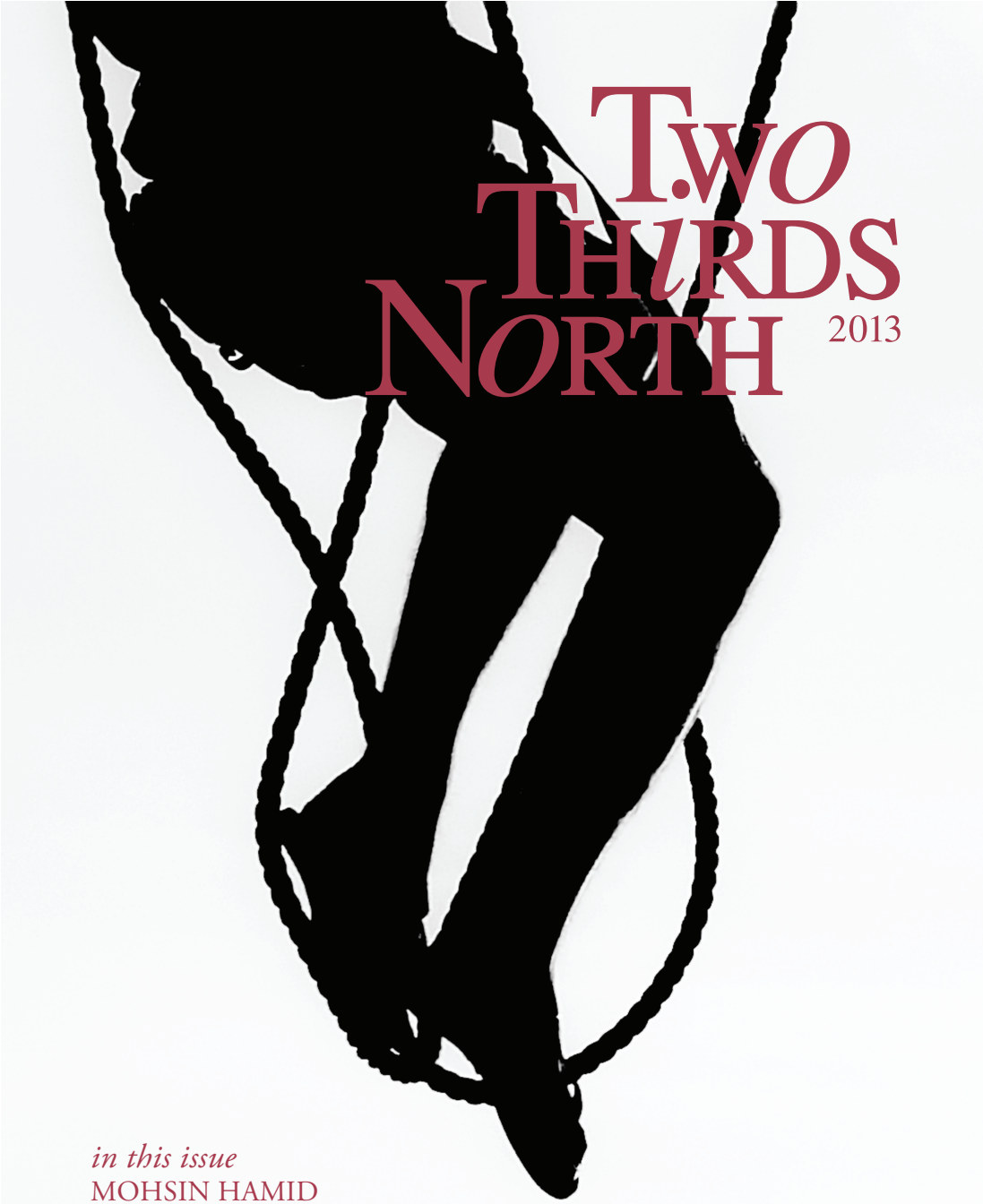

Two Thirds North

2013

in this issue

MOHSIN HAMID
GERARD WOODWARD
CLARK BLAISE
ANN FISHER-WIRTH
OCEAN VOUNG

TWO THIRDS NORTH

2013

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POSITIONING

IN FOCUS: MOHSIN HAMID

Editor's Foreword

Stockholm, situated two-thirds the way from the equator to the North Pole—but all too close to the latter—is a peculiar crossroad for world culture. Perhaps it is the international role that Sweden has endeavored to play in global political resolutions, or perhaps it is the annual presentation of the Nobel prizes, and the periodic scandal raised by the selection of the prize in literature. But for being so far north Stockholm draws an unusually heavy stream of international writers, artists and musicians. We, at Stockholm University and *Two Thirds North*, are the happy beneficiaries in this stream of international culture. The world of electronic media, moreover, allows us to act as a focal point for publishing voices and visions from all over the globe. And we are proud to do this.

In this year's edition, Gerard Woodward pays homage to Kafka in a tale of a man who becomes incased in nacre; Clark Blaise penetrates the mind of a dangerously precocious Indian-American girl; Ann Fisher-Wirth tweaks a Swedish proverb into a vital challenge; Ocean Vuong inhabits the fractured identities of family members after war. Many other literary voices, experienced and new, serious and funny, make up this edition of *Two Thirds North*.

The selected works cluster along four thematic lines that may seem extraneous to the works themselves, but resonate with our own journal's title—*Two Thirds North*—that is, an

attempt to discover, explore or map out our place upon the vital sphere of human experience.

UNCHARTED CURRENTS includes those works suggestive of the fluid insecurities of being lost, of feeling adrift in the world, of having lost one's identity or link to one's culture.

Poems and stories in SIGHTINGS focus upon observation, of seeing the world and sometimes oneself from unexpected angles or within unfamiliar situations and places.

BETWEEN THE POLES puts together the works which suggest global orientation or distance—or which simply describe the polarity of relationships in conflict, what William Faulkner describes as "the human heart in conflict with itself."

If UNCHARTED CURRENTS suggests a sense of being lost or feeling adrift, POSITIONING intimates a sense of finding or defining oneself, of tracing the lines that create identity, whether through family or place, gender or race.

In addition, we conclude this issue with an exclusive interview with Mohsin Hamid, the author of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Hamid draws our attention to the processes of writing and film adaptation, as well as his vision of his work in times of globalisation.

We hope you will enjoy these diverse artistic expressions of modern world literature.

Paul Schreiber

UNCHARTED CURRENTS

My Father Writes From Prison

OCEAN VUONG

Ha Noi, 1994

Lan oi!, there are things in the dark
I can only say
how one spring I crushed
a monarch mid-flight
just to know how it felt
to have something change
in my hands. Here
are those hands. Some nights
they waken
when touched
by music
or rather, the drops of rain
memory erases
into music. Hands reaching
for the scent of lilacs
in the bombed-out temple
a shard of dawn in the eye
of a dead dog, your voice
on the verge of bursting
into promise.
Hands that pressed the pistol
to the boy's pulsed temple
just to prove I was larger

than my father's shadow
growing from the roots of my feet

I was 22 and the chamber was empty
I didn't know how easy it was
to become
a god. These hands
that dragged the saw
through the bluest 4AM
cricket screams

the kapok's bark spitting in our eyes
until one or two
collapsed the saw lodged
in darkness until one
or three started to run

away from their country into
their country and the AK-47
the lord who speaks
loudest whose words will stop

the lilac how to close
the lilac that opens
daily From my window

there's a lighthouse Some nights you are
the lighthouse
some nights the sea
what this means is that I don't know
a hunger other than

the need
to be shattered
and rebuilt
No forgiveness
but the mind forgetting
the body's crime
of living
again

Dear Lan or *Lan oi!* there's a man
in the next cell who begs nightly
for his mother's breast a single
drop
I think my eyes are like his watching the
lighthouse turn
into morning, into your purple dress
where I buried my face
after too many wars

Lan oi! My lotus-scented girl, my echo trapped in
1981 the cell's too cold

tonight and there are things
I can only say where the monarchs

no longer come and with hands
scrapingthe piss-slick floor
for fragments of a broken woman I turn
towards the last decade of my life:
a blind fool facing the sunrise
waiting for something
to ignite.

Abstract Child

RICHARD KING PERKINS II

We mourn for the abstract child
as if she is possibly our own,
wanting to go to her

where she lives weightlessly
in a monastery of trees

calming her fever and uncertainty.

Clouds furrow the brow of her sky,
so we lie to her
knowing one tear will break us all
beyond repair.

Take our hands
take our hands now, we cry,
just before she pulls us into a blue forest
of miracles and slightest impossibility.

We hold her in our withered limbs,
trying to clarify what is indistinguishable

but if we truly could do that
none of us would have ever heard
of this strangled other world.

Abandon

DARRELL DELA CRUZ

I.
The conductor focused the transparency
of Hymns. The black words illuminated
on the wall. We were all supposed to sing.
Dashes in between words meant that we should hold

the note. I wheezed the first verse. I held onto the pew
for balance – knuckles white from the loss
of circulation. The light from the projector burnt out –
an abrupt silence. "Leave" a parishioner told me,

"you look like you need help." I left.
The last words I heard from the father was, "Jesus wept."

II.
In the waiting room, I sat on the only open chair,
behind a man who had lain across an entire row.
"I will tell my son when he is ready,"
he kept mumbling in intervals.

I peered over to the father – dry beds cracked
on the side of his face where tears should be.
How long did this father wait for a confirmation?
They called my name. I entered

through the same hanging doors the father
looked to, waiting for his son to arrive.

The Dream Spill-O Keeps

COLIN DODDS

The news breaks hard
and the movies change often.
Only fundamental complaints remain.

Spill-O was cheated.
He can't cover himself
with just himself.

He gambles, opens fortune cookies,
makes wishes when the numbers on a digital clock line up,
looks into the faces of strangers.

The day is huge, infinite in all directions,
but somehow limited as a crippled spider taped to a brick.
Spill-O rolls for miles in his bed
trying to reconcile it.

And he would make wild leaps
to take the hurt in heaps
and follow it all straight down,
if there was a bottom to this conundrum.

The only dream Spill-O keeps
is of becoming the man in Las Vegas
who learns to eat the chips at the table
and crosses out his spot in history.

you, breathing

that brings you back

I want to pull the thread

telling stories to the moths

your jumpers have been stowed away

not shipwrecked

weightless

puncturing your lungs to feel

preening feathers

sharp and clean-cut

like a sparrow's beak

i am pointy

sometimes

Avian

ROBYN BELAK

Keeping it Running

RANDY PHILLIS

I.
Dick has three identical
Volvos and Sean's back yard
is scattered with the parts
Dick constantly swaps out.
When he gets one running
just good enough, we drive
out toward El Dorado
where Juanita lets us into
the junk yard. We chisel off
rusted pulleys and supports,
sit on the oil-soaked ground
and smoke weed in the weeds.
No matter what we find,
Juanita always charges two
dollars. Once I bought a whole
door I didn't need
just to prove it.

II.
The calendar girl wears
a furry negligee printed
on cellophane. I lift it,
study her nakedness, put
it back and contemplate

which way she looks best.
I am broke and in school
and at the machine shop
where Brad, according to
his shirt, fabricates me
a thermostat housing.
I had to drill the old one
free and ruined it.
My car is so old and
rusted the parts store
is useless. Brad has given me
a Schlitz in a can.
This is going to take a while.

III.
And so it seems to have gone
for a good long time,
getting by and getting the giggles
even when the transmission fell out
right on Tom's leg, when Deb broke
her finger taking the slave cylinder
out of the old Brown Bomb,
when the squirrel who ate the wiring
out of Little Truck built a nest
on the muffler so when we finally
got the new harness in and cranked
it up the nest caught fire
and burned that truck down.

IV.
My dad tried to teach me
I could fix anything, keep it going,
as long as I just kept track
and put everything back together
in the exact reverse order
I took them apart.
But now I'm older and my car
is more computer than machine,
even its seats heated.
I've just driven 800 miles
to see my mother in the hospital.
I didn't remember her so old.
Dad is dead thirty years,
and finally she's following.
His strategy fails me
because I'm just not sure
how any of this started.
All I can do is look out
the cold window into the parking lot.
If I push the button in my pocket,
my car winks its lights at me.
Mom just stares like she has no idea
who I am.

Spill-O and the Woman in the Canoe

COLIN DODDS

Holding the door,
hanging out the windows of the world,
heir to deeded dust and rusty doings,
Spill-O dreams of a woman in a canoe,
a scrappy Venus in the shell of a razor clam.

Weakness visits. The sun waits
in the early stages of an ambush.
Call it late.

Spill-O coughs, scratches his head,
his limbs are loose. He tries not
to look too hard at the antique fork
or a real estate guide.

He tries to drum up some variety of
apocalypse, even if just for himself.
But it is no dice.

The crust of days and his own dull breathing
thwart him. People blur by with impunity.
All of them holding the door.

Spill-O's heart hangs by its hinges,
good for nothing but holding on.
Where the ice broke and he sank,
she brings a canoe.

He coughs and finds
his arms around thin air in her shape,
blinks and holds her pliant body again.

It makes him learn
to look loosely

LENA BECKMAN

In Her Prime

CLARK BLAISE

Tiffy Hu and I are passing by the hedges behind the tennis courts, headed to skating practice, when a horrible truth strikes me: life is eternal. There's no escaping it, not even in death. I'm scuffling my shoes over the concrete slabs, over tufts of grass and weeds and the anthills and dried snail shells. Dogs do their business under the hedges. Flies drop their eggs.

Smudgy little birds perch on the fence and hop through the thorny branches.

"You coming, Prammy?"

"I'm thinking," I say. What goes on in her little brain? It must be like the birds, hopping and chirping. Actually, I do know. It's sex, sex, sex.

A year ago, towards dusk, I was walking by this same place. A gray veil, like a frayed blanket, had moved up from the gutter and across the sidewalk. Birds were dive-bombing. As I got closer, the blanket dissolved into moving parts. Hundreds of mice, or maybe moles, were making a dash up from the sewers and across the naked sidewalk to their burrows under the hedge, like wildebeest on their migration, attacked by crocodiles.

We die and decompose. But this afternoon, the combination of birds and ants and tufts of grass makes me see that something of us does return. Our chemical shell is reabsorbed. The elements keep going on, and on, and on and they recombine randomly,

making birds and mice, grass and trees, and sometimes, even, every few thousands years I guess, a dog or a human being. Life is a default position.

"Prammy?"

How many lives before I'm a self-conscious person again? There's no end to it until the sun quits. Without a gram of religious feeling in me, I'm suddenly a believer in eternal life. If I don't live very long, at least I've figured out One of Life's Big Questions. This is seriously weird.

The ice surface is a polished pearl, and I start by laying down a long, lazy sum, the ∫ from the Calculus, running the length of the rink, edge to edge. It's my signature: Pramila Waldekar was here. Nothing is hard if it can be reduced to numbers and everything, sooner or later, is just numbers. So long as I do my spins and axels inside the sum, I'll be safe. Today he's going to be hard on me, maybe because Tiffy is with me. "My Gods, you are not Aeroflot taking off from SFO, you are an artist. You must rise from nuthink. From ice. All rise coiled inside."

And I wonder if there is not a coefficient that includes speed, drag, and vertical lift. It's a matter of directing energy.

Poor Borya thinks it's an invocation to the *f*-hole on the top of a violin, a subtle dedication to his marvelous self. Back in Minsk, he played the cello. Sometimes he plays for me. That was the first Big Thing I figured out, in case I don't have time later on: the Sex thing.

People are prime numbers, or they're not. The Beast is eighteen, which factors to 3x3x2, a perfect expression of his mental age. I'm thirteen: prime. Tiffy Hu is twelve, 3x2x2: what more to say? Borya is thirty-seven: prime. We are irreducible. Borya hasn't been

prime since he was thirty-one and he won't be prime again till he's forty-one. What will I be like in my next prime, at seventeen? A fat cow, says Borya. A woman is never stronger than she is at twelve or thirteen. We are designed for our maximum speed and strength, before the distraction of breasts and hips. He only takes on girls between eight and ten; after that their contours change, their centers of gravity, their strength. That's Borya's philosophy, and I endorse it.

He also says a thirteen-year-old woman will never be more desirable. It's a Russian thing, maybe. I've read Lolita. On a normal practice day, after skating, we drive to his place in Palo Alto and do it in his basement apartment, in the house of Madame Skojewska. Madame is the widow of Marius Skojewski, a Slavic Studies professor at Stanford. Borya says Polish ladies are "very tender, very sophisticated. Russian people very narrow, very brutal." In order to explain my comings-and-goings in Palo Alto, I asked Daddy to pay for Russian lessons, which he was happy to do.

Borya was surprised I wasn't a virgin. No girl with an older brother like The Beast can be a virgin. No one watching us at the rink, listening to Borya's berating, his picking apart of my motivation, my technique, my discipline, would think us anything but bashful student and demanding teacher. With Tiffy Hu watching and waiting her turn, it's only skate, skate, skate: leap and twist and turn and spin, work up a sweat and then take her home with me for dinner.

The Beast is in. "Tiffy Hu!" he shouts, charming as always. "Hu's on first?" Tiffy doesn't get it. "Or should I be asking, who's first on Hu?"

"Ignore him," I tell her. "How's your Russian?" I ask. It's a test. If he suspected anything about Borya and me, he'd ask, how's yours?

He's got a Russian secret-girlfriend, a big, über-golden Stanford sophomore goddess, too good for his sorry UC-Santa Cruz freshman ass. I'm starting at Stanford next year, skipping the entire and doubtless illuminating American high school experience. I'll be the youngest they've ever admitted. I'll be thirteen years, ten months.

The Golden Goddess used to go with the big Stanford tennis player, Mike (that is, Mukesh) Mahulkar. The Beast used to be his lob-and-volley partner. The Beast was a decent high school player—he even won the state finals. Golden Goddess would spread a towel on the grass and watch them slug it out. Those long, golden legs, those skimpy tops—I could see The Beast was a little distracted. Then suddenly Mike and GG were no longer a couple—Mike's parents said she was just another practice partner—and Mike was engaged to a proper caste-and-class appropriate Bombay cutie. The Beast, just a senior in high school, started hanging out with GG. Our parents would have nailed his door shut if they'd known. At least it left me free to explore other options.

My father and The Beast think Mike Mahulkar is going to be the next Big Name in international tennis. No way, I say. I charted two of Mike's games. He's totally predictable. Backhand, forehand, lob, rush the net. So many balls to the net, so many deep volleys, side to side, in a sequence even Mike doesn't know is mathematically predictable. You can lure him to the net and set him up for a passing shot. Of course The Beast can't, and so far no one in the amateur and college ranks can, but some Swede or Russian will humiliate him. I showed The Beast my pages of calculations. "Even you can beat him," I said. "Here's the probabilistic algorithm for beating Mike Mahulkar," and he said to me, "just go back to the ice."

The Beast thinks the only difference between him and Mike is Mike's superior coaching and Stanford's weight room and flexibility training. Since we didn't have our own gym and staff of coaches, he doesn't stand a chance against the famous Mike Mahulkar. So Mike is strong and determined, but just forget that his game is boring and he'll meet someone out there who matches him in strength and see into his game and send him spinning back to country club status and an eventual MBA.

We sit in silence around the dinner table. We always sit in silence. I cannot remember a time when anyone spoke. We're not like Americans, grabbing a bite here and there, stuffing ourselves with processed foods, injecting our flaccid bodies with empty calories in front of a television feeding us empty images.

We never miss a meal. We are family. We are Indian. We are vegetarian. Every meal is a small production. Chop-chop, spice and dice, then fry, always fry. Even our bread and desserts are fried. Our walls glisten from airborne globules. My forehead glows. We sweat it. We practically bathe in vegetable oil. Of course I am the only true American in the family. The Beast was born in Bombay. He conveniently forgets this fact. I have my sliced red pepper, celery and carrots. Tiffy is scarfing down the fried food.

She breaks the silence. "This is really good!" and my mother is pleased. This is the daughter she should have had. "All we get at home is greasy soup with noodles and pieces of vegetables swimming around in it."

I could say all we get is the same stuff, chopped and fried in the same spices, every day for all eternity. I stopped last year. His Lordship is drinking a beer. The Beast has a Coke; Tiff, Her Ladyship and I have iced tea.

"Chinese food is very good. I have many Chinese friends," says His Lordship. So far as I know, all he has is Al Wong, his friend

since graduate school, and Al and Mitzi come over once a month and they go to Al and Mitzi's once a month, and they play bridge.

My mother says, "Chinese food very healthy."

"Especially deep-fried egg roll," says The Beast. Don't say it, I pray, but out it comes: "I mean egg loll and fly-lice." He never disappoints. Tiff doesn't get it.

"Chinese people are like Indian people," His Lordship explains. "Very loyal to family. Children very loyal to parents, parents very protective of their children."

Tiff looks to me for help. "I never thought of that," she says.

"I think we're very Greek, actually," I say.

Mother says, "Greek people eat meat wrapped in leaves."

"Greek myths," I say.

"What myths?" His Lordship weighs in. "All European myths are comic book versions of Indian myths."

"I was thinking of Atreus," I say, to deafening silence.

On the walk back, Tiff asks, "What's that Atreus thing you said?" Just the usual incest and slaughter, I answer. Gross, says Tiff. Then she says, "Your dad and Al Wong actually rented a house in Palo Alto? Lots of hot action, I'll bet." Among Chinese, Al Wong is a little bit famous.

But she doesn't know my father. My father and hot action—in the linguistic interstices, all things are possible, I guess. And the third guy, a Parsi, went back to India. But then she says, "You won't get mad if I ask a personal question?" My life is nothing but very personal secrets. "Go ahead," I say.

"You and Borya, you're getting it on, aren't you?"

"Getting it on? What does that mean, exactly?"

"I don't care if you are or if you aren't. I was wondering about, you know, his thing. How big is it?"

"Big, meaning long, or wide, or what? It's a meaningless question, Tiff. Big as a function of his pinky finger? Big as a function of his arm?"

"Forget about it," she says. And I wonder if she already knows that she's next. And Tanya Ping is lined up, just after her. "Just, what's sex like?"

It's like a puppy of some rough, large breed that just keeps jumping up and licking your face. It's shaped like a candle, without a wick. Of course, Borya's Jewish, so the shape's a little off. "It makes you sleepy," I say and Tiff nods, saying, "That's what I thought."

Maja Skojewska was Maja Pinska. "I grew up in a very liberal Jewish family," she told me, in our informal Russian "classes", and when I'm her age I'll probably be saying, "I grew up in a Hindu family." Madame's idea of Russian lessons is to talk of her life, in Russian, interjecting Polish and English and before too many weeks she says, "See? You just asked me that in Russian!"

Her father was a schoolteacher, a great admirer of India. That's why she and her sister, Uma, have Indian names. When the Germans came to the school to get him, the priest said, we already turned him over. And there he was all along, working in the same school, only sooty black from shoveling coal. The Germans couldn't imagine a Jew working like a Pole, dirtying his hands like a Pole. Her husband-to-be was also a schoolteacher, a Polish Catholic (not to be redundant) but after the war he went to university, then to Moscow State for more study and after two books, he was invited to Oxford, and that's when they made their escape. The idea that little Maja Pinska would be eighty years old and tending her garden in California is testimony, she says, to a kind of stubborn life force.

On her table are bananas so unblemished that I thought they were wax. "That's the first thing I noticed when we got to England," she says. Bananas! And the thrill of peeling a banana has never left her, after fifty years. Bananas are the symbol of freedom and affluence. And we sit a few minutes in silence, and she leans towards me and says (I'm sure it's in Russian, but it's as clear to me as English), "You know, Borya will drop you."

"I know," I say.

"I don't approve of what he does, but then I say, it's better you learn from him than from these boys I see on the streets."

"Yes," I say.

Sometimes I think of Madame's life, and mine, and that it's all a kind of trigonometry of history. Her life is a skyscraper, mine is just a thimbleful of ashes, but our angles are the same. My adjacent side is just a squiggle, and my opposite side barely rises above the horizon. But the angle is there. I feel that I can achieve monumental things if I can just live long enough.

Even with all his money, it took Al and Mitzi fifteen years to leave their cottage in Cupertino and splurge on a 23rd-floor apartment in downtown San Francisco. It's all glass, 360º panoramic views of the city, the Bay, the bridges, the Marin Headlands, Berkeley and Oakland. No interior walls, but for the bathroom and two bedrooms. They also have a country estate in Napa. Some evenings when the fog rolls in, it's as though we're suspended in a dream, disrupted only by bridge-table small talk. Other nights, the city sparkles. Al pours me a small glass of plum wine. Tonight, my father complains of his job. He's in nano-technology, and his responsibilities are shrinking fast.

"Have you thought about something new?" Al asks. "I mean really new."

"Yes, I have," His Lordship responds. It's the first time I've ever heard such a thing. He always defends continuity. His father spent forty years in Maharashtra State Government service. What really new thing could he possibly do?

Every now and then, when Mitzi and Her Ladyship are out of the room, Al Wong will say, "What do you hear from our old friend?" He's got a needle, and he uses it. I can tell it's a jab to my father's self-esteem, but I don't know what it means. I think there's a lot of sado-masochism, not nostalgia, in their friendship. Sometimes it's good to be a quiet, studious, Indian daughter; I'm just furniture. Except for Borya and Madame, I'm used to being ignored.

Most of the time, they just sit and complain, drink some wine and play their bridge. After half a glass, my mother will say, "What was the bid? I'm feeling so light-headed!" Al and my father were in grad school together and started out at PacBell together, and my father's still there. Al decided to go entrepreneur, and bought a computer franchise. He sold that at just the right time and bought and sold a few more things at their peak, and then he bought a hotel in Napa. He built it up with spas and a gourmet restaurant and hiking trails, and then he opened an adjacent winery: AW Estates. Al Wong's hotel, called The Inn at Napa, is where young Bay Area Chinese professionals want to get married, or at least honeymoon or go on weekend get-aways. He says there are so many young Bay Area Asians at his hotel that it's like a second Google campus. AW Estates Pinot Noir is what young Chinese professionals drink. Every thing he touches turns to gold. He's even got a line of plum wine for the older folks.

For some reason, the very young and the very old like their vices sweet.

I don't know how it started, but tonight there's an edge, an identifiable complaint, coming from my father. "I've been thinking," he starts, and he leans forward, perhaps aware that I'm sitting ten feet away. "I'm thinking my children disrespect me."

That's the news? Al says, "Mitzi and I never wanted children." Once they made that decision, she went to law school and now she's a major litigator.

"I blame this country," says my father.

"It's in the culture," says Al. He came from Hong Kong. "We can't live their lives."

"I believe my son is dating a person without my permission. I believe he is involved with a most inappropriate young lady."

That's when Al says, maybe to break up the seriousness, "By the way, guess who's back from the East? Now she's an accountant. I've hired her to do my books."

And then, just from His Lordship's grimace, it all makes sense. There was someone in those days of hot action in Palo Alto. Tiffy Hu smelled it out, and I've spent thirteen years in a fog. It's so exciting, so unexpected, I want to jump up and pump my fist.

"I think…" my father says, then pauses, "I think that we must leave this country."

If furniture could speak, it would shout, "What?!"

"Hey, man, that's an extreme reaction," says Al.

"I'm not talking of that one. I have been a bad father. Things have been going on under my nose, outside my control. Asian children should never be allowed to stay in this country past their childhood. I may have already lost my son, but I can still protect my daughter. If I can save one from shame and humiliation I will at least have done half my job."

I clear my throat. "May I speak?"

His Lordship stares across the living room, as though an alarm clock he'd set and forgotten about had just gone off. Truly, I am invisible to him. I clear my throat and say, a little pompously, "Pardon me, but that train has left the station."

"We're not talking of trains," he snaps.

"Okay. That horse has left the barn."

I never thought I would, under any circumstance, defend my brother. His Lordship, says, "Kindly keep your opinions to yourself. You are not part of this conversation. This is about your brother."

I'm up against something that is irrational. "No, it's not! It's not about him. That genie is out of the bottle. It's about me, isn't it?"

Al Wong passes his hand between my father's frozen gaze, and me. "Vivek," he says. "She has a point."

Some day I want to ask Al Wong, what was it that happened in that house in Palo Alto? What caused my father to cast a life-long shadow on this family?

"Go to your mother," my father says.

I don't go directly to my mother. My fate in this family is, as they say, fungible. I approach the sofa where His Lordship is seated. "Let me say one more thing. If you try to make me go back to India and if you stop me from going to Stanford and you try to arrange a marriage with some dusty little file-clerk, I'll kill myself."

Things have been frosty these past few days. The Beast is back in Santa Cruz. While I'm at work on my AP History, and my parents are watching a rented Bollywood musical, the phone rings and my father picks it up, frowns, then holds it out towards me. "It's your teacher," he says, and I expect a message from school,

maybe an unearned day off, but it's Borya. He says, "Madame is asking for you."

I tell him I have no way of getting there. And why would she be asking for me?

"I am driving," he says, an amazing concession. He is not a hop-in-the-car Californian. He's a skater, not a driver. I didn't even know he has a license.

Normally, I would never ask to leave the house after dark, but when I say, "Madame Skojewska is asking to see me. Mr. Borisov will pick me up," my father barely lifts his eyes from the television.

"Where will you be?" he asks.

I write down Madame's address and phone number. They don't know that Borya lives in her basement.

I recognize the car as Madame's, usually parked and dusty in her garage. She revs the engine once a week. It's been over a year since she bought a gallon. "A gallon a year, if I need it or not," she joked.

Borya starts out in English, "We go to Stanford Hospital. Madame has…" he strikes his chest, "heart." Stanford Hospital is where I was born, but this doesn't seem a commemorative moment. And then, it must have occurred to him that we are not at the ice rink and that no one is watching, and that my months of Russian instruction permits adult interaction; he grabs my hand, kisses it, and says, "you know how she loves her bananas. She walked down to Real Foods, bought two bunches, and on her walk back home she suddenly collapsed."

When we arrive at the hospital, he says, "They said she was going, tonight."

She's in the ICU, under a plastic tent. It reminds me of the flaps on baby-strollers, the plastic visors, the baby warm, secure and sleeping while rain is pelting. Just like that, sweet mystery of life and death. One day we were chatting like old friends, See, you just asked me that in Russian! and I felt I belonged in a time and place I'll never see, I've never had a student like you, you sit so quietly, you don't repeat words, you don't ask why we say it the way we do—you just start speaking it like a native, like someone reborn.

A student like me is accustomed to praise from her teachers. But that's not the point; the point is, I impressed her and she's the only teacher I'm likely to remember. I remember years of teachers' meetings, standing alone at the edge of the classroom while a teacher pulls my parents aside. I see her gesturing, and my parents shaking their heads. What did she say about me? I ask when we're back home and my mother says, Some nonsense, and my father says You have a good head, but you are prone to dreaming and you must work harder, or you will fail. I know it's about the Evil Eye; I might accidentally hear some praise that will turn my head from proper feminine modesty.

"You know what she said about you, even today? Even this morning when she was headed out to buy her bananas? She said, 'Borya, living long enough to teach that girl Russian is the greatest privilege of my life.'"

We stand behind the glass and it seems that Madame's eyes are open, and shining. I raise my hand and flutter my fingers; it's all I can do. Do svidaniya, Madame.

I think I know what it was, back in that rented house in Palo Alto when my father and Al Wong and the Parsi guy were Stanford students and my mother and The baby Beast were still in India. Al knows, Mitzi knows, my mother knows. He wants to go back

to India because someone from his past, a woman perhaps, has suddenly come back. Some long shadow of shame has shaped our lives. It's about him, not me, though I'm the one who will pay the price.

When Madame died, I started thinking of other teachers.

When I was very young—five, I'd guess, in pre-school—I discovered algebra. First, it was the word itself, it tasted good in the mouth, like something to eat or drink. Fortunately, I had a teacher, who didn't laugh when I asked her what algebra was. "Miss Zinny" we called her, but her good name was Zainab, and we were the only two South Asians in that class. The next day she brought her college math book and we spent my naptime working out the problems. I remember the excitement, the freedom in a phrase like "Let P stand for…" or a declaration like "Let A=C+1." Solve for the value of C. The consolation of algebra; everything is equal to something else. It was something I couldn't explain, but it's what I felt a few years later when I learned about imaginary numbers. It's about seeing the nine-tenths of the iceberg, and not being afraid. What I remember is the equals sign. Everything in the world can be assigned a value, and has an equivalent. I went home and told my mother, "Let P stand for potato. Let R be rice."

"Then wash the rice, please."

In Nautical Terms

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

Without lineage or progeny, the sea neither appears
nor empties in a boat's wake.
Without true form, it bends around what passes
and retranslates each time
into something the world has never known.

I drag my right hand through the water
behind this infinitesimal body,
thrust the left hopefully toward the bow.
Somewhere in between I am
suddenly becoming me,
again and again—
as in *where I'm going has never been,*
where I come from is the foreign land in the distance.

One Degree Away from Place

SREEDHEVI IYER

Disclaimer Warning: in the global scheme of things, I'm already an Other. I've prayed with Buddhist monks in Burma, I've done Pilates with Filipino maids in Hong Kong, I've organised a protest rally against Malaysian elections in Brisbane. I try very hard, but still, I'm an Other.

Expat writers transport to places most conducive to their temperament, where they can finally let go and start being themselves, where they have optioned out of home and become cultural tourists, mixing with other expats, exchanging feedback on work, sampling newness with a sense of wonder and respect, like a rare piece of cheese. Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast* writes of Paris. Anthony Burgess and Somerset Maugham each wrote *The Malayan Trilogy* and *Far Eastern Tales* before *Clockwork Orange* and *Of Human Bondage*. Today William Dalrymple writes extensively about India. Pico Iyer writes in a *TIME* article about airports being his closest idea to home, a junction to all the places in the world he has travelled to. Alain De Botton perfects the experience of exquisite humanity in *The Art of Travel*.

The spark is set light by pushing to the frontier, where there is nowhere left to go. The expatriate writer reaches outward, embracing this being-alone in foreignness and willingly going towards the unknown, to confront the susceptibility of self-image.

With migrant literature, I feel the emphasis is on inwardness,

the necessity of an inner struggle that strives towards the more fundamental. The migrant writer inhabits a foreign world that is the by-product of a choice, rather than being the choice itself. Yes, the vantage point makes the old new again. As Salman Rushdie says in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, one has to step away from the frame in order to get the full picture. But the scope of change has more to do with a sense of survival, a sense of wanting to maintain sanity. Migration is permanent—a fulsome uprooting, and an attempt to plant it again on foreign soil.

The expat's scope of change, in contrast, is part of the same instinct that wants to get to Mount Everest, or the Taj Mahal, or the Great Wall of China, or Uluru in Alice Springs: BECAUSE IT IS THERE.

In *The Writer as Migrant*, the Chinese writer Ha Jin looks at the Aristotelian question: "As whom does the writer write?" He warns of the danger of writing as a spokesperson of one's nation/culture. I am no spokesperson, but I do write for an audience bigger than my homeland, for those in the world who have either travelled towards the strange, or want to through books, those who know they can achieve the same sense of adventure and unknown from a storyteller of authority.

Still, I try not to place myself only because the categories intersect and overlap, to an extent where any unilateral perspective becomes a joke. I was born in Malaysia, although I am of Indian background, and already I'm a minority in this Southeast Asian country which is not famous for its treatment of ethnic minorities. For years in Australia I barely acknowledged my Malaysian roots because I was not only a double hyphen, but also a double outsider. In the days before Masterchef Australia and the advent of Poh Ling Yeow, in the days before 9/11 and the Bali bombings and the existence of global terrorist cells, the only people in Brisbane

who reacted to the word "Malaysia" were cab drivers. They knew of an Australian naval base in Butterworth, a dead colonial town. In such conditions all I could do is try to seem an insider – to attempt as much self-erasure as possible. So it was about being more "ocker" than "ocker," being all "Gday how ya doin mate all good yeah."

The perspective changed in Hong Kong, though, during my Master of Fine Arts. I suddenly understood what it must have been like for the Hemingways and Steinems in Paris, because everyone else—MFAers from Mumbai, Shanghai, Manila, Singapore, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Sweden—everyone was a fully-formed hybrid. We collectively understood that the real home existed inside the pages of a book. Being the outsider was the norm, and connecting to the world at an angle was the regular way to be.

In the Philippines last year, my sense of perspective decided to do a somersault, folding in on itself and peeking out from between the legs. I traveled with the University of Iowa, and saw a sister country to my homeland, and felt eerily at home despite not knowing the language. I was not used to seeing Southeast Asians being so devoutly Christian. To me the Filipino resembled the Muslim Malays I had grown up with. But the place had the weather I knew, the humidity I understood, the hospitality I had been raised to practice, and the calmness I always adopted in the face of incomprehension. This place was halfway familiar to me but exotic to my companions. They were in a state of hyper-excitement at the very existence of the tropics. Everything was worth considering: a statue of Jose Rizal in a town square, the height of palm trees, the smile of an old lady, a monkey in a cage, the pebbles on a side street. It was all so recordable, because it was new. They were so busy seeing the Philippines. I was so busy seeing them. And

through them I re-saw the Philippines, Southeast Asia, the tropics, the exotic, the overwhelming Asian-ness of it all. What was this alien place, and why had I not seen it before?

These things make perspectives travel in circles rather than lines. They allow for views to turn in on themselves. I could turn around and look at personal experience with a new caress, by being a writerly insider, I could finally be the outsider to my very own past, the Rushdie-like big picture, because I had gone far enough to be able to turn back. This was exile, the thing common to both the expat and migrant, to write what you know only because the consciousness is now away from it. I possess the schizophrenic dynamic between where I live, which has informed who I am, and what I write, which used to inform me of who I am. These are not dichotomies to me, but part of a single, continuous narrative. My past shapes my present. My future will depend on how I understand my past.

I live in the land of my Other, which has sharpened my sense of inside and out. Since I work a little bit in academia, I suppose it is inevitable I get a Marxist slant on everything. I pay my mortgage in my own name, rather than a partner's. I can wear shorts and sleeveless tops on the streets if I want to during great Queensland summers, and I can do it without worrying about what kind of attention I might receive. But when I write, it is definitely about my own. Stories of the place I have definitely left in my consciousness and psyche are the ones that now pull me to a page.

I adore that I can pack a picnic at a moment's notice and drive out to the Gold Coast to walk on a beach wearing a swimsuit, and yet what I want to write about is the Malay woman in Petaling Jaya with the headscarf, the tudung, which she freely chose to wear after years of secretly visiting nightclubs. I have sat in cafés in Brisbane and bemoaned gentrification, the losing of heritage

to banks, shopping malls, everything that is already everywhere else, that buildings would now only exist in memory. But what I want to write about is the intentional wholesale refurbishment of Little India in Kuala Lumpur, an Indian enclave in the Malaysian capital, which was beautified because the Indian Prime Minister was visiting and things had to be swept under the carpet. I worked with the University of Queensland Press on Indigenous Writing, when Doris Pilkington published *Rabbit Proof Fence*, and happily carried her bags around as she presided over the Brisbane Writers Festival held in tents by the riverside. But what I wanted to write about was the 10,000 strong demonstrations by HINDRAF, the Hindu Action Force, as they protested against Queen Elizabeth II for colonial policies, and claimed one trillion dollars as compensation.

These are the stories of witness as much as they are of experience. These stories come out of conversations, out of friendships, out of memory, out of maintaining a side to me invisible to my Australian peer or colleague. My distance, my change in values, and my expansion of worldview made everything I once imbibed as reality a thing I am estranged from. This is the agony and the ecstasy of exile. My own is no longer my own, but a cast off phantom limb I'm always reaching out for. I'm an Other in a world that is my Other, but then maybe that cancels each other out, in a way, the way minus times minus gives you a plus. This maybe makes Australia my own and Malaysia the Other, an inversion of us and them so gradual and subtle I have no idea when it first occurred. But maybe that's one of the beauties of today, one which, more than being globalised, is more cosmopolitan. I say this the way Kwame Anthony Appiah does in *Cosmopolitanism*. The idea itself is an intertwining double strand: we have obligations that stretch beyond kith, kin and even shared citizenship. The other, that we

take seriously the particularities of human life. So maybe what we're all trying to do is to be cosmopolitan, because, in Appiah's words, "the foreignness of foreigners, the strangeness of strangers, these things are real enough. It's just that we've been encouraged to exaggerate their significance". It's when we realise that the binaries, the home and the world, the us and them, the own and the other, after a point, really cease to matter, and maybe that's what we have all been trying to do with our words all along.

The Touch

OCEAN VUONG

We slept on the floor, our bones cushioned with
cardboard. Behind the wall, someone

was humming a lullaby. I felt the hardwood tremble,
my mother's shoulder quivering

against my back, the sound of tears flooding her
breaths as she quietly cursed

the god she failed to know. I did not think
as I reached into darkness, guiding a love infused

in fingertips, as I wrapped my arms around her
waist. The way a man does.

I did not think how the wind stopped hissing
through the cracked window, or how

she softly exhaled as I pulled closer knowing this
was not right: a boy reaching out

and into the shell of a husband. I only knew the
warmth spreading between us,

that the wings on her shoulders were really my
hands.

SIGHTINGS

Cornering the Light Beyond a Braided Stream

JEFF ALFIER

My mind is lost among monsoon
flowers – blue flax, gold poppies
and lupine that span a cutbank inside
a ghost town rail bed where wind
sweats chaparral like fear.
A diamondback forsakes its hide
on the splinter of a crosstie,
like sin left behind at an altar call.

An Aztec Thrush sings vagrant
over black humps of Benson
railcars. My eyes trace its flight
till shadows edge away from stone,
robbing silhouettes from lizards,
my vision ending where storms
left deadfall hung in canebrake
along vanished watermarks.

Beyond this thorn-scape my bootsoles
catch, a longing for cottonwood
green might just be hunger to touch
what remains most human here,
where mining towns once rinsed
arsenic in the San Pedro River
while men clocked madness
by the copper in their blood;

or by this hard white sun that swells
till thirst withdraws me through
the rusted sleep of a broken gate,
back to my car baking astride a field
a scarecrow surmounts, a reign over
what grows beneath him in his castoff
shirt and crossbeam arms, hailing
me in a sky of frantic colors.

Avant-Garde Dance Recital

LEN KRISAK

Eight are the modern company they keep,
So, sixteen soles—and twice as many scarves.
They move about in space not all that deep,
Four female figures that their Master starves,
And four young things who either writhe or lift,
Depending on the need. They're out of breath
By minute five, and bottoms start to shift
From cheek to anxious cheek. "Birth," "Life," and "Death"
All seem the same to those of us in rows
We can't escape, waiting our cue to clap.
At last, the octet, clearly in their throes,
Expires—but no! They've got yet one more lap
To take, and then no more of Philip Glass.
We rise, applaud, and think, "My aching ass!"

Lord Roddaquim Reflects

CRAIG DOBSON

Mounting her from behind,
I am framed in the bedroom mirror,

so that during each plunge,
rippling her from arse to elbow,

I'm profiled to good effect.
Engaged, I try a face or two,

arch an eyebrow, purse a lip,
even, with some élan, place one hand

upon my hip, ennobling what is now
a portrait pose: His Lordship, rutting.

And Now This

JOHN ABBOTT

An August storm
composed only
of lightning
draws us from
sleep
and on to
dry grass
stiff beneath
our toes.

One flash –
and we see
the old sycamore
with perfect clarity,
the bark scattered
around the trunk.

Another bolt
renders today's
sidewalk chalk drawings
ancient and stark.
Darkness can't erase
the imprint
on our eyelid
impossible now
to conceive

our younger selves
crouched down,
weight on knees.
The cement in
summertime becomes
an entire world,
especially when
we are blessed
with a drenching,
all encompassing rain
which turns
the sidewalks
and gutters
into streams
we follow blindly.

Vernal Equinox

MARY BUCHINGER

This is how it happens: we eat dinner,
a mix of leftovers with some fresh add-
ons, chicken wings barbequed days ago
when it was sunny and warm, coleslaw,
biscuits to stretch it out, then afterward,
the kids scamper up to the attic, telling
us to wait at the table as a late storm
draws circles of snow, full-bodied ghosts
of March twirl narrow white sleeves
up to bare maple limbs caught in the
winds, and our boys descend again to
turn out the lights on us, only the snow
glows sodium-orange outside the dining
room windows, Stravinsky's Infernal
Dance of King Kashchei playing on the
stereo as our sons announce themselves
transformed into the River Spirit and
the Shadow of Death, strange figures
spiraling black-gowned legs and arms,
our children flinging dark selves into
dark, trading shadows swirl for swirl,
while we parents murmur be careful,
watch out, covering sharp corners of
the table with our hands, as they giggle,
spinning there on the wooden floor,
the bigger one lifting the other into the
air, homemade pennon flapping in the

ridiculous twist of a top-heavy twirling
of brothers up to the old chandelier of
copper bees, the swift current of our
twined rivers sweeping them, oh cold
ache, these wild living gods of death,
whirling, whirling, too fast it goes,
threatening to never slow
—this life we make up as we go

Nacre

GERARD WOODWARD

My childhood friend Monica had a dolls' house but no dolls. Instead she used chess pieces, which she found to be perfectly suited for representing the various members of a household. The King and Queen were the parents, the bishops were the servants, the knights were the pets, and the pawns were all the children. This left only the rooks to account for. I'm not sure what Monica did with the rooks.

I remember Monica because she was the first person to notice the thing on the back of my neck. We were playing with her dolls' house, (I was not unaware of the fact that I was also, in a very loose sense, playing a game of chess), when she decided, in her frivolity and out of a desire to use up excess energy, to climb onto my shoulders. She was a lightweight—three years younger than me—but I was shocked to be so straddled, to feel a little thigh close to each ear, and the warm softness that pummelled the back of my neck. I should have shaken her off, but it was she who climbed down, giving a shocked little yelp of pain, holding her groin with one hand, as though she had been kicked there, while in her other hand she clutched the father of her house (the black king). Through yellow tears she cried out to me for hurting her with that 'thing' on my neck.

Years later she said she imagined that I had been wearing some

sort of pendant or medallion on a chain with a large buckle fastening and when she returned to the scene of her injury and asked me what I was wearing I said that I was wearing nothing other than my normal clothes.

She demanded evidence that I had nothing sharp under there, and so I loosened the collar of my shirt and let her look. She cautiously inserted a hand down the back of my neck and exclaimed with horror—the sharp thing down there was not an item of jewelry but was actually a part of my body. I thought nothing more of it, because to me it just was a particularly large and pointed vertebra. The human skeleton protrudes under the skin in all sorts of odd places—think of the clavicles, or the knee cap, or the funny bone, or that bump near the wrist, and of course the backbone itself which on certain people is so prominent you wonder if they are really descendants of stegosaurs—notched and quilled as they seem to be. All I had was a rather prominent one of these, on the back of my neck.

Some years later this notch increased in size and it did more than just lift the surface of the skin: it pushed through. There was little to draw attention to this phenomenon, because no one had any cause to investigate or come into contact with that part of my body. in the normal course of things, and By day it was safely hidden beneath my collar, but at school in our twelfth year we were given this annoying thing—a medical, which meant stripping down to vest and pants and submitting ourselves to all sorts of tests, inspections and calibrations. It was then that the area at the back of my neck was first documented. It appeared, as I learned from my mother later, that a small part of my upper vertebrae had broken through the skin and become exposed to the outside world. The spinous process of the lower cervical vertebra seemed exceptionally extended. 'You could hang your coat on it' one of the

doctors said. Later investigations showed that this particular part of the vertebral column was beginning to fuse with the shoulder blade, and to restrict my ability to move freely.

By the age of fourteen I began to notice a decrease in my ability to rotate my head from side to side. I could no longer look back over my shoulder to see if I was being followed (not that anyone ever did follow me), and the original protuberance of bone through the skin had extended laterally, so that now instead of a little notch of bone poking through the skin, there was a ridge of bony material, varying from an half inch to nearly an inch in thickness, protruding from my skin in a roughly straight line across the lower part of my shoulders, occupying the same space that a yoke would rest if I were a carrier of such a burden.

It was, of course, a phenomenon new to medical science and although I was subjected to many tests, no one was able to provide any sort of explanation. Or cure. I was closely monitored throughout my adolescence during which time the ridge of bony material grew considerably, rising in a crest of matter to such a height that it could no longer be easily concealed, and in fact began to take the form of a sort of high bone-collar. One of the immediate effects of this was to increase my hearing considerably. Behind me there was a wall of bone, a sort of amphitheatre for my head, that operated in just the same way as the dish of a radio telescope, collecting and capturing and concentrating all sound. My clothes had to be specially adapted. I could no longer wear conventional shirts with collars and ties, and so my school uniform was modified. I acquired a number of nicknames, most commonly tortoise-face. My resemblance to that animal became particularly marked very clear if I got down on all fours (so I was told) because then my bone collar would protrude above my head like a tortoise shell. All I lacked was a long, wrinkled neck.

Movement became more restricted. I could no longer move my head backwards. Looking upwards became difficult. The fusion was extending along my arms and I was gradually losing movement in them, they were starting to stiffen and were becoming difficult to bend at the shoulders. It was as though I was suffering, one doctor said, from an exploded form of arthritis.

As movement of the head and arms became more difficult, I found intellectual pursuits the most rewarding. I read and wrote and I played chess. Those early days of playing with Monica's dolls had planted a seed in me, and whenever I played chess in the school chess club, I imagined that I was conducting some sort of conflict between two families. I still thought of the King and Queen as parents, the knights as pets, the bishops as servants and the pawns as children. Their movements about the board seemed to be an expression of their personalities—who, for instance, can fail to see the gamboling and playful galloping of a horse in the knight's odd move, or the circumscribed world of the toddler or baby in the pawn's little footsteps? Likewise, the bishops move through their world at an angle, breaking free of the tramlines followed by others, and gliding through an other-dimensional course, just like a seer, or shaman or priest would do. And a rook, or castle, is all governed by hard edges and straight lines. So alive did the pieces come in my mind that I would sometimes hold a pawn up to my eyes to examine that spherical wooden head of his, no more alive, of course, than a clothes peg, but who was to say there was not a mind somewhere within the turned beech?

"I think you are turning into a statue," Monica said to me on our last day of school. Indeed, my hood of bone was now as high as my head and gave me the appearance of some ruffed or frilled or crested creature like a peacock or a triceratops. It had also begun curving forward, like a wave, so that my head movements became

even more restricted. The movement in my arms had become severely limited, and I could not lift them more than 45 degree at the shoulder, in any direction. The medical world continued to be baffled by my condition. As far as I could tell, my illness was unique; no other person on the planet suffered what some people called ossio-effloresence, the apparent emergence of the skeleton into the external realm. Attempts had been made to rectify the bone growth, but surgical intervention was difficult, risky and ultimately counterproductive. The bony tissue was, it seemed, riddled with blood vessels and nerves; moreover, it was of a substance quite different to bone, and much harder—more akin to tooth enamel or, as one doctor observed, nacre, the sort of stuff that certain seashells are made from. In any event, areas of this shell could only be removed in small sections at a time, because of the veiny network beneath, and then the shell grew back all the more vigorously in other areas, just like a pruned rose bush. It was thought the best strategy was to carefully monitor the rate of growth and look for signs that it might slow down and eventually stop. The growth rate throughout my adolescence accelerated steadily from half, to one, to one and a half inches a year. By the time I left school and went to university it was increasing by two inches a year and showed no sign of slowing down.

I chose to study mathematics at university, with the hope of embarking on an academic career. Unfortunately I obtained only an average undergraduate degree, and so was unable to transfer into postgraduate study. Most of my fellow students at that time were intent on finding jobs in The City, and for a while I thought about doing the same. A disability such as mine might not be too problematic in a job which seemed mostly to consist of sitting before computer screens and talking into telephones. A friend of mine joked that I would be at an advantage, because people in the

city needed thick skins. It wasn't the first time I'd heard that joke, nor the one about needing to come out of my shell (which the same friend also made, in relation to working in the city).

But of course my condition would be a terrible disadvantage in almost any job I could think of—apart from security guard. By the time I had finished university the hood of bone now curved over the top of my head and extended down in front of my face, like a policeman's helmet, only lower. In straight-on view, I am told that only my mouth and chin were visible. The upper part of my arms had fused completely to the side of my body, and the emerging shell now extended all the way down each arm to the elbow, in which I still had a little movement. Once, when I found myself caught up in a bar room brawl at the end of my student days, I was saved from injury when an unopened beer bottle would have hit me full in the face, but bounced harmlessly off the frontal shield of bone, so that I didn't even notice it. I am told that some friends envied me my armour, but of course they couldn't see things from my point of view. I was effectively blind, or at least had vision so severely restricted that the only portion of the world available for my viewing was that directly beneath my feet. I could read books, and if I lay on my back I could watch the television (if it was placed at the end of my bed), and I could contemplate a chessboard, but otherwise, I was limited, and becoming more limited by the day.

As my bone hood continued to grow, the best treatment was thought to be that of adaptation rather than cure. Ingenious devices were contrived that came to my aid. First of all, a simple periscope was rigged up that gave me near perfect forward vision. Thus I was allowed to see my loved one's face again. It may surprise you to learn that I had a loved one, but I was lucky enough to receive frequent advances from ladyfolk, among whom I found Lauren, the light of my life.

In my mid twenties the shell-like structure that was growing around my head took on a new rate of growth. Nearly six inches a year. Within a short time my periscopic device proved useless, for the bony structure had grown far down below the level of my face, and in only a couple of years had reached my lower chest area. At the same time it had expanded outwards, so that my head wasn't too tightly enclosed—there was a good five or six inches between my face and the shell interior—it was like wearing a very capacious diving helmet (with no visor, of course.) I was still able to view the world at my feet, as if down a tunnel, and sometimes Lauren would take up her position down there so that we could see each other face to face. But there was something very sad about these moments, because it looked in all probability that eventually the shell would obscure even that viewpoint and Lauren would forever be out of sight, around the corner of my bone tunnel. I had been told about how the bony structure was beginning to take a spiral form, the centre of the spiral being at my elbows, and it appeared that whatever form the shell finally took, my hands and forearms would be on the outside.

Throughout my twenties and thirties, the bony shell, continued to grow, and eventually the forward section of it reached down as far as my knees and began to come inwards at that point, first rubbing against the lower part of my legs, making walking very difficult, and later impossible. The shell curved beneath and behind me, so that I was reduced to permanently standing on my knees, and eventually, at the age of thirty seven, my entire body was enclosed within the spiral shell that was growing out of the back of my neck. I was also told that this was very similar to the way in which true shells actually grow—the whelk or other mollusc starts off as a blob of soft flesh which begins growing shell from a point just below the back of its head.

I was no longer mobile. The diameter of my shell had reached six feet, which meant I had become as wide as I was tall. I could only be moved by winch and trolley, and a team of at least five strong men. I was only moved if there was a very good reason. Trapped within the spiral of my shell, feeding was mainly undertaken by passing food to me in a package passed into the opening of my shell on a device like a flexible fishing rod. Though I was unable to use my hands to feed myself I had become adept at using my teeth only. When this was too difficult, much of my food intake was imbibed through a long tube. It became increasingly darker as the shell grew, though my eyes became adapted to the permanent dimness. Advances in technology meant I could watch a small screen within my shell, which meant I could at least converse with people and see what was going on in the outside world. Lauren and I could still maintain physical contact. She would crawl, with flashlight on her forehead, into my spiral far enough for us to see each other face to face. Each time she looked at me with the kind of awe a speleologist might experience on discovering new cave paintings. Sadly even this difficult manoeuvre became impossible after a few years. The shell now turned through a complete 360 degrees. The opening of the shell was now on a level with the back of my neck, where its point of origin was.

In the midst of my whorl I find consolation in mathematics and chess. I am a keen reader of the latest mathematical developments in quantum physics and string theory. I am a firm believer in the idea that the answer to the secrets of the universe can be found in mathematics, indeed in the game of chess, which, though now playable by artificial brains, still possesses a numerical mystery at its heart.

You will be surprised to learn that I am a father. It is not such a surprise, surely. In our early days, before the shell had reached its

greater extent, Lauren and I had no difficulty performing the necessary function, and indeed even now we can enjoy and savour the delight of carnal contact, if Lauren makes herself available to me, (my hands have retained their sensitivity, even though to me they seem to inhabit a different universe), and she can venture into the horny iridescent gateway, the cornucopial cup of the entrance to my innerness, and reach in as far as she can—I am, of course, permanently unclothed in my shell, it being far too hot for dress, and the difficulty of donning or taking off any attire is far too great for any benefit to be had from clothing. No, I do not only have a child, I have three children—Bernard, Clodagh and Gavin who are, as I write, 10, seven and four respectively. When they were little they regularly entered the tunnel of my shell and rounded the spiral so that they could meet me face to face. They thought it a great game to slip and slide about on its smooth inner walls. They do this less as they grow older, and by the time they are adults it will be impossible for them to see my face directly.

My legs have lost much of their muscularity and their bone tissue. I have long considered what I might do with the remainder of my life. I am experiencing a paralysis of an unusual kind—while I have full use of all my limbs, I cannot move. Nor can I see, other than on a screen, and that itself has become too difficult now, my eyes have trouble focusing on the nearness of the pixels. My hearing—well, that is something that has been enhanced, in a way. The shell acts as one enormous amplification device. When my daughter was little, just the stroke of her little soft fingers at the lip of my shell sounded like the pawing of hooves, to me. I can pick up voices from many dozens of feet away, my own voice reverberates like an alpenhorn, and if I sneeze—well, that is like the crashing of the sea.

The sea. I have no mobility whatsoever. Cranes are required,

teams of people, specially adapted vehicles, in fact nothing short of a large pick up lorry and trailer can manage me. Yet I had this profound urge to visit the sea, to hear it—because, as you can imagine, I think I hear it all the time, yet it is my own blood gushing through my ears that I hear. And so at great expense of both money and effort, it was finally arranged for me to visit the coast—I travelled for the first time in years, I am told I was a great sight, I am perfectly spiralled now, going through three complete revolutions so that there is now a very long tunnel between myself and the outside world and I reside in a realm that is in its natural state completely dark. I was taken to a beach on what is these days called the Jurassic Coast, and I was carefully placed on the pebbles. And the sound of the sea came crashing in at my door. Oh, a tremendous sound, so thrilling, so surging, it echoed about the marbled walls of my whorled world, and the smells, the salt tang, the peculiarly rich air, all these quenched what I didn't realise had been a tremendous, lifelong thirst. I even began to wonder if this very condition hadn't been caused by some deep sea-longing in me, a belief, or nostalgia for a seaborne pre-existence—for don't we all begin life as sea creatures, swimming an internal ocean? I don't think I would have minded if I had been left there—for I was down below the high tide line, and I don't think I would have minded if the tide had come into my spiralled self, had filled the million corners of my helix—perhaps I would have survived and lived a long and fruitful life, perhaps my inner anatomy had changed in such a way as to be adapted for the underwater life. But no, I sensed a big crowd had gathered about me on the beach. The biggest conch in the world, that is what I was now, and a spectacular sight to behold, in diameter nearly nine feet. And it was with great disappointment that I felt myself being lifted once again, the winch being put into motion and it sound merging with

that of the crashing waves, lowering me onto the cushioned bed of the trailer once again, and taking me out of that marvellous realm, back into the pain of the dry land.

Leaving the Horseshoe Café

JEFF ALFIER

I walk the main drag of sundown
Benson. A woman in an evening
dress recedes through a lane
of houses, her figure airbrushed
onto the smoky blue pallet
of evening.

Beyond the last streetlamp,
the desert is hollowed for copper,
named for sun-struck myths
of gold and phantoms, the brute
majesty of distance where a truck stop
thrives.

A Kenworth lumbers past, Ohio
plates, its grill a wind-lash
of extinguished lightning bugs,
the wings of bright butterflies.

We Always Stay a Day Too Long

RANDY PHILLIS

for Tom and Kathy

Last night drizzles to nothing,
strained, like our brains, through
the coarse cloth of blackout.

Coffee shines in its metal pot
and red memories seep through into giggles.
I want to kiss the pink tips of your ears.

I shave my neck raw before we shuffle
to the deli where we bob like pickles in brine,
gently unwrapping the waxy paper.

Later, talked out, we spread the news
on the table, pull weeds, twist
the seed heads of those flowers you love.

I love your small dress
as the wide waters of rain raise
the scent of grapes and darken the ground.

Evening, we pull sweaters from the hall closet.
Autumn whirls dusk, and
the scarlet leaves swirl like motes,

like the flash in your grey eyes and I remember
rhododendrons tall as trees,
your mouth warm and wet, a star bursting.

Hungry, we find ourselves in the same
new place, toes curled over the edge of hope.
I straddle these bright dreams

and unfold them like clean cloth,
a man caught in too much skin, forgetting how
to place the tongue against the palate.

We wash the day's residue away with the sound
of water lit by questions in the wide twilight
and lean into the slow river,

the distant ridges cracking like light
from beneath a door. Open the bottle.
Slip again into the warm,

cinnamon solidness of another night
and the movie we cast ourselves in, playing
on the drifting picture window, illusory

like any reflection as we turn up the music,
run our fingers through the long hair of strangers,
try to catch the slender men dancing.

Seconds After

LEN KRISAK

It is a kind of after-shower shower,
These waters dropping from the summer's leaves
To plink the roof not half a summer's hour
After the rain. And on the waiting eaves,
At edges where the sun comes back to warm,
A faint breath lifts away, its lazy steam
Almost a kind of smoke that starts to form
From rooftop offerings—so it might seem.
But nothing has been made a sacrifice,
I'm sure, since nothing in this noontime storm
Could ever wash away a sin. Dry ice-
Like, merest vapor rises in the weather
Granted since raindrops fell upon us twice.
See how they've risen, lighter than a feather.

Curtis Drug Store

JOHN ABBOTT

Driving across town with my
dad so he can pick up his ulcer medicine

laying down all my allowance to buy
sour gumballs I stuff into my mouth

two at a time, staring at the dated
fifties décor as if it were the last

sliver of sunset burning down the horizon

Heaven on the Point System at the Petro Truck Stop

JEFF ALFIER

The pulse of a clock blurs the borders between
any two days of the week. Mumbling becomes
shorthand that gets a bloodstream warm mercy
in a stoneware cup that could be the very one
you held in tired fists on any coast behind you.

My waitress is Kat, an avatar from somewhere
else, bringing plates of breakfast no matter
the hour, because truckers who sleepwalk
from counters to washrooms and back
mean it's dawn somewhere in the world.

Even storm clouds today wear the beleaguered
faces of truck stop men. Families from town
are here on rumors of the cheapest buffet about.
I order the same meal each time, counting
how many ways light can fall across my toast.

A trucker near me speaks of his commission
and his grand cut of the payload. He calls Kat
a good girl for not forgetting to bring
his ketchup, and I know that's a trucker's
way of falling in love this far from home.

She just lets those words slide off her smile –
for she's the truck stop's 'Daymaker of the Month.'
I hear the drizzle start to lessen on the roof, squint
at the sun breaking on the streets outside, catch
the wind-shadow of a child running past my window.

iWarriors

FRANK SCOZZARI

The image shook as Amar tried to hold his hands steady. He shifted the camera left and then right, and finally centering in the small digital screen was the image of a man, gravely injured or dead, lying face down in the street. From a concrete building across the way, a long piece of rebar reached out from an open doorway and tried to pull the wounded man to safety. Amar took a deep breath and clicked video.

He watched through the screen as the piece of rebar finally hooked the wounded man's upper arm and pulled him toward the shelter of the building. But the man rolled and the piece of rebar came back and found another place to hook. The end of the rebar was bent like a horseshoe, and reaching across the body. It found a grasp beneath the wounded man's arm, and again, the rebar dragged the wounded man toward the shelter of the doorway on the far side of the street. Amar focused on the bloody image centered in the small digital screen, and holding his hands steady.

Amar stood in a building foyer, out of the sights of the sniper, with both feet planted shoulder width apart and his arms straight out before him. He heard someone yelling down the street, but he could not make out the words. A distant gunshot caused him to flinch but he quickly re-centered the image. Slowly, the men worked, pulling, tugging, slipping, reaching back, and finally heaving the injured man to the safety of the building.

Amar looked at the face of his smartphone, touched the save option, watched for the confirmation, and then tucked the phone into his pocket. He disappeared into the doorway behind him, hurried through an empty corridor, and came out on the opposite street a block away. He looked in both directions, and when he saw that all was clear, he sprinted down the sidewalk in the opposite direction from which he had come.

After three blocks he slowed, turned a corner, and stopped beneath an open window.

Amar whistled. A head popped out from the window, looked down the street, and then down at Amar. Amar tossed the smart phone up, and the man in the window caught it then disappeared into the window. Amar walked down the street toward his apartment.

Inside the building, the smartphone was hurried down a hallway to a secluded room. There, was a makeshift office designed to receive and transmit video dispatches to the media world outside. Two men sat at two tables at laptops. The smartphone was handed over to the nearest computer operator, who connected it to a USB cord, and with a stroke of the keyboard, the video was uploaded. A webpage opened, a link was clicked, and the man began typing in English. The other two men watched over his shoulder:

"Freedom fighters try to rescue fallen protester, shot by Assad's henchmen, in Hama, Syria. 4th August, 2011."

The message was sent out via satellite. The recipient's email address - Al Jazeera News - flashed back on the screen.

The three men looked at one another and smiled.

Amar's roommate, twenty-six-year old Murhaf Rahman was fixing a sandwich of pita bread, humus, and meat. Leaning against the counter was an AK-47, recently smuggled in across

the Turkish border, compliments of Turkey's Military High Command.

"I don't want guns in here," Amar said.

Murhaf took the rifle, opened the kitchen pantry, tucked the gun inside, and went back to his sandwich.

"We having a good day, brother?" Murhaf asked.

"Yes, it has been a good day, brother," Amar replied.

Brothers they were, but not in blood. It was the five-month-old rebellion that bonded them, though they had differing views on exactly how the rebellion should be conducted.

"We will be meeting this evening," he said "I would like you to come."

"I want you to see what we do. I want you to meet Hazem," Amar continued.

"I think it would be a waste of time," Murhaf said.

"He is a wise man. If you hear his words…"

"Why? Because he speaks English?"

"No, because he speaks words that make better sense than any man I know."

"I'm sorry. I do not understand your kind of warfare," Murhaf said.

"How do you know unless you come and listen?"

"It is time wasted."

Amar stared at Murhaf. "Perhaps you will find it in yourself to join us brother?"

Murhaf said nothing.

"We will be meeting at the safe house on Friday," Amar said.

On Friday Hazem Saleh, the leader of this rogue band of cell-phone journalists, stood at the front of an improvised meeting room. He was, middle-aged with graying hair and a graying beard, and was dressed in a business suit which had not been pressed for

some time. He had worked as a media supervisor for the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression before it had been completely abolished by Damascus, and had been a senior foreign correspondent for BBC World News, before foreign news had been outlawed. He was trying to bring some sense of professionalism to a band of gypsies.

"It is a good day, my friends, my brothers. The sun is out. We are alive. And the fate of Syria is securely in our hands. The longer the revolution lasts, the better chance we have for freedom."

A noise came from the rear of the room and all eyes turned back to see Murhaf standing in the doorway.

"Welcome brother," Hazem said.

Amar smiled and offered him a seat, but Murhaf found a place against the back wall where he leaned his shoulder and remained silent.

Hazem showed them a video.

On the screen appeared Al-Jazeera English showing grainy images from a mobile phone of detainees being beaten by Syrian soldiers. The reception, which was poor to begin with, went hazy and then vanished. A young man sitting next to Hazem near the front of the room got up and played with the satellite dish until the feed came back and the images came in clearly.

Then they watched a second video began to play of a long piece of rebar reaching out for a wounded man. The bottom of the screen said BBC Worldwide News. The announcer, a very British-looking, well-dressed woman with blonde hair, spoke in Queen's English, "President Bashar Assad's bloody crackdown on protesters has taken an ominous turn over the weekend. In the city of Hama, an armored attack on thousands of protesters killed at least 150 civilians on Sunday. There were also reports of attacks by the army in at least four other cities with dozens more killed. The

increasing violence has raised eyebrows in the West. The number of people killed in the bloody repression of an uprising against the government in Syria has now risen to at least thirty-five thousand, awakening leaders of the international community…"

"It is exactly what we need!" Hazem said. "To open the eyes of the West, to find support of the international community. It is our path, our way to freedom, and we are the window to the world, God's spies on earth." Hazem's eyes searched and found Amar. "And thanks be to brother Amar, whose courage and steady hand has brought us this recognition."

Hazem turned back to the computer screen and watched for a moment as the announcer continued. "Once-friendly nations have now criticized President Bashar al-Assad…" the announcer's voice spoke. "And French President Nicolas Sarkozy has demanded his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad to step down for overseeing massacres of his own people."

Hazem gazed across the room, his eyes smiling. They had secured an audience in the Arabic world already with many newsreels airing on Al Arabiya. Now, they had found an English audience as well.

"It is success, my friends," he said. "It is a new milestone. Now it's only a matter of time and Assad will fall." His eyes glanced down at the tabletop. "And today, we have been afforded a new tool to advance our crusade."

On the table were two small boxes. Hazem took one of the boxes, turned it over and showed the printed words: Apple iPhone 4S. He began to open it, and half way through the process he tossed the second box into Amar's lap.

"It has enhanced camera and video," Hazem spoke, now holding the iPhone in his hand. He waited for it to light up. "Much higher resolution, thirty frames per second, longer battery life,

and enhanced HD quality. With this, we can take media-quality video."

He turned the iPhone so that all could now see the lit touchscreen.

"CNN … Anderson Cooper … here we come!"

The room erupted with applause.

Murhaf stood restlessly. He saw no reason to celebrate. It was not the path, he thought. A new phone was no match to the weaponry of Assad's regime.

"No rebellion was ever won without violence," he spoke loudly.

All eyes turned back at him.

"It is silliness to believe you can win a war with a phone."

"Then our rebellion will be the first," Hazem said boldly.

"Assad will not fall to an image on a smartphone," Murhaf replied. "Ask the people of Libya."

"Maybe it was true in Libya. But this is Syria. And we are Syrian people, and if we can find justice through diplomatic means… through peaceful means, without Syrians spilling the blood of Syrians, shouldn't we choose peace?"

Murhaf was a believer in self-reliance; in the one truth that all things that must be changed by one's will. Defiance was the path, he thought. Waiting for a diplomatic resolution, requesting help, especially from the Western World, was just short of cowardice.

"A brother falls and you photograph it? You photograph the blood of your mothers and fathers, the blood of your brothers and sisters, and your children?" He looked over the silent group. "When will you fight back? If not today, if not tomorrow, then when?"

"We fight back, everyday," Hazem said. "With a picture that paints a thousand words and a pen that is mightier than the sword. And with the will of the people, and the will of the Creator, we will succeed."

They were elegant words, Murhaf thought, but overused and not worthy of a response.

"It is through international pressure and intervention," Hazem continued. "With the might of the West and the support of the Arabic states, Assad will crumble." He looked at Murhaf. "Are you for the revolution?"

"Of course."

"Then take this weapon," Hazem said.

Hazem held out the second iPhone, offering it to Murhaf.

Murhaf stared at it.

Hazem's arm extended. "Here. Take it. This is our implement of war."

It is such a small and simple device, Murhaf thought. Not a device for overcoming oppression or stopping tanks from rolling over defenseless protestors.

He shook his head. "I do not believe in the power of the pen," he said. "I believe in the power of the sword. Give the phone to someone who believes in it."

Hazem withdrew his arm.

There was to be a great demonstration in Assi Square in three days, Hazem took special care to coordinate full coverage of the event. He had a large map of the square, had sectioned it off into quadrants, and assigned the men to strategic spots within the plaza.

After everyone had left, Amar and Murhaf walked back to their apartment in silence.

"Why come to the meeting at all if you are going to cause problems?" Amar finally spoke.

"A man educated in the West?" Murhaf mumbled to himself and put on his little half-smile. "It is only because he was educated in the West that you trust him."

"Why do you say that?"

"Since when do Syrians follow Western ways and Western words?" Murhaf said and then stopped. "Crusade? Whose crusade?"

"It is because his way is the just way, under the eyes of God," said Amar. "Some Syrians resist violence. Why have a problem with that?"

"You have forgotten your history," Murhaf huffed. "Democracy never came from peace. It comes from war. It is a fact of history. All great nations have risen from blood. If Lenin waited for a peaceful demonstration, Czars would still rule Russia. If Libyans relied on iPhone images, Gaddafi would still be laughing. And if you turn the other cheek now, Assad will roll over you with his tanks."

"Murhaf, I pray that you do not destroy us."

"No war was ever won by peaceful protest. The free people of Syria and its mujahedeen will overthrow Assad, but we will not do so with an iPhone."

The safe house was raided by government soldiers and Hazem Saleh had been dragged off and killed. Much of their equipment had been seized or destroyed. The laptops, which contained email lists of outside contacts on their hard-drives, were taken away by the regime's intelligence service for deciphering. Any man who had used his name in any email, in anyway, was now a hunted fugitive.

The rebel effort regrouped and refortified. As safe houses were raided and destroyed, new ones popped up. As equipment was seized or destroyed, new equipment was donated or smuggled in from Lebanon or Turkey along the many secret paths, which linked one safe house to another. And as leadership was lost, new leadership was found.

The massive demonstration in Assi Square had begun in the morning hours as scheduled, but had turned deadly by early afternoon. The number of demonstrators swelled into the thousands, too many for the government to stand by and tolerate, so tanks and armored vehicles rolled in and seized the square. Some of the activists tried to stop the advancing armored columns with makeshift barricades, but they were no match for the military. Amar had watched, and had filmed as the demonstrators scattered and fell back. Some of the fighters like Murhaf had stayed in the square, throwing stones at armor. But the regime released their snipers, and their mafia-like gunmen known as shabiha who operated as hired guns for the regime, and they began to systematically cut down any pocket of resistance.

Amar stood back from it all in a small building alcove. He held his iPhone out steady before him and filmed.

From behind the barricade, a man stood up and raised his fist at the armored vehicles.

"Freedom forever, despite you Assad!" yelled the man.

The man was shot in the head, fell to the ground, and his blood ran in the street and glistened in the sunlight.

Another man who sprang to his aid was also shot, and he fell diagonally, cross-bodied over the first.

"Now Assad," Amar said to himself. "How will you explain this?"

Another demonstrator threw a rock, which bounced off the windshield of one of the armored vehicles. The rock was answered by a volley of machinegun fire, but the man had ducked down quickly and escaped injury, for the moment.

Then the shabiha, came from all directions with clubs and guns and riot gear, and began beating, indiscriminately, any activist who failed to flee. Those who had fallen to the ground were kicked and dragged back to the armored vehicles.

Amar filmed as another demonstrator fell to his knees with men over him flailing with their clubs, striking him against his arms which he held up to protect himself until his arms could no longer take the beating, and then his head was unprotected and the clubs came against his head until he dropped, lifeless, and was dragged off with the others.

"And this? It is Islamic extremists? The world will now see Assad! The world will now see how you really are… and all your lies!"

Then, through the small digital screen, Amar saw one of the government thugs turn his way. Before Amar knew it, one of them had his rifle raised and pointed at him. Amar ducked back into the alcove, breathing heavily. When he poked his head back around the corner, he saw the remaining demonstrators fleeing in all directions, and the shabiha coming his way. Amar turned and ran.

Amar could not remember much after that, only running fast and breathing hard, until he was beyond the earshot of the carnage. He found himself in a protective alcove trying to catch his breath. He was sweating heavily. His mouth was stiff and dry. He looked down and realized his leg was shaking and he held his hand against it until it stopped.

He stood there and watched as the people ran past until there were no more. He snuck a glance around the corner and down the street. It was deserted. He needed to build his courage to return to the square. It was there that his journalism would turn the tide of this rebellion.

"You must be brave," he said to himself.

He looked again and saw no one. Then he stepped out into the street and walked forward, filming burned buildings and rubble-strewn streets empty of people, just four blocks from the square.

A man emerged from behind a building and yelled as he ran past. "It is not safe, brother! Save yourself for another day."

Amar continued, and another man ran past.

"Turn back," the man yelled. "The entire Syrian Army is coming."

Amar heard distant screams and gunfire, but could see nothing. He ducked into another building alcove, debating whether to continue or not.

"It is time for war, brother," a voice said behind him.

Murhaf stood, leaning against the wall. His AK-47 was in one hand and a can of Red Bull in the other. Murhaf smiled, brought the can of the Red Bull to his lips, and tilted his head back to get the last drop. He then tossed the skinny can to the ground.

"Come brother," he said. "I will help you get your pictures."

Amar nodded his head.

Murhaf peaked around the wall of the building, down the street. Then he led Amar across to the other side, keeping tight to the walls of the buildings as they proceeded north toward the square.

They zigzagged from one side of the street to the other, keeping clear of the sniper fire from alternating rooftops.

The street broadened into a boulevard.

Murhaf ducked into a building foyer "It will be more dangerous to cross further down," Murhaf said.

Amar nodded.

Murhaf held his rifle in a defensive position and peered around the corner. The protruding façade of the building allowed for a commanding view in both directions. Now he could see the last barricade, a half-kilometer ahead, and he could see movement behind it. The last of the demonstrators, those who had pulled back from the square, had assembled another wall of toppled carts and lobby furniture. The air was filled with teargas and smoke.

Murhaf never liked this street. It was too big, and too wide,

and it was in the financial district, a street for the government elite. But they needed to cross it in order to be on the south side of the square, and this was as good a place as any.

Ahead they heard gunfire, and they saw a demonstrator running to the opposite side of the street. Another gunshot sounded and a bullet ricocheted off the pavement near the man as he made a last leap onto the sidewalk and into a building. Murhaf looked up and saw the dark outline of a head just above the roofline on the opposite side of the street. As soon as he saw it, the head went down.

The demonstrator, safely in the building, peaked out a broken window and then disappeared.

Murhaf looked at Amar. "It's our turn," he said.

Amar nodded.

Murhaf looked up at the roofline and saw nothing. "Let's go."

"Okay."

They bolted across the street, and as they did, something fell to the ground. It clanged to the pavement, and when they looked back, they saw the iPhone there lying exposed like a flayed rabbit.

Amar reached into his pocket, disbelieving it had fallen out. His pocket was empty. He thought of all the images it contained, some of the most striking video recordings of Assad's brutal tactics taken to date.

"I must get it," he said quickly.

"Wait."

"I must get it," Amar said again, and he began to move forward.

"Wait!" Murhaf said, holding his hand out against Amar's chest.

Murhaf checked the buildings down the street. Along the roofline of a tall building on the left, another head showed itself.

The head stayed up for a second and then went back down. That makes two, he thought.

He huddled there for a moment, thinking.

"There's another one up there," he said, motioning with his head.

Amar glanced up but saw nothing.

For the moment, they were safely out of the sights of the snipers; their heads and bodies were behind the wall of the building. Murhaf looked back at the cell phone shining in the sun. There within, he thought, were the pictures to paint a thousand words. Amar looked nervous and was sweating profusely. Further down the street, Murhaf could see the last barricade with only a few remaining demonstrators behind it. There were distant sounds from the square beyond, rattling machine-gun fire and distant shouting, and he could tell by the way the demonstrators were crouched down and taking cover, something was coming, something big. Murhaf decided to retrieve the phone, not because he preferred it over charging ahead and spilling the blood of the Alawite thugs, but because he knew Amar was determined to get it at any cost, and that he, Murhaf, was better equipped of the two to engage such risk.

"Stay here," Murhaf said.

Amar did not challenge him.

Murhaf took one last glance at the rooftop. He saw nothing. Then he took a deep breath, gripped the AK-47 tightly in his hand, and bolted into the street.

A single shot of a sniper's rifle stopped Murhaf, mid-stride. He staggered two more steps and dropped to the pavement.

"Murhaf!" Amar cried.

Murhaf tried to pull himself up but fell back and he lay there flat on his back, his rifle an arm's length away from his extended

hand. Amar could see blood coming from beneath him and pooling in the street.

"Murhaf!"

Amar leaped into the street, he fell to one knee beside his fallen friend and looked down at Murhaf's lifeless face.

"Murhaf," he cried.

The pointlessness of it struck him suddenly.

He was shaking. He felt the emptiness that came from it all. The rebellion is crumbling, he thought.

Amar grabbed Murhaf's rifle. In an instant, was standing alone in the street clenching an AK-47.

A shot rang out and a bullet ricocheted off the pavement near him and when Amar looked up he saw the head again above the rooftop. Amar put the rifle to his shoulder, leveled it and fired. The rifle recoiled violently, spattered out several rounds, and the head quickly dropped back down below the roofline.

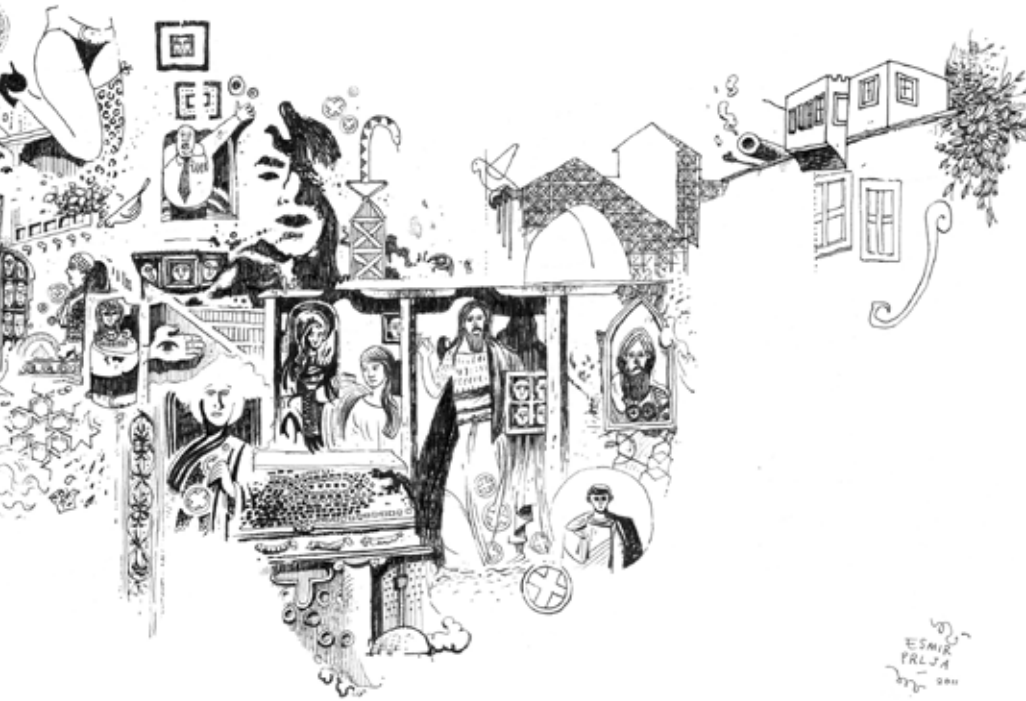
Amar heard the droning sound of on-coming tanks, in columns. It is the sound of doom, Amar thought. He felt the vibration of the earth; he could hear the slow, steady, creaking noise, the mechanized hum of powerful engines, the clacking of tracks against pavement.

Through the smoke and haze of gunfire and teargas, he saw the tanks emerging, rumbling down the street directly toward him. The last of the demonstrators scattered from the barricade in all directions.

He looked down at Murhaf, the blood still fresh on his lips. Beside him lay the iPhone 4 with images that would never change the course of the rebellion.

Amar's hands tightened on the wooden stock of the AK-47. He heard the sounds of rattling gunfire, and then he charged, toward the advancing tanks.

ESMIR PRLJA


ESMIR
PRLJA
2011

Thoughts Rendered Visible

SALLY ANDERSON

An inkblot of birds is really hens
perched on the rock of an eggbox,
the Baltic sky is an invisible black
and the sea swims in moonlight.

In the bathroom, hands cupped
blood coming clean while you sleep
across soiled sheets, I slip back in.

Somewhere in California the ocotillo
is blooming crimson against cactus thorns.

Here in Sweden we spend Friday
to Sunday marooned on the bed, blue.
Bodies, white like clouds
blotting out a summer's day.

Below us the bed blends into desert
and without your parachute silk
we would rain down onto sand.

Your arm, long and Nordic white
floats across my sun stomach
and we surrender to a world after
Magritte, a world split without
gravity, without remembering.

A dove flies across your face
freezes over parted lips, your one peaceful eye.
My face is turned towards you, hidden in clouds
lids white with patience, mouth painted shut.

After Christopher Smart

ANN FISHER-WIRTH

For the tomato is an orb of holy light.

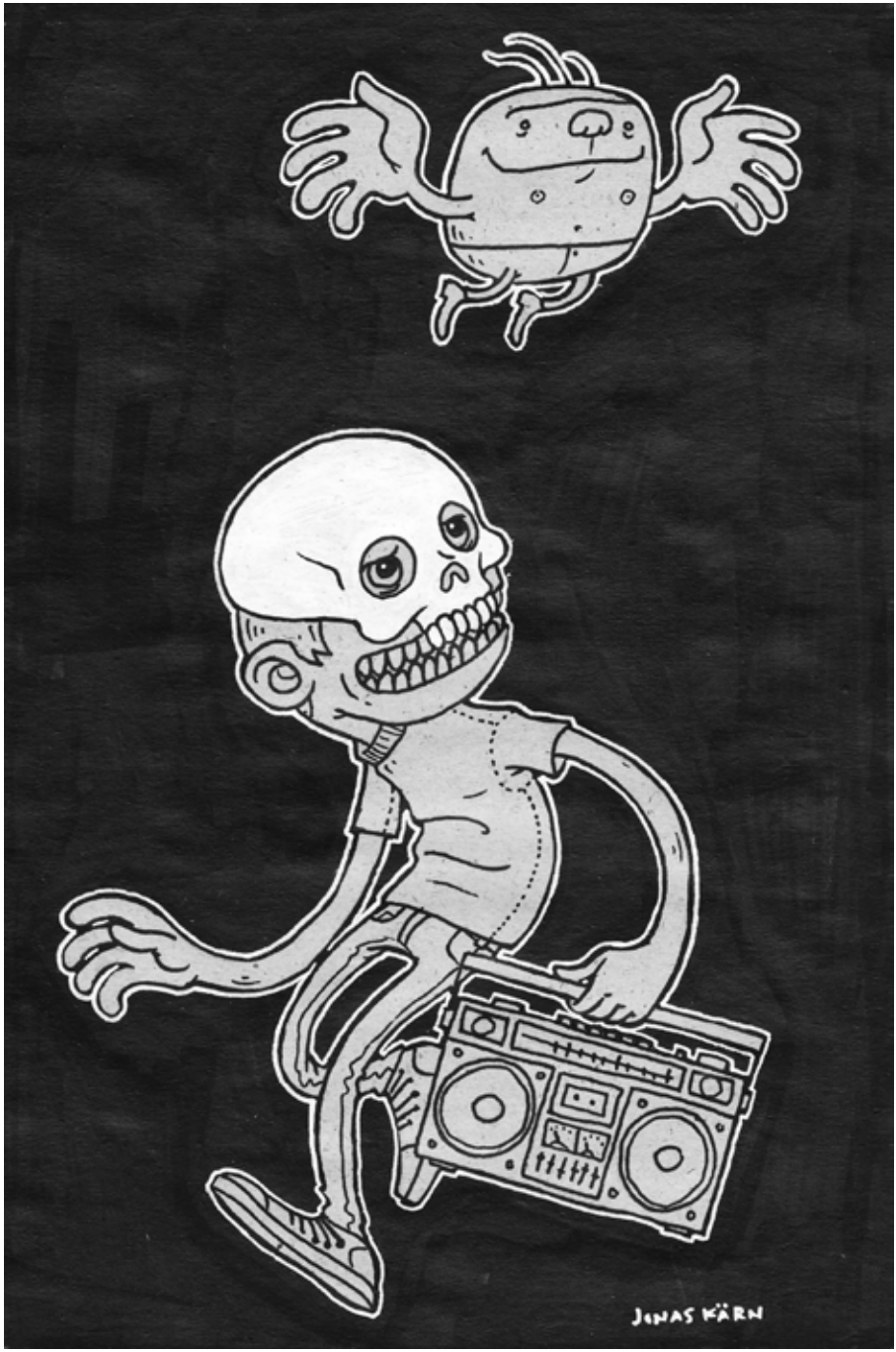
For its seeds are the gleaming defenders of heaven.

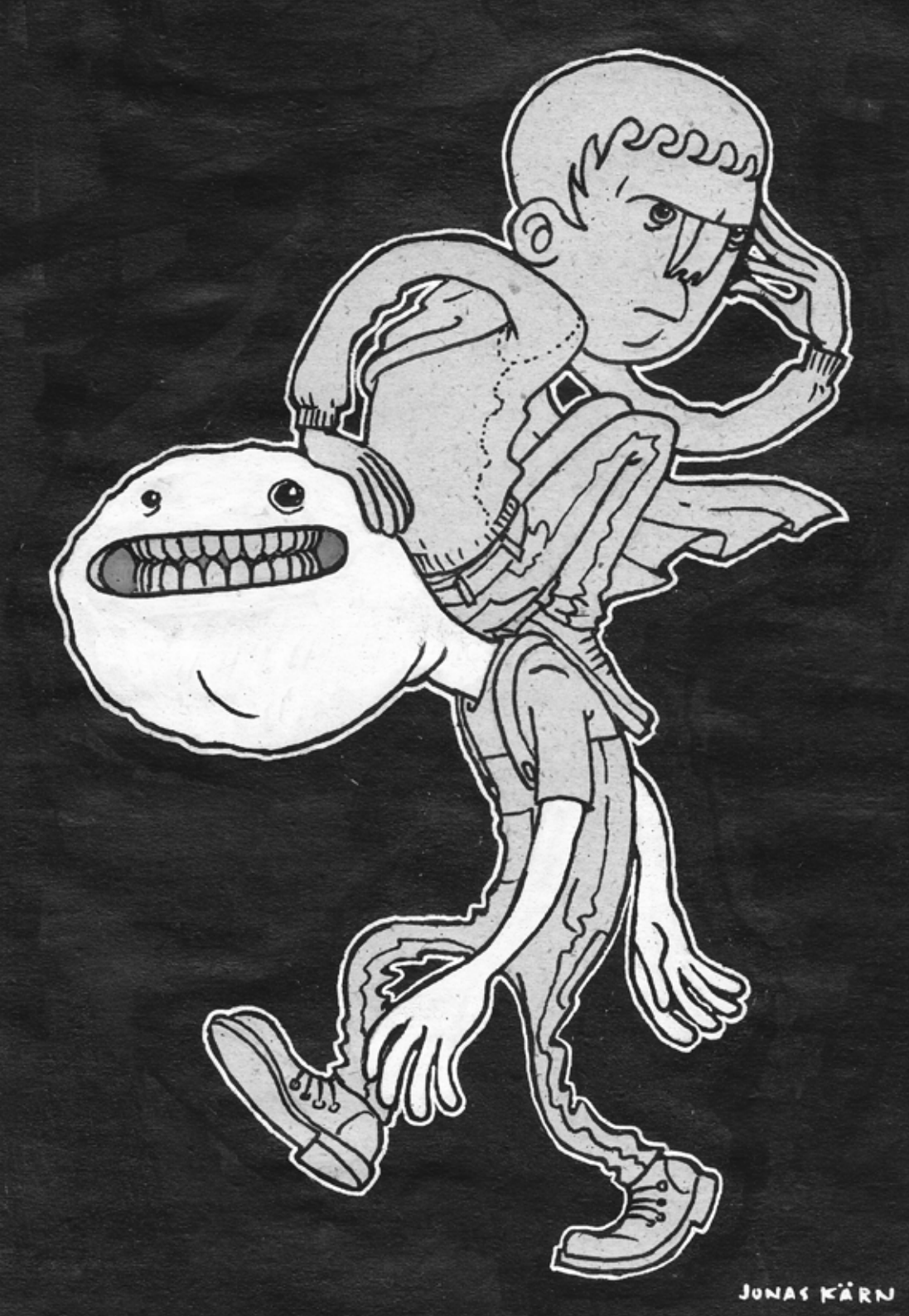
For if the vine grow freely it will scale the vault of the stars.

Art Portfolio

JONAS KÄRN


JONAS KÄRN


JONAS KÄRN


JONAS KÄRN

BETWEEN POLES

At the Reception

MARY BUCHINGER

Torture is a non sequitur,
it is each time. The three of us
introduce ourselves to each other
as we stand at a small cocktail table,
our plates of tabouleh and brie
nearly touching. He has every right
to tell his story, yet we want it
not to belong anywhere.

A scholar of African art, he travels
outside his country to teach. One day
he returns, is called in by the Chief,
they'd gone to school together, known
each other since they were boys. No,
he tells this man, I did not bring guns
from Norway. No, no thousands
of soldiers. His accuser falls asleep.

Eventually he's led to another room
where he is alone for hours. When
two men come to ask for his belt
and shoes, he knows. The torture
is in the morning. Or the afternoon.
It is in the night. Sometimes
many times. He doesn't know
his wife is writing letters, colleagues
all over the world are writing letters.

Amnesty persists, where are these guns,
where these soldiers. His cell door
has a hole at the bottom large enough
for the rats. At this point, the third person
standing at our little table, silent until now,
clears her throat and asks, There in the Congo,
do they speak English? He answers politely,
as if this question follows naturally.

But none of this belongs. It's been four years.
His wife's still there. In spring, the old
are born. The young experience death.
The lamb and the lion take turns.
This April morning is sparkling, cold.
The magnolias froze. Taxes are due.
Last night, I dreamt my tongue was numb.

After I Left

SALLY ANDERSON

I.
You send me silence
a sound you call a voice
which is really
just the waves
of an unnamed ocean

You send me letters
hidden from your wife
whose name I will not
remember

You send me a stone
from Vysočyna
lava from Italy
a Czech chestnut

All the while the waves
roll along the sea
and I am empty

II.
You say you carry me
up the mountains in Madeira
showing me Pico Ruivo
this winter, Pec pod Sněžkou

But I am not there
I am very much here
in the lilies from another man
in his lips finding my face

And Petra, your wife?
where is she as you lounge
across your couch, showing me
her favorite pillow

You say you will carry me
25 years like you carried the other
sweet cherry kisses
make a sweet memory

You say you will carry me
because I am the wordless key
a quarter of a century of building a wall
around a garden that only my smile can open

No, unlike the the entwined fish
we were never meant to be, I beg you
let the Pisces fall apart and release me

III.
You are still there, watching me
in light of the green available light
your name stagnant in my gmail

And I am perched above the other man
who looks like your younger self
as he whimpers to tell me he loves me

Ferðasaga

FRIÐRIK SÓLNES JÓNSSON

The tour-guide's being is akin to the holy trinity. There is a mindless body, a bodiless mind and finally a consciousness that doesn't care about either, but hovers above and observes without an opinion. At this expedition, my fifty-sixth, all three facets of my being were as content as they had ever been. The mindless body bounced happily in our seat, the bodiless mind was lost in fantasies about heroism, self-sacrifice and violence: sometimes all at once, and the mindless-bodiless consciousness floated above those fantasies thinking, *How did these worms enter me?*

At the tour-guide school in Reykjavík, I was taught that keeping a journal during the first few trips would be useful for future reference. I usually only wrote down the names of the places we visited, and due to my poor handwriting, the shaky bus, and the soft-covered notebook that rested on my rock-hard thigh, the words sometimes looked like spiders, other times like hieroglyphs. Later, all I had to do was look at them and the memories would pour over me like molten lead.

The most important lesson came from travelling with people I had never chosen as my travelling companions. Therein lies the essence of the tour-guide profession: to be able to get along with any poor soul that gets on your bus. This particular group seemed

so perfectly diverse that I imagined they were most likely picked together from trillions of applicants by some unseen hand and the bus was to be the setting for some high quality reality-television. This analogy suffered from the fact that there was not a token black person in the group. Come to think of it, the show's producers might well have decided to use me in lieu of an actual black person. I have always believed that I possess much of their innate grace and effortless dignity. I could stand in for an Asian, too, since I have Bruce Lee's chiseled body.

I hoped that my group of tourists would get their money's worth. If their round trip of Iceland left them feeling perplexed and slightly disappointed, I would be totally satisfied.

When I first stepped into the giant, futuristic bus, the driver had the deep brown tan one typically gets from staying in Mallorca for three weeks every year for thirty years in a row. The person behind me caught my eye. Every single lecturer at tour-guide school warned us that the most difficult person on every tour would, as a rule, sit directly behind the tour guide. This remains an axiom. It was an older woman with the face of a scowling cartoon character, her mouth the shape of a horseshoe. She looked at me once for a split second before looking away dismissively. I also noticed that there was a large Icelandic flag on the bus. It was an oversized dashboard ornament of sorts. The bus had the normal bus climate: stale air that was a mixture of the smell of a new car and the not unpleasant aroma of vacuum cleaning. There was a more elusive scent underneath these two. For a moment I thought it was spaghetti Bolognese but a tad sweeter. Then it hit me: it was the faint smell of vomit that no human effort can exorcise from a bus once it's there.

When the forty or so passengers were seated I stood up and said a few words: "Good day ladies and gentlemen. My name is Mumjö and I will be your guide for the next few days."

I tried to keep my eyes fixed on a point somewhere in the back while I told my group briefly of our plans for the day and then I sat down again. We drove off and I began conversing with my driver. His name was Þorlákur and we quickly found some common ground. I told him about my visit to Dubai, where I'd arrived drunk and nearly went to jail for it. He responded with a similar story of his own about how he had once almost been removed from a plane that was not yet airborne because he had drunkenly abused a young couple. The girl had been white but the boy had been black. He said, "Devil, was that man angry. I thought he was going to attack me." The flag that was hanging lamely between us now made a lot more sense. Why did these old working class types always have to be so predictably racist? But who was I to judge. I dislike fat people, smokers, and people who wear fleece sweaters.

I thought about what sort of people made up my group. According to reliable statistics explained to us at school the average Iceland-bound tourist was between 40 and 60 years old, affluent and well educated. I knew exactly what sort of role I would fill in their trusting and expectant minds: a noble savage who read carefully alliterated quatrains while fish dried above his bed, a diamond in the rough, a child of nature and above all an authority on every aspect of Icelandic history, geography and culture. Moreover, I knew exactly who their idea of a typical intellectual was modeled on. It wasn't some tweed-coated Englishman in a black and white photograph or some Frenchman with bulky glasses on black and white television, gesturing wildly with a non-filter cigarette. It was the scruffy ex-Yugoslavian in those grainy YouTube-videos who talked with a heavy accent about Jaques Lacan and Hitchcock movies and pronounced interpret as int-air-pritt, with drawn, dry trilled r's, and people as pee-pill. I made a mental note of trying to use these words in a sentence. God bless that man. Because of

him my own broken English would become a badge of prestige and my fumbling for words would maybe be mistaken for a sense of urgency, like my brain was just working so much faster than my mouth, an idea that was probably both fascinating and alien to the members of my flock. I spoke into the microphone at intervals about some of the things that caught my eye. Once about a hill that was almost covered with the purplish blue color of lupine in bloom, another time about the salmon river that ran straight through a beautiful grown valley in the middle of the city and its rabbit plague. I kept my comments to an absolute minimum since I had been on a few of those trips as a passenger. There were few things as irritating as the voice of some know-it-all crackling from an old loudspeaker three centimeters above one's head. An old woman was hobbling by the side of the road dragging behind her one of those bags on two wheels that old people take shopping. It was checkered and had a large sticker on it: NYPD.

I passed the time looking out the bus' huge windshield, which made my field of vision greater than usual. I thought about that old woman and her sticker. Where did she get it? Was she in any way affiliated with the New York Police Department? I began thinking about my uncle who had died a few years earlier. He was a hermit and a farmer in the western fjords. I had visited him once. Everything around his farm was in various stages of disintegration or impairment: the birch tree in front of his house was even more crooked than the usual weather-beaten birch typical for Iceland's bushes, a lamb that had been kicked by a horse dragged its paralyzed hind legs and a three-legged kitten coughed in an uncanny human-like way. But what interested me the most was my uncle's Chicago Bulls baseball cap. Was he a Bulls fan? Did he follow NBA basketball? And there it was, my opportunity. As we passed a gigantic deserted shopping mall that was usually referred

to as "Recession Square" I grabbed the microphone and said: "And here to our left, pee-pill, you can see Recession Square. Many int-air-pritt this failed shopping center as a symbol of the hubris and the collective madness that resulted in the economic collapse of 2008."

Our first stop was Deildartunguhver, Iceland's biggest hot spring with 250 liters of water burbling from the earth every second. My tourists seemed impressed and although I had never been there before, I was more curious about a small cubicle that stood near the parking lot. Within it was a crate full of plastic bags that each held a few tomatoes. Next to it was a small mailbox that had "200kr" inscribed on it. It was clear that we were a long way from the city, where this method of trading could never thrive. I was fortunate enough to have some money in my pocket and ate at least two bags by myself as well as giving generously to my fellow travelers. I imagined that if I was one of these tourists, with soot in my lungs and tinnitus buzzing in my ears, I would be thoroughly impressed. In fact, the only thing keeping these poor people from vomiting from the culture shock of being confronted by such a trusting and compelling environment was probably that their overstimulated nervous systems had all been thoroughly dulled by pollution, apathy and drugs. Their native societies were most likely only weeks away from growing together with all the pollution and machines into a single bionic cancerous mass. I imagined something that looked like a gigantic burbling glob of metallic chewing gum, seething and expanding under a brownish red sky, deformed monstrosities squirming all around it in great lakes of chemicals, squealing, gurgling, begging for death.

After the second stop the horseshoe woman began giving me trouble. She sat with an open book in her lap and asked lots of questions about the names of the mountains, farms and lakes—

she wanted to see if the guide knew. And if I didn't, she would complain to her travel agent, my mother, and demand a refund or at least a discount.

We had lunch at a rest stop called Hyrnan, a depressing white concrete building with late-eighties/early-nineties style décor. Þorlákur came and showed me the way to a small room somewhere behind the counter. "This is for the drivers and tour guides," he said and pointed towards a table set with a thermos and some plastic cups and a plate with a few pieces of bread with cheese and sliced cucumber. The pieces of bread had probably been sitting there all day since the cheese was dark yellow and curling up at the edges. "Places often have something like this to encourage drivers and guides to bring groups there," he explained. I was thrilled. I had a fondness for any sort of special treatment. When I was a teenager I always had the feeling that a limousine was just around the corner on its way to pick me up or that I was to be given an award somewhere for something. When I heard that Mormons believed that only a limited number of people would go to heaven I knew I would be first in line even though I wasn't a Mormon. When I heard the term "Nietzschean elite" I knew that was me. These juvenile delusions of grandeur had morphed seamlessly with age into a sense of royalty and divinity. I had proof. A genealogical database called Íslendingabók, had the family histories of most Icelanders dating more than 1200 years back. According to it, I had a forefather called Húnbogi Þorgilsson born in 1070. He had a brother named Ari "Fróði" Þorgilsson, born in 1067, who had written a book also named Íslendingabók. In its prologue he begins by tracing his ancestry 35 generations further back, ending up with the Norse god of the sea, Njörður, and his son, the fertility god Freyr. He mentions some kings as well along the way, but aristocracy loses much of its appeal when you are already a demigod

of sorts. I thought about this while I ate my bread and surveyed the yellowed walls of the small room. Then I looked at Þorlákur who was chewing contentedly. According to the same sources, me and him, along with every other Icelander, were related in some way no further back than six or seven generations. He didn't look much like a demigod. I decided against trying some of the coffee from the thermos, because I felt pleasantly tired and wanted to take a nap before our next destination. On the way out I considered stealing some salt and pepper shakers so that the legend of the stingy, thieving tourist might live on but I decided against it, thinking that any legend that couldn't sustain itself by its own momentum didn't really deserve to live.

We had a pretty long drive to our next stop so I fished out my Amazon Kindle eBook reader. I was reading an essay collection by the English critic Herbert Read who had some valuable insights on pornography, which was today's topic á la mode. However, when Þorlákur asked me what I was reading.

I said, "The Kite Runner."

"Uh."

"It's very moving."

"OK."

The horseshoe woman was now getting on Þorlákur's nerves. She had hijacked my guiding duties and was pointing all and sundry and she was blurting out the names of mountains and stories of local folklore to those who were sitting near her.

Þorlákur hissed, "Maybe she'd like a microphone as well?" He kept jerking his head quickly in her direction.

"Ah, forget about it. Remember the Icelandic maxim: it doesn't matter where good things came from."

He turned away and muttered something about maintaining good old hierarchies in the bus, people sticking to their designated roles and all that.

Our next stop was a blue-grey pebble beach sequestered by some tousled black cliffs. The horseshoe woman exclaimed, "That must be Djúpalónssandur." Then she turned to me and said, "Fishermen used to row to sea from this beach, and for the sake of tourism, which they must have known would become equally important to the nation's economy, they left their three wage-deciding rocks in the sand. The smallest was called Amlóði. If you could only lift that one you got a quarter of a full cut. The middle one, Hálfsterkur, would get you half a cut and the largest, Fullsterkur would entitle you to full pay. Let's go and to try lift them."

The driver was clenching his fist, while I put on my best guide smile and said, "Yes, let's."

Some of my tourists tried lifting the stones but usually only managed the smallest one. When they wanted me to try as well I told them I could barely carry myself. That was the truth. I had a piece of metal and six screws in my shoulder from a drunken climbing accident a few years earlier and because of it I could neither carry a backpack nor swoosh my beloved fly-fishing rod back and forth like I used to.

A large group of sinister looking teenagers were standing around a little pond close to the parking lot, watching and cheering on as three girls were swimming across the pond in their underwear. It was freezing outside. I deduced that they belonged to some remote rehab-clinic for youngsters. People who were battling alcoholism and drug abuse did seem to be drawn to sea-swimming everywhere I went.

The horseshoe woman wandered around like eternity's boomerang and I went up to her to chitchat. The trick was not to let myself get lured into a staring contest or a silent war but to maintain communication or better yet, increase it. So for the next few stops I always walked up to her and asked her how she was and if

she wasn't enjoying herself. However, after a while these questions began to sound a bit insincere so I asked more original questions, such as: "If you had a pig that defecated the world's most delicious potato salad, would you eat it?" and "Would you drink a tall glass of boiling water to save a person's life?"

She didn't respond to these and her scowl wasn't menacing anymore, she just looked tired and unhappy. The seat behind me was empty when we got back on the bus.

We kept going. The bus hummed peacefully and I became sleepy. Slowly but spasmodically, the hovering part of my tripartite being floated across the bus over to Þorlákur, like flotsam towards shore. It looked at the driver's profile, his leathery brown skin. It focused on his temple, peered into it, the pores of his skin seemed to grow bigger and bigger as it hovered more closely until it had sunk into his skull. He was thinking about sex, about how he thought it was disgusting at first, how he sometimes had managed to charm women back to his small apartment. How they looked beautiful when they were still at the bar or in the taxi but featureless and bland in the daylight next day. He was thinking about the drunken grunting and thrusting while cupping the breasts or the buttocks. It felt like he was operating some awkward machine; some horribly designed bicycle. He hated the salty bitter smells and when it was done he felt lonely and sober. He wanted to have a drink but he would have to wait until the next weekend because only hopeless alcoholics drank on Sundays. He thought about how sex got better after he met his wife, especially after they had their daughter. His wife seemed to know exactly what she wanted and more importantly, how to get it from him. This, along with his driving job, gave him a sense of purpose. Around the time a grandchild was born he was surprised to experience another upsurge in his sex life, considerably greater than the first. Now he sometimes

felt like he and his wife were the palms of a pair of hands that belonged to the same body, trying to crush between them some small fluttering bird or a small animal. He sometimes didn't register whether it was himself twitching with pleasure or his wife. The hovering part now extracted itself from Þorlákur's mind and hovered back to its home right above my head. It had seen enough for one day. Who would have thought it. Þorlákur a total sex fiend. Jesus, and thinking about sex when he should be minding the road or the bus' oil pressure. Dirty dog. I had just the medicine for him. "Hey Þorlákur, do you want to hear a joke?"

"Yes."

"Okay, what's the difference between a human and an animal?"

"I don't know, what?"

"Animals do it when they're sober."

He feigned a short laugh then became very thoughtful again. In a blink of an eye we were in another one of these rest stops.

The body is a disgusting and degrading place, I thought to myself. I was sitting on the toilet in one of three booths in the men's room. I could distinguish a number of offending odors: my feces, somebody else's feces, my own sweaty scrotum and worst of all, a chemical imitation of a sweet flowery smell, most likely the air-freshener sprayed at intervals out of a white plastic box above me, close to the ceiling. Worse, still, the overall effect reminded me of cooked food, and coupled with the short pangs of pleasure and relief I felt just made the whole experience more bestial and humiliating. For a distraction, I fished out a black felt marker from my pocket. I wrote the words "White Kenya" on the left side of the door in front of me. I tried to draw the letters as girly as I could with curved lines and a plump circle to dot the i. On the right side I drew a crude depiction of an erect penis with a drop coming out of the end. Inside the drop I drew a small swastika.

I made a mental note of buying a different color felt pen as well. If the swastika were, for instance blue, it would suggest at least two different artists, maybe even three with the Kenya insignia, and some sort of exchange between them. Which for instance had come first, the swastika or the drop of liquid? Was it urine or semen? The graffiti would provide the booth's future occupants with a welcome diversion from their stinking corporeal capsules. They could spend many a delightful moment trying to gauge the meaning of my scribbling. Not only were the pictures open to all kinds of interpretations and discussions about topics as diverse as history, colonialism, the absurdity of racism and social Darwinism, they also raised compelling questions regarding authorship, author intention and gender. The ludicrous demand for a White Kenya would no doubt elicit a strong response of outrage closely followed by an even stronger surge of love for one's fellow man. My art was already making the world a brighter, better place.

When I was done I walked outside and saw Þorlákur sitting at the curb, eating one of those crummy sandwiches they sell at rest stops. I thought to myself that people are never as beautiful as when they are concentrating, and when he looked up at me his eyes seemed to exude a deep sense of calm, like those of a docile cow. At first I felt a sting of sympathy for this man, then genuine affection began to rise from the pit of my stomach like a pillar of red smoke that tickled the back of my throat. A sheepish smile was forming on my face when it dispersed again as quickly as it had appeared and was replaced by anger. Before I knew it I was thinking about how I could ruin his little moment, or just make things a little worse for him.

I wanted to bother him with some of the inane prattle that people of his generation usually can't stand. "I make my own pesto, you know," I said.

He didn't answer.

"You should try it," I suggested, but his eyes were fixed on some spot on the ground. I continued, "The trick is to use only organic pine nuts. I can email you the recipe."

Still no response.

"I think the poodle can be regarded as a Darwinian victor because of its ability to elicit sympathy."

At this he stopped for a moment and reached for his drink, a little box marked Kókómjólk with a bent straw sticking out of it.

"Nice sandwich?" I asked.

"It's alright."

I could see that it had shrimp salad on it. "Do you know who never, ever eat shrimp?"

He looked up sleepily, but curiously.

"Fishermen who have had the misfortune of catching a dead body in their nets."

He continued chewing and looking on the ground.

I was annoyed at his lack of reaction so I pretended to look at my watch, said, "Hm," and hurried into the bus again. Pretty soon we were off again. The tourists were in good spirits. I think some of them were drinking and a few in the back were starting a sing-along. This was as good as it gets in this business: the tourists enjoying themselves without me constantly pulling the wagon. I was looking out the window for a while and I managed to sleep a bit but at moments I found myself occupying the part of the tour-guide trinity that hovered above and peered inside. The bodiless mind was listening to Bach's eighth cantata (which would, if it were an episode of Friends, be called 'The one where the oboe goes beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep') envisioning a scene from the not too distant future. People of every creed and color were dragging huge blocks of stone to build

sphinxes with my face. The asocial people from the prisons had been hired as middle management. One of them was emptying wheelbarrows full of glasses and earrings and mobile phones into a hole. I saw that Þorlákur was waving his hand in front of me. I removed my headphones to see what he wanted.

"Mumjö, what are you listening to?" he asked, looking at me rather than the road a few times.

"Metallica," I lied.

Then we entered Stykkishólmur, where we were to spend the night.

The next day we were back on the road before nine, even though Þorlákur and I had stayed up for a while drinking in the hotel bar. We stopped at a seal museum in Hvammstangi. It was just two small rooms with lots of pictures of seals and three or four stuffed seals in large plexiglas boxes. My group seemed very interested and murmured merrily. One of the stuffed seals had the strangest effect on me. As I was looking at its voluptuous plump curves, the shiny skin stretched tight over its bountiful blubber, I got thirsty for fat. I left the museum in a hurry and went to a store across the street, where I bought a large bottle of cod liver oil. I had a few long swigs and then I put it away, because this stuff has so much vitamin D that it can ruin the liver if one doesn't drink it in moderation. My group was filing out of the small building that housed the museum and in a little while we were off to Kolugljúfur or Kola's canyon. It is named after Kola, a troll woman who is said to live in the area. On the way there I began to feel the effects of the cod liver oil set in, at first as an agreeable burning sensation in my arms, then as overall euphoria. I could smell its fishy odor on my upper lip and by inhaling it and holding my breath I could both heighten and prolong waves of intense pleasure. I was now both confident and wide-awake. These sensations were both equally foreign to a hard-

working tour guide. When the bus stopped at the small gravel parking lot near Kolugljúfur I felt literally drunk with power, like bright light could at any moment start shooting out of my fingers. I watched my flock going towards the canyon, and then split into two groups. One half stopped by the sign that held some information about the canyon while the other proceeded towards the canyon itself for a more holistic experience.

I jogged behind a mossy hill nearby and pissed. When I reached the bus again I was greeted by one of the tourists, an American I think. He greeted me a little too cordially for my taste, "Hey, where have you been?"

I made a fist and positioned it over my crotch with the index finger pointing down and made the international urinating sound, "Pssss, Psssssssss."

"Oh, I see."

I maintained the eye contact and did it twice more, a little slower. "Pssss. Psssssss." The moment was very awkward for both of us but I simply couldn't stand being harassed by members of my flock whenever I decided to disappear for a few minutes. A little later we were on the highway again.

We spent the night in a little town called Eskifjörður where we would all have dinner and drinks together. I had a spiritual experience that night. The dead drank through me. This is a common enough incident in Iceland, especially when the young and the innocent were involved and I was the very essence of youth and innocence. They repaid me by filling my muscular breast with humble gratitude for all the other days of the year the dead do not bother to drink through me. I was also grateful that the dead had bothered to put on my pajamas when they were done with my body. I only had two memories from the night before (other than the communal dinner itself where I was drunkenly trying to say

edgy and controversial things like one of those amoral intellectual types, but may have come off as a total fascist). One was from walking alone near the docks. The sun was shining even though it was the middle of the night and the mountain walls on the other side of the fjord seemed to be moving closer. The other was from lying on a sofa while one of my tourists, a woman I suspected to be a lesbian, was blowing hard into my naked belly making the purring sound that horses make. This scenario provided two immediate concerns. If the woman was not a lesbian, I'd feel as if I'd betrayed my lovely wife by allowing this to happen. The second was whether my genitals had been exposed at any point through the large opening in the front of my pajamas, which could also be seen as a betrayal of sorts. All in all I was delighted about how the evening had gone, full of these moments of happiness tinged with shame or physical discomfort. In my experience, unadulterated happiness has always proved a terrible omen. I was also on better terms with my flock now and standing at eye-level with a bunch of tourists would always require some bending at the knees, so to speak.

On the way to Stöðvarfjörður I wasn't as much hung over as I was terrified. I contemplated grabbing the steering wheel and sending the whole bus hurtling down to its doom on the rocky shore some 150 meters beneath, thereby offering the passengers as sacrifice for an early spring. The bus would crash and compress into a metallic ball. The pulped remains of my tourists' would be sprayed out of some tiny hole in the bus's battered carcass and exist for a few moments as a pinkish cloud of juiced flesh, with some grey matter at the edges that consisted of the pulverized innards of all their digital cameras. In this cloud form the tourists' minds would become a single collective consciousness and would, as such, waste its final seconds admiring the scenery, mostly black

rocks and greenish surf, ohh-ing and ahh-ing instead of repenting or reflecting on their collective squandered lifetimes. I would be tossed out of the bus while it bounced from rock to rock on its way down. I would be discovered lying in the soft moss, God's warm palm, my porcelain angelic beauty perfectly preserved. I would possess all the tranquil innocence of a sleeping child. In one hand I would be holding a pencil. It would be short and thereby accentuate the loveable roundness of my thick and sturdy fingers. My other hand would be clutched around a scribbled note to my wife saying, "I am filled with gratitude and love. Try and forget me. Goodbye."

Any god would of course deny Þorlákur the chance of escape from his prejudiced prison of a body and tax him instead with the shame of survival. I imagine he would be found sitting in the water, still holding the bus's steering wheel with some brown seaweed on his head, perhaps even a bird, and his eyes would be rolling around in his head. His discovery would coincide with some naturally occurring slapstick sound effect. He'd live on for a few days and recount the story of our disrupted round-trip to the media. He would be uncharacteristically coherent.

My kinspeople the Norse gods had a soft spot for grand gestures. They'd reward me with an afterlife of my own choice. I would spend eternity driving a monster truck somewhere along the countryside in the twilight, knocking over one of those Terracotta statues at intervals while chugging cod liver oil. I would be listening to the Pilgrim chorus from Tannhäuser or the final movement from Beethoven's ninth. Maybe it would be better to have some company, one of my friends maybe. And as for something to listen to for eternity a nice audiobook would perhaps be better. Maybe Gísli Halldórsson reading Jaroslav Hasek's Góði dátinn Svejk. He had such a calming, amiable voice. Then it would

maybe be better if my friend was driving and I could be sitting in the front seat dozing off with the hovering part of my tripartite tour-guide tucked at my sleeve. I examined my mind and realized that my vision of heaven contained a totally ambitionless desire for oblivion and sleep. This realization depressed the hell out of me. We stopped in front of an outdoor rock museum in Stöðvarfjörður. I decided that it was more or less self-explanatory and that my presence wasn't needed.

I stood outside the bus and felt hung over in a poetic, inspired kind of way. This is how I remember feeling when I wrote the spring poem, which ends with these words:

Fönn skal af foldu brenna
sól, þá galar hani
sól, þá galar hani

I looked up at the mountains above the town. The moss was neon-green against the wet black rocks, which appeared like holes in the mountain. I meditated about why people think of nothingness as something black. A person like me, with a more developed sense of reality, knows that nothingness neither absorbs nor reflects light. It should therefore be thought of as a transparent hole in the ether, more like glass than black tar if people insisted on using these visualizations. I began to experience the aural equivalent of nothingness. I could almost hear a humming drone of silence underneath the gusts of wind, sonic holes in the ether as real as the black spots in the mountain. I asked Þorlákur, "Can you hear that?" He stood for a while and listened with an expression of deep concentration on his face. I forced out a small but audible fart. He slapped my shoulder and giggled like crazy with squinted eyes. We climbed aboard the bus and waited for the flock.

The bus drove on. The din of the engine and the chatter of the tourists merged into muffled white noise. In the distance sil-

ver and gold stirred together with God's lovely light as the sun sank behind a cloud over a flat-topped mountain. Its slopes were lit up with the warmest tones of brown and green. The voice of the horseshoe woman sounded behind me, "That mountain is called Trölladyngja."

I yawned and asked her if anything interesting ever happened there. "I don't know," she said. "Not everything in Iceland has a story."

I smiled and signaled Þorlákur to start the engine. The din merged with the chatter of the tourists into white noise. In the distance, silver and gold stirred together with God's lovely light as the sun sank behind a cloud over a flat-topped mountain. My mindless body wobbled happily in its seat like pudding. The bodiless mind was lost in fantasy, staring in front of the bus and the yellow lines in the middle of the road looked like the bus was flicking a thin yellow tongue. I found myself standing at a decorated podium, wearing a pharaoh's headdress of gold and turquoise, and issuing some new decrees to throngs of people in a large square, encircled with colossal walls of stone. These good people, my flock, were going to finance the building of a sphinx with my face, larger than the one with the broken nose. The assemblage murmured discontentedly before joining together in a deafening uproar. I winked and snipers appeared on top of the surrounding walls and mowed down two thirds of the crowd. Silence. Then a low chant began among the survivors, growing louder and louder until they were all screaming at the top of their lungs in unison, and the chant went on escalating until my bus sailed into the next gravel parking lot in front of yet another rest stop. I muttered the chant clapping on my thighs to its rhythm as discreetly as I could so Þorlákur wouldn't notice: Mumjö! Mumjö! Mumjö! Mumjö! And the mindless-bodiless consciousness, which hovered above, peered inside the head and thought: *How did these worms enter me?*

Candid

GREG MOGLIA

Ten minutes into our talk she says *To be perfectly honest*
I don't stop to ask her *Up to now fudging the truth?*
Instead I think how I've tried, sometimes even believed
I'll tell my lover how I really feel

My photographer friend says *You can't take a candid photo of yourself*
My scientist friend says *You can't locate the exact position of an electron*
You need light to see it, which moves it – The Uncertainty Principle
I really try to tell about me and in the telling the 'me' moves

Becomes an 'old me' - Freud said *Writing is the record of an absent person*
Now I get it, the me I propose to be has moved on – what's left to give?
Miles Davis turns his back to the audience for his trumpet solos
Alone with the music he offers a road to a mystery

At a movie my lover and I hold hands
Moved them just enough – always smooth
Always at caress and when it ended
She said *For this show, best was holding your hand*

I asked *Be perfectly honest, what did you think?*

Rafael

LENA BECKMAN

All this is making me feel very alone.
And dirty. And not the kind that is good.
What is the beauty in haggling with lies
and small favours? Beauty is when you stand
close to the edge of a cliff, inhaling
the crisp air as the disc gets punctured
by the sharpness of dawn, the sun leaking
its contents and staining the vast greyness
of the night sky.
And then I burn,
wholeheartedly and completely. Consumed:
Rafael
A car door slams.
A moth flies by,
it cries a wordless tune. Soft, I can see
every stroke of its wings beating. This one
was lucky: the sixty-nine Chevy is
covered with carcasses. "Are you coming?":
Rafael
I focus on
a straw I found
growing by the road I ripped it up, root
and all. I hold it close and cross-eyed see
that here to the straw all is clear. What lies
beyond is a grey blur. And then appear
the opaque twins.

They speak: “What’s wrong?”
The straw becomes a window and through it:
Rafael.
”Nothing,” I say
”I just wanted…”
And word by word I pluck the wings off my
intentions. The dust on my pants is gold
red and orange. Two car doors slam. Sixty
nine Chevy scolds me loudly but I can
still hear the moth sing. It hits the shield and
all this is making me feel very alone.

Spacker Steals a Bike

KEN POBO

Spacker saw the red Schwinn and, at ten years old, stealing came easily. His dad left money in his top dresser drawer, so Spacker always had candy money—and never got caught.

Bobby O'Reilly owned that bike. A trusting kid, Bobby never locked it, just pulled up to where he was going and let it sit. When Bobby walked in the dime store, Spacker casually hopped on—and rode away. He went from town to Bingate Road a few miles away. The Schwinn turned easily and he quickly learned how to drive no-handed. His own bike was a nightmare of flat tires and wobbly chains. Even the baseball cards fell off.

Busted. Hard to hide a Schwinn and Spacker's parents personally returned it to the O'Reillys who thanked them. Bobby cried. Someday he'd get even with Spacker, pray that he'd be hit by a truck or get some awful disease.

Bobby got hit by a truck and died two weeks after his twenty-third birthday. Spacker and he had become friends, sort of. They'd drink at various taps, complain about how Micah had to be the "boringest" place on Earth. If only they could fly. No wings, only wounded cars.

Now Spacker hardly thinks of Bobby. A page turns, a cloud drifts by, someone brings a beer or doesn't. For Spacker, the years are like a bicycle basket stuffed with so much crap that the basket detaches and it goes everywhere. Just keep riding and looking ahead.

Of Voices and Two Swedish Proverbs

ANN FISHER-WIRTH

Why worry what drowned dogs the river washes up.

Why worry what gold-mouthed boys with honey on their fingers
Sidelong slip you the shy smile,
Beckon you blushing to their tables. Love, death,— You're
Wise, you're wizening, you should be able to dance the dance,
And if your heart thuds in your throat,
Gather your skirts around you, grin, hang on to your dignity.

Off the cliff wings whir, they are
Fattening, gorging, on the bloody juices
Of August. Blackberries stab your fingers.
Mother threads her needles of rain.

Sweep your own doorstep first.

When the cat is away the rats dance on the table.

Peasant Women Along The Road Carry Centuries

JOHN FLYNN

Long ago they slaved off girlishness.
They do not apologize for the way they stare
with envy at an American city-dweller's manicure,
mistrustful of the silk in her smile.

This lady visitor, still sober, explains Americans
have lost their villages. No mud or chickens
not even much dust in their roads.
Americans carry auto problems, office paperwork, numbers
schedules, reports, quick-fix and policy concerns.
A surprise, then, they do not wake unburdened?
She tells them Americans suffer many grave problems.

The women scowl and snort in disbelief.
America, they say, is paradise for a woman.

Women, Fire, & Whiskey

MICHAEL BADGER III

1

This was the fourth in a succession of sleepless nights. And, as with the previous three, Vester wondered if the problem was that she just didn't drink enough whiskey.

Out the kitchen window she saw the darkness as timeless and uncertain and folded in on itself. It was too late to be night and too early to be morning and she was not about to trust the malfunctioning clock on the stove while she watched the rusty kettle, waiting for water to boil. Time, for Vester, had become some eccentric acquaintance that confused the boundaries between Thursday and Friday. A prankster that told her that there's no way to wake up if she hasn't slept.

Pressing her palms into her eyes helped with the throbbing headaches. While she did this, sometimes the best thing was to visualize the room she was in: the hanging utensils and fruit baskets, the donkey-shaped oven mittens, the withering plants in front of the window, a few pictures of idealistic, forward-thinking female icons, worn pots and pans, galaxies of useless decorations. She had taken pains to place everything in their proper, aesthetic place and she knew everything by heart, could rearrange every detail of the room in her head, and often did. Her favorite decoration was on the fridge behind her—a light red piece of construction paper that

read *Mommy* and underneath, a stick figure with snaking brown squiggles for hair, a small circle for a head, bright red ovals for lips, a yellow triangle for a dress, and shapes that were almost cowboy boots residing at the end of two long, tan lines. A crayon drawing of her, Vester.

Normally, the strict placement of the objects grounded her and she too was put in her place. Normally.

She shivered, the hairs covering her skin lifted in response. She gathered her arms close to her chest while tapping her bare toes on the floor. The faint slap against linoleum was the only noise in the room besides the crackle of the kettle slowly heating the water within. The clock flashed, revealing the new, if still uncertain, time.

From down the hall she heard noises coming out of her bedroom—grunts, shifting, a nasal tone—noises that told her that the man in there had noticed the empty bed. Still, she had a few minutes before he fully awoke and came out to find her, looking worried, trying to comfort her. They always did. And she always hated them for that.

Vester's car radio told her that it was Thursday, that some celebration, parade, or cause for jubilation would not only create excitement but also congested traffic in the downtown area and that's when she turned the radio off because she didn't care.

As she stared at the open pages of her book, she tried to calculate the hours she had been awake—since whenever Monday happened. She looked up regularly, watching the parking lot for anyone watching her, watching the clock—2:54—waiting for it to slowly blink its way to 3:00pm. She watched a fly buzzing around

her; she followed its movements with her eyes, never moving her head. The car's engine was running and her heart was beating fast and deep and loud, her fingers shook too much and the words on the page were as erratic as the fly. The grey interior of her car matched the sky outside just as the clock's numbers matched her inflamed, red eyes.

The fly landed and she smashed the thing against the dashboard with the spine of the book, covering the author with innards.

Every time she caught her own eye in the rearview mirror, the drooping, thick rings under her eyes and the skewed state of her hair reminded her of the hours she'd been awake.

Leaning against the window, she clamped her eyelids down in a desperate attempt at sleep, letting the book fall from her fingers and into her lap, the pages rippling shut, falling perfectly into themselves, her place lost.

Wednesday night or Thursday morning? Third night, still no sleep and she had tried everything. Masturbation didn't help. Neither did chamomile, lavender, or rosebud. Reading proved infuriating. Trying to force it defeated the purpose because, Vester realized, she was too conscious of it.

She slouched back in a wicker chair and stared at a purple stain on the wall—its presence inexplicable and therefore maddening. The chair was abrasive against her cold, bare skin. An empty mug dangled from her left pointer finger while her right fussed with her hair, twisting it into knots. A deflated tea bag slowly soaked the splayed pages of a book near her feet. The stain on the wall was shaped like the profile of a laughing face. Or a girl with no arms.

The dark purple sky twisted its way around the earth, pulling the sun along with it. Just as the man with the awkward orgasm—who yelled *Thar she blows!*—had, not five hours ago, pulled her

out the bar, down the street, into her apartment, and onto the bed; pulled her clothes from her body, the wrapper from the condom, her legs apart.

She watched the last stars fade from the night and the evergreens of northern Maine appeared in the dawn light—huge, imposing creatures of stillness surrounding on all sides. Intimidating. Claustrophobic.

The man had a promising way of saying, "You're lovely," and, "Don't worry about it," and she believed him. She believed him all the way until—naked, after sex—he wormed over to her, fitting his body around hers, his breathing slowing down and the struggles of a snore faintly blowing hair onto her face. He wrapped his arms around her and his limp, useless penis pressed against the back of her thigh. She stopped believing. She pushed herself out of bed, bundled all his clothes into her arms. When his left shoe hit his face he snorted awake. Vester saw his mouth open in confusion and protest, but she was yelling too loudly to hear anything he might have said. He left quickly and half clothed, fighting with the door as it stuck, briefly, on a small pile of crushed blue envelopes near the door.

The stain had to be wine. And it morphed to look like an open mouth with too many teeth. She put her palms in her eyes and rubbed. She saw tiny shots of light behind her eyelids. The problem wasn't the inability to sleep, she knew, but was more likely the inability to stop thinking. When she looked again, the stain silhouetted a four-headed lizard.

Her thoughts drift back to an uncomplicated West Coast dorm room, drift to boxed wine pouring straight out of the little tap and into her mouth, drift to her singing songs she doesn't like but because she's having such a goddamned good time

it doesn't actually matter what's coming out of her just as long as she's there and present and noticed and laughing and drinking, touching, feeling, moving and smiling in a way that tells everyone around her that: yes, *yes*, she'll be their friend forever, she'll always stay in touch after she does what everyone does and goes back home after graduation, and that, goddammit, they all better keep in touch too or else, or else, or else she'll come back and find them, goddammit, and they all mean the absolute goddamn world to her, and, well, fuck spatial distance, it won't separate her from her friends and lovers—all beautiful, wild, intense women themselves. Lovers whom she still loves, just not in *that* way any longer because she knows that *that* road is one already traveled and her sense of novelty will never allow for her to be actually committed to someone for all that long, but, of course, her lovers understand, her lovers know that they'll always be a part of her because what kind of human would she be if she just gave up that most intricate part of her love, that communicativeness and connectiviness and togetherness and loveness, that, that, that bright, *glowy* thing which only a woman possesses and only a woman can give and only a woman can receive and only a woman can know—goddamn, what kind of *woman* would she be if she just tossed that around like an unwanted dress? She knows, she tells them, that all of their sexual and emotional connection is owed to and owned by women. Elegant, vigorous, women. And the truth is, that at this moment, drinking wine, teeth purple as grapes, face blushed as an orgasm, that she wants this forever. And no it's not the wine talking—she wants everyone in that room to connect and love and remember and, above all, to *stay in fucking touch*.

A knocking in her head jolted her from the left. She saw the clock first—2:56. She palmed her eyes and realized that the

knocking sounds were really there, on her car window and holy shit she'd been found, she'd been seen, and her foot hit the gas, her arms shot to the steering wheel, the engine roared, but the car was in park.

Slowly, bracing herself, she looked to her left. A man stood, smiled, and shrugged. It was clear he was not interested in her in any legal way—he was t-shirted, thick-bearded, and he shaved his head to hide the early onset of balding. Vester didn't wave back. Didn't respond but with a glare. She needed sleep.

He mouthed something; it sounded complicated through the window and her delirious head registered the noises like shouting underwater. She wanted nothing to do with any of it, but the man was persistent.

"What?" Vester said, as she rolled the window down an inch.

"Oh, just saying I like your eyelashes," the man said.

"I'm here to see my daughter, not to get picked up," she said.

"You don't remember me?" he said, stroking his beard.

"I haven't been sleeping well."

"I know a cure for that."

"Of course you do."

"Whiskey."

"Who are you?"

"We met a few weeks ago. Our daughters were off in the playground together. We spoke."

"That's great." Vester wanted to leave the conversation there, drop and run, put the car in drive and blast the fuck off… but knew she had to look like a responsive parent. She turned away, looked toward the daycare, the clock—2:57.

There was a pause between them. Vester felt like she was fighting to swing the conversation in the opposite way from where it was headed. He put his face up near the crack in the window and whispered long and soothing, "I know what ails you, my friend."

They always do, though there's no way they ever could.

Vester blinked long and breathed deep, said nothing while absently fiddling with a fraying lock of hair, staring at the man, considering him. He ran his hand over his shaved head, smiling a crooked-toothed smile and Vester saw that half of his left pinky was missing. She considered how, for the past few days, she'd been fucking these dogs, these men, like she was a rabbit on ecstasy. How she couldn't sleep. She needed sleep. She'd settle for a coma. How the man staring at her could offer her, if nothing else, another night's attempt at distracting herself to the point where she wouldn't even notice she was blindingly awake. She considered how she needed.

The book in her right hand felt flimsy, an absurd prop. The hair in her left hand felt huge and bulky between her fingertips, every individual strand weighed her down, pulling her onto the floor of her car, through the concrete parking lot and down into the earth. She felt disrupted. Didn't like it.

Or she lets herself drift to places like 1:56am years ago, six months four days after leaving the West, out of contact with the Mom and Dad who, after she took the step out of the closet, claimed their daughter had been lost in a raging West Coast fire; to places an entire width of a country away from her lovers and friends, the only people she could even consider calling family; places where she's feeling a longing for the West, the place she amputated herself from, where she's feeling a lust for those nights with boxed-wine and those exaggerated and unfulfillable promises—a desperation that came to her as an entire soothing bottle of wine and a slurring phone call to one of the women, one of the lovers—that Bitch—and only three hours after the wounding and displacing phone call, and after maybe seven—eight?—whiskeys

at the bar across the street, and then *here*: suffocated by darkness in front of her apartment, she fumbles and tries and loses her keys while some voice floats near her, drunkenly babbling to her how *exquisite* she is, and how she just doesn't give a fuck because, *now*, now, after that goddamned phone call, now she just wants someone inside of her even if it's *just* physically. For the first time, this time, this night, she's giving up the emotions and the optimism she holds—held?—so dear, giving them up for this grotesque lump of muscle and testosterone, because maybe that's how it is now, maybe she can't be so picky and choosy about when and where and why and how. And maybe, *maybe*, it's better that the Treacherous Whore hung up on her; *probably* it's better that her attempts at reconnection were crushed under the immeasurable weight of the phone slamming into the receiver; *surely* it's for the best that the Backstabbing Cunt said *I was, just, you know, I was just experimenting, V. It was for fun, right?* … this *must* be the only way that she can feel connected ever again, because: *Experimenting?* Experimenting. An experiment. And, as the dead bolt twists over, then those hands and that voice collide into her and become one physical object, one physical man, and maybe that's why she feels like it's the best idea, the best *experiment*; maybe the crushing but fleeting weight of a man will be all she needs, grounding her into a society and a life that's showing her that there's *no other way.* Experiment? Experiment. She falls to the floor as this stranger steals some vital part of her; and she wants to know, badly: will she ever again feel connected?

Tuesday night or Wednesday morning? She's never considered midnight the defining end of a day—after all, bars are open until 2:00am in Maine. But it was far past two at that point and her torn, comfortless couch was soaked in a man's sweat and

the floor was strewn with her clothes and she felt at socks that scratched her ankles and the hands of the wall-clock told her she'd been up nearly 48 hours despite all the alcohol.

The man with the curly hair and the promising generosity and the deep pockets and the distracting, crooked penis had slammed the door on his way out ten minutes before. She had done or said something wrong, maybe. But she didn't know, couldn't remember; the memory of the offense failed to echo through her head—but the weight didn't hesitate to settle in.

Vester wondered what caused water to heat, besides the heat from the stove. Something about molecules and speed and friction. Still it wasn't fast enough and she grew anxious. Her toes slapped the floor harder as the groaning noises in the bedroom grew into audible questions.

There were places, she was sure, that weren't here in this kitchen, in this apartment, on this street, in this town, and so on out into the universe. There had to be places where she still had a goddamned happy daughter instead of a pile of blue, state-issued letters that just kept slipping through her door.

She turned around to face the crayon drawing of her and lifted a hand towards it. As she touched the picture she felt the dryness and the fragility of the paper. The memories that moved through her were wrong and displacing. She jerked her hand back, held it close to her neck.

The areas beneath her fingernails began to itch.

Or that place like four days ago, no question it was Monday, 3:06pm, where her daughter bounces out of the daycare, the faint red of freckles on her olive skin, the cheekbones hinting at a wealth of femininity hidden just underneath, the smile holding

only a few teeth and the gaps revealing pink pink gums open and vulnerable to carrots and cereal, all of this bouncing right towards Vester when that woman in that blue dress-suit steps out of that junked car, her goddamned body between Mother and Daughter. It goes: Mother, Woman, Daughter; in that order on the sidewalk and the Woman says something to Daughter but Mother doesn't know who this Woman is and then the Owner of the daycare center comes out—and the order is Mother, Woman, Owner, Daughter—and she, Owner, starts talking to Daughter and glances sideways at Mother for brief, furtive moments, then Woman comes over to Mother while Owner stays and holds Daughter's hand and Woman shows Mother legal looking papers with a very large and intimidating and bold acronym—**D.H.H.S**—printed on the top of the page with **OFFICE OF CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES** underneath, and she says things like *multiple attempts at contact* and *neglect* and something about having *a preponderance of evidence*, and all the tiny words on the page blur together and Mother cries and screams things like *Do you know what I've went through for my child and fuck fuck FUCK you* and the State Worker Woman just stands calm and professional and bitchy and Mother wants to rip her goddamn ovaries out through her stupid, bitchy mouth, but she can't because she can't fucking see because there's so many tears and everyone is just blurs. Her eyes won't focus right and she only sees the blurry silhouette of her daughter being ushered into that goddamned piece of shit car and she can't even tell if Daughter even looks towards her and that's the worst thing: never knowing if her daughter even *looks back*—though, *of course* she looks back, because she is her goddamned *Daughter,* because she has to. She *has to*. Has to. Right. She goddamn fucking couldn't *not* have looked *all the way back*.

Hidden in the shadows of the lone deciduous tree in the parking lot, Vester waited for 3:00, ducking behind the trunk at any sign of movement. Parents were in cars, doing crosswords or reading, their motors running.

She watched children rush from the center and sit on the stoop kicking their legs or bolt into their familiar cars.

Vester ventured a few inches from the tree and squinted. She watched as an entire family—Mother, Father, Daughter—walked out of the daycare center together. The Father had a full set of hair, a crisp suit; the Mother in a dress, hair tidy in a bun. The Daughter, blonde and fragile, was holding both of their hands. They smiled and looked at each other.

She took a few steps back, wondering why an entire family was inside the center. Wondering where she recognized them from. Wondering where her own daughter was—why she hadn't left yet. Wondering why she couldn't stop looking at the family. Wondering why they were walking towards the park on a cold day. Vester felt like she remembered them from a postcard or something—from a moment where their presence meant nothing. Wondering why this picture perfect family meant something now. Wondering … wondering why she didn't have that exact goddamned thing right goddamned now.

Head first into a bottle of whiskey, mumbling, Vester asked herself if the universe would always deal her shit, and a man's voice to her left said, "It's Monday."

She didn't turn, just finished what was in her glass and winced.

"You asked what day it was, right?" he said, hesitant.

"No," she said.

Vester felt his eyes searching her, taking his time. "I remember you," he said. "We bumped into each other maybe, like, two months ago?"

Silence.

"Yeah. Yeah. It was here, or, rather, over there." He pointed towards the front door. "I remember 'coz you were hitting the bartender and he was dragging a small girl out. Surprised they let you back in."

"A misunderstanding," Vester said, finally looking at him.

He struggled, his amiablity lost for a moment. "Oh, you've got bits of…" he said and reached towards Vester.

"Don't."

"Whoa, just—" he stumbled. "There are bits of paper all in your hair."

Silence.

And after a few more rounds—Vester hesitant, the man cordial; Vester refusing, the man persistent; Vester giving in, the man victorious—he convinced her to take the effort and move to a table.

The man started in with an anecdote, something about there being this car packed elbows-to-asses full of nuns going the wrong way down a one-way road. Vester looked around at the neon signs, swaying people, broken bottles, unsmoked cigarettes—everything fading together as she scanned the room.

The man said he had been crossing this one-way road but hadn't bothered to look both ways, cars only going one way and all, the extra head motion a waste of energy. She nodded absently; the too-jovial, surrounding barroom banter mocked her fragility. She heard everything happening in that bar, every conversation layering over the other—all of it crucial in some distant way.

The man went on despite Vester's slack-jawed disinterest. Apparently the jam-packed nun-mobile had hit him, barely, as it passed at 45 on a 25 road, and, did she remember those windshield wipers on the headlights of the old model Saabs? He laughed and said it was one of those things that had ripped a clean strip of skin

off his left thigh, why he had a graft, a large scar he routinely told people was from a motorcycle accident. A liar. An exaggerationist—his word. But, the funny thing, he continued, was that the nuns didn't stop: a hit and run. Vester cringed and held her drink with both hands. She, wanting so desperately to forget her day and make everything right and go back to how it was and just do goddamned anything else but hear what was going to come from the man's mouth next, held her breath in annoyed anticipation.

He paused, sipped his beer, and said, "It was a hit and *nun*." Grinning, his eyes scanned hers, scanned her body, her breath.

Vester said nothing. She stared right into his face and she saw—realized—that there, in his pathetic and misplaced interest in her, in his unfortunate respect, in the way he tried to please her, there, *there* was the guarantee of the perfectly framed portrait, a stabilized snap shot of normal. The utterly generic answer she could use.

In his innocence, she saw her daughter.

Or that place, moments, seconds, hours after the statutory detachment at the daycare center, when she falls against her front door, barely able to open the thing—wrist limp, the door handle doesn't spin, her left fist slams, depth perception skewed from the tears and hair and desperation—the door sweeps aside the pile of unopened, blue, state-issued letters that have been coming through her mail slot every day for weeks; the pile she had been avoiding, the pile she took to stepping over, stepping on, the pile she told her daughter not to touch, not to worry about. She crawls as far as her wilting, dizzy, nauseated, horizontal body can, and crumples into herself, lying on top of the pile of letters, wondering where that bright and glowy part of her went … not crying, just seething and breathing deep and constrained, feeling like she's

missing a huge goddamned piece of her self, her *soul*, she finally, she, goddammit, she rips open a blue envelope and reads the words *program designed to reconnect Parent and Child* and despite knowing that this was bound to happen, basically written in the goddamned stars, she still feels the utter pain, the loss, and she rips the letter in half, yelling *HOW HOW HOW*. She rips all the letters in half in fourths in eighths in sixteenths in millionths, shreds, smithereens and she lies in the pile of scraps and decides she needs whiskey goddamned now.

Vester, sipping at her whiskey, played with the possibilities of this man—this man with chest hair cascading out of the V in his wool sweatshirt, this man with the nice, promising, unassuming smile, this man with the genuine body language. This man with the puns. And she remembered places where she wanted to feel connected, stable.

"Right," she said.

"Oh, I know," the man said and looked to the table, his head bobbing in silent laughter. Vester watched as the man gave out a small laugh and lifted his head. "Bad one, huh? But think of it this way," he said, suddenly lifting his hands, fingers spread wide, vertical palms conceding his point, "at least I've *something* to say." He paused, waiting. "I'd wager that half of the guys that take you out are lousy conversationalists. I bet they stumble, sigh, cough, excuse themselves, check their phones, or even ask you about—" he feigned a gasp, fingers to his lips, "—your *job*." He stared at Vester with mock horror spread across his face. "So about your job—"

And the answer couldn't have been more obvious: she saw herself inside this inescapable, strenuous cycle of whiskey and yelling and losing and whiskey and yelling and losing, and so far there was never a place for her to give two shits. "I daylight as a nihilist,"

she said, and, even though she thought not caring about anything would, somehow, require caring about not caring, the whole thing felt goddamned right. Though, nihilist or not, she wondered if it was the same thing as a mother not legally owning her child.

"What? Oh, come on, let's get to know—"

"No," she interrupted. "I'm not going to talk to you about my job," she said, draining the last of her drink. The sting in the back of her throat was quick and familiar. "And I'm not going to talk to you about my life. We're going to cut to the goddamned chase."

The man sat up straight, rubbed his hands on his legs and said, with wide, naïve eyes perched softly in his tilted head, "Wh—What is the chase then, exactly?"

The areas beneath Vester's fingernails began to itch.

Or she's in that place so goddamned long ago, years ago and eight months twelve days—8:45—every other place she has to turn to is burned in some imaginary fire like the one she died in at her own parents' hands. This place so deep she never wanted to remember, but she watches as it forces itself out, this place in the doctor's office, she's sitting there, the doctor staring at her, and she realizes that to be *here* means she only has two options and, but goddammit, at one point she had every option back there—away so long back *there*—all of the possibilities open for her … and but *here* is where she is, tangled in the insane-making web of *only two* choices. But it goes deeper and scarier and insaner because that web spreads out to infinity in both directions—*her* one choice for this one child would let loose every possible option in front of *it* or, simply, *wouldn't*. *It* would lose all the possibilities just as she had, though *she* had an entire life to lose them. *It* wouldn't. The doctor says not to consider the fetus inside of her because it, technically, is not a living, breathing, conscious thing yet, he says if she thinks

it's better for her body, not to mention her life—but how about *its* goddamned life?—then her hesitation, the doctor, a man, says, is a strong gauge of her readiness—he's implying she has *none. None!* None. Hesitant and uncertain she nods and a deep and uncontained sigh leaves her feeling utterly empty and so incredibly goddamned lost that when she walks out the door, the gaping hole of indecision that is exactly her mind is not exactly convinced either way, that sigh *still* coming out of her throat … but, she feels—she thinks—she knows—that, no, it's coming from that bright billowing glowing connection between her and the person inside of her. And there will never be another time like *right fucking now*. She starts running and running and her feet will take her on their own—the west, the west, the West, please, just the West, with hope of connection and togetherness, just as far west as possible until collapsing—and it's so goddamn precise because any other choice will destroy every cell in her body with agony guilt regret sadness disgust and pure horror over the understanding of the impossible death of something that *hasn't yet lived*.

After the second man she had ever been with, and the first since the birth of her daughter, entered her—her insides stretching, his cock forceful, her muscles tense and resisting, his blue veins bulbous under skin, her pubic hair scratching against his, his fingers scraping and clawing her back, her fingernails piercing her palms, his hand on the back of her head, her hair ripping from her scalp, his thrusts deeper, her thoughts of her daughter, his gasps flinging spittle, her throat full of bile, his eyes closed, her eyes wide, his left leg shaking, her entire body shaking, his *I'm gonna, I'm gonna*, her *Get it the hell out*, his semen all over her sheets, her blank stare at the far wall, his words of pleased astonishment, her silence, his asking, her silence, his silence, her silence, his *Cunt*, her

bleeding cervix—she knew that out of all the possible choices, she was beginning to get the right idea.

And to places an hour—two, three—after the man with the wool sweatshirt left, places with only flashes available, where, holy shit, there she is, a wine bottle in her right hand, pacing in front of Daughter's cold empty room … and a black flash and she's in the room, standing over a broken bed, the wine bottle half empty, yelling at the frame *You'll never be stable*, at the mattress *You're a disappointment*, at the sheets *You'll never be my daughter* words she remembers her own mother screeching over a phone years ago … then a handful of tacks she squeezes in her left fist, dozens of holes dribbling blood, and she decides, she knows, that the haze and the choices and the pain between her legs aren't goddamned important, because she's got to, she ... and she's standing in a pile of every piece of paper that Daughter has ever touched, it's all in the *living* room, at her feet, not in some goddamned dead, unused room where nothing will ever be happy again *ever*. She stares at the wall, wine running down it in purple dregs, and she'll never again get to *really* see her daughter, not *really really*, unless, of course, she does this, because it's what Mother does—it's what *mothers* do. It's how mothers show off, it's how they say *I'm caring, I care*, it's why mothers fuck men, it's why *Mother* fucks men. And Mother tacks everything to the wall, reaching and grasping, trying to think of how her Daughter looked, sounded, smelled, felt, was—no: *is*. And when the tears pour out of her, catch in her hair, flow down her face, wash her whole damned body, it's obvious that they've been there forever; the salt and wetness doing goddamned nothing but adding to all the blurs, her screaming and suffocation doing nothing but blurring everything else. Then: collapse to the floor, huddle next to the wall, curling fetal, bare body shaking, crying,

drinking, screaming, throwing, breaking, pulling, anything, anything *anythinganythinganything*.

Past the bottles on the shelves, into the mirror, beyond her neatly wrapped hair, freshly washed face, and the spaces between her teeth, staring to the corner booth behind her where, a moment ago, she hid her daughter in the shadows of a coat rack, telling her, "I won't be gone long, promise. Just up there, drinking soda. Just a second."

The bartender with the rotund, pockmarked face slid a small glass of whiskey to her, recognition in his nod, and she put some cash down. "Just the one for me today," she said, smiling, her eyes continually glancing back to the hidden corner.

"Sure," the bartender said, pocketing the bills.

Forty minutes and five glasses later Vester was slapping the bartender's huge back as he carefully dragged her daughter out by the hand. Vester was going on about daycare getting out *too* early and this is the *only* place on their way home and what's the matter if she just sits in the back, not bothering anyone? The bartender said nothing as he deposited the child next to a lamppost, Vester close behind. Lighting a cigarette, he opened the door for an approaching man in a wool sweatshirt. Knowingly, they raised eyebrows, smirked, and walked in, shutting the door on mother and daughter.

"My throat hurts," her daughter said.

"It's just the *smoke* from that *asshole* smoking in *there* all day!" Vester yelled at the door, middle fingers in the air.

Vester palmed her eyes, trying to shake the fog out of her head, when a woman's voice asked if everything was okay.

"Yeah, just—" Vester started, but, when she looked, she realized the woman was talking to her daughter. It was a blurry out-

line of a woman she almost recognized, next to her were two foggy figures of a man holding the hand of a small girl. Vester thought that the small girl was her daughter, then heard her actual daughter behind her, saying hello to the other little girl.

As the woman turned toward Vester and started speaking, hands on her hips, her words came in one long, high-pitched sentence. Vester heard something about Last Straws and Disgusting Parenting and Irresponsible Drunk and The Authorities.

"Okay, just—," Vester said, waving at the air. But the woman kept talking and spitting and scolding while the man behind her nodded and the little girl sucked her thumb. "Just—" Vester tried. "Just—just—"

But the woman's mouth continued, the noises forcing their way out.

"Just wait, goddammit!" Vester yelled, hands up in surrender. The woman stopped, scolding finger in mid-air. Vester looked to the bar, back to the family. "Just watch her for *one damned* second," Vester said, pointing at her daughter, and turned toward the bar. "I gotta get my goddamned stuff. I won't be gone long," she said as she slipped into the dark, smoky maw behind the door.

Time passed in waves, through fading vapors of alcohol. The sun rose soft and slow. She sat outside her apartment door, in the cold, half wrapped in a robe, tacks and tape tangled in her hair, leaning forward with her face down.

At some point two legs stood in front of her and a deep voice said, "Take this," and a blue envelope dropped near her feet, into her line of sight. The legs walked away.

Still lying on the old, sweat-soaked couch, she closed her eyes as the sun breached the clouds, briefly landing on her face. Only

in some peripheral way did she notice the blue envelope sliding through the mail slot.

When the stain on the wall looked like a harlequin Chihuahua juggling brass knuckles, she heard footsteps approaching and was acutely aware of where and when they stopped. There was the scratch of paper on metal. A blue envelope flew through the mail slot and hit the ground with a light thud.

She was right. The man with half a pinky was good for another night of free drinks. But, she lied, she had to get back home and relieve the babysitter. He could come, but only if he drove.

As they stood in front of her apartment she wobbled, searching her purse for her keys. He held her by her waist; she could feel the place where a pinky was supposed to be.

"Now, shhh," Vester said, a finger against her lips. The man said nothing so Vester patted his head saying, "You're doing good." She knew she could get away with shit like that—the degrading shit any man will take if he can smell the inevitability of sex.

"*Well*," the man said.

"Shhh," she signaled with a different finger. She turned the key and opened the door slowly, kicking the pile of letters. She could feel the man close behind her.

The living room was dark and deserted. Vester shivered.

She flipped on the lights. "Ta da," Vester said, smiling and spreading her arms out to the room. The walls were hung with dozens of crayoned pictures, poorly glued-together construction paper in the shape of bright amorphous snowmen or animals.

He was silent.

Vester felt, she told the man, it was important to nurture an inspiring environment, letting her daughter know that she, her

mother, cared *so much* about her, that she, Vester, would always support her in whatever she did. Always.

"But, where's the babysitter?" he asked.

"She—well, gone, obviously. She must have left. Left early," Vester said.

"Leaving your kid here, in the cold?"

"It's—well, she knows I'll be back before midnight."

"It's almost one."

"You wanna drink? Tea? Coffee? Wine?"

The man looked at her. She could tell he was trying to dig into her and she didn't like it.

A deep, uncontained sigh left her lungs and she jumped on the man, pressed her mouth against his, wrapped her legs around his waist and clung to his back. His tongue pried its way into her mouth. She accepted it. "My room is around the corner."

The man started forward, Vester still clinging, their faces still attached through streams of saliva and fumes of alcohol. "Which one?" he asked.

"The only one with a fucking bed in it."

"Do you share it with your daughter?"

She pressed her face harder against his.

Dim, weary lighting and cold linoleum against her bare toes. Still awake, staring at a whistling kettle, surrounded by the paraphernalia of a lost life and hearing the rustlings of sheets and the heavy footsteps of the strange, bearded man who had rubbed his halved pinky against her breasts, who had drooled on her thighs as he attempted oral, who had shot all his junk onto her chest.

As the kettle whistled she grabbed for the handle. The heat stung her palm and she recoiled. "Goddammit," she hissed. Holding her hand in pain, she glared. "Goddamned, stupid…" She put

her hand under cold water and cursed all the inanimate objects in her life.

A voice sounded from the hallway around the corner, "You okay?"

Vester hesitated. He had wanted to cuddle after sex. He might try to buy her breakfast. "You need to leave," she said.

"Are you all right?"

"Now."

"Oh, um—" Vester could hear the jangle his keys made as he put his pants on.

With a rag around her hand she poured the scalding water into a wine stained mug.

"Look," he said from around the corner. "Shouldn't we talk?"

A laugh burst from Vester and the tea bag slipped from her fingers into the steaming water. "Just leave." She laughed as a pungent aroma lifted up through the steam.

"Right."

Vester tried to grab at the string of the tea bag, and each time she touched the water she inhaled sharp. She wanted—needed something to show for her troubles.

The man's face appeared from around the corner and she quit with the tea bag, his appearance made her fumble and the steaming water splashed onto her feet. She breathed out, containing the urge to yell out. He opened his mouth to speak, but Vester cut him off with a raised hand. The skin around her eyes tightened slightly. She kept her mouth shut, lips pressed together, and lowered her hand to caress the mug with her left pinky, attempting to look calm.

"But—," the man stuttered, he had no time to finish.

As she swung the mug towards the man, watching the water propel through the air, she felt unusual, confident, and satisfied.

2

Not that it was the best sleep she ever had slept, but she did sleep. She knew because she woke up.

She woke thinking about how fluid and irregular time felt. She thought about a lot of things. About how the carpet where she lay—the right side of her face pressed to the floor—was where she stood earlier to watch the bald man with the beard rip the door open and run, his wails dopplering around the apartment complex as he held his burnt face with his imperfect hands. About how there was this place she knew of where she once felt connected, where she could reconnect and restart, where she could recreate.

As she pushed herself up from the floor, she told herself that if she drove straight through, no sleep, no unnecessary stops, it wouldn't take her more than a few days to get back West. She wouldn't be gone long.

ESMIR PRLJA

POSITIONING

Family History

RACHELLE ESCAMILLA

She tells you how they carted them here,
trucked them, she corrects herself. On the backs
of flatbeds freshly deloused.

She's forgotten why she moved to Pittsburgh
and when she's home watches workers
careworn

she extends an arm
out the car window: holding her palm a platform
for the flashing rows of produce.

Border Crossing

RACHELLE ESCAMILLA

She tells you about that term
wetback, how it means they
crossed the border at

the river
she smiles when she says it
you know she loves the water.

Hometown

RACHELLE ESCAMILLA

How does our town
look under the fireside mountain
range under the *Quien Sabé*

rattle snake roads and ridges below
our water tower?

She's too far to turn focus on the
brush swoosh-foxtail fields and earwig
tunnels like toothscrapes under toes.

Where her brother's stubby mud fingers
brush the bunchgrass and the *Andreas*
Fault splits the grasslands.

She wants to turn and look, but the fields
have been lifted the brassicas have released
their nose and a body of salt would spoil the dirt.

Ghosts

RAYMOND COTHERN

There is a family of albino squirrels on my uncle's farm in Mississippi. Every July when my brother and I spend a few weeks of summer vacation with relatives on the old Wilson family land, we are determined we will succeed in thinning those ghost squirrels out. Our cousin Paul swears with a straight face he has seen them but the rest of the family—girl cousins still at home, Linda and Marcel—laugh at us about hunting things no one else can see. No amount of talk around the supper table—sopping up the juice from black-eyed peas with biscuits the size of a man's fist—no assurance betweens bites can persuade those girls or Aunt Mae and Uncle George that those white animals exist in the oaks and tall pines that grow around the pond up on the hill. Every afternoon with pumped up Benjamin Pump air rifles we make our way down the hollow to where a clear stream no wider than a forearm trickles down from the pond through sand and red clay. At some point, like soldiers on patrol, we split on the walk down and quietly go to our favorite stands—mine always under the old beech tree near the stream, Wayne and Paul on further up the hill past the pond where they settle among the pines where half-eaten cones litter the ground from those squirrels gnawing to get at the pine nuts.

It is never long after finding the spot between two large tree roots and leaning back against the trunk where cousins have

carved initials in the bark that I begin to feel some sense that this is where family has hunted along these same low hills and tilled the land since the Civil War in order to eat, feeling some connection I can't express and wanting this life instead of the one in Louisiana, hunting not able to be done out of the back screened door on Bernardo Street, not one of pulling corn when ripe or milking cows but an everydayness of going to school and coming home to quietly watch television because my father is working the *dog shift* at night or maybe playing tackle football in the empty lot along Live Oak Boulevard. And of course I kind of know my Mississippi cousins would probably trade their life with daily chores for ours for a while. But there is a joy there on that farm not felt in the quietness of home, reclining against that beech tree, birdsongs overhead, a feeling of connectedness to the woods and long low hills rising everywhere you look, to the slow pace of the day and the heat of summer and the quietness of a night so much darker than at home and infused with secrets and answers just out of reach.

It is never quite the same when we spend a week at my grandparents' farm in Mississippi. No cousins our age to roam the woods with or swim in the creek in the woods. We want companionship and trips in my uncle's farm truck with the long wooden bed to swim in No Bottom Hole and Nancy Branch. Where my father grew up there is only the timeworn Henry J in the old garage and never any trips in it, and a barn only large enough for tools and plow points and some feed—so unlike the huge barn with the rusty-weeping tin roof and hay stacked in a loft high enough for secret passages and edging along the bales like Cary Grant on the faces of Mount Rushmore, leaps between stacks over chasms in the earth's surface, the square rocks of hay shifting and tumbling down to the valley floor. At my grandparents' it is always quiet

talk at night—around the fire if it is a Christmas visit—and never a radio on that I can remember although my grandmother listens to one religiously. At my uncle's we listen to radio mysteries with a creaking door opening slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, then a voice welcoming us to the Inner Sanctum where Helen Hayes and Mary Astor and Boris Karloff chill us with tales of terror. At my grandparent's farm it is talk of who has been sick and what first cousin of the neighbor down the road died of a ruptured appendix while shelling peas.

There always comes a time when we abandon the quiet watch for movement in the treetops of those mutant gray squirrels, always the eventual sound of laughter from Wayne and Paul that signals they have grown tired of seeing nothing and want to move on through the corn field on the rising hill near the pond in search of something to shoot at. Scrambling straight up the steep bank of the pond, I meet them and we scan the surface of the water for any turtles but usually we see only a few heads for a moment before ducking below the film of dust and pollen in swirls disturbed by only the slow crash dive of green-pointed heads.

The waist-high corn is still dewy and soaks our jeans, our air rifles either on one shoulder or held at the ready to keep them dry. And it is a feeling of moving toward the unknown, something found at the end of those long rows at the edge of the woods, some new undiscovered feature of the land, a chance meeting with animals that inhabit the safety of the rolling waves of briars or entrance holes burrowed under tree roots that rise out of the earth like the glimpsed back of an anaconda. The sense of adventure, yes, of not knowing what is ahead and no plans in mind but those made on the run for any unexpected encounter, and it is what makes those days so special, that feeling of possibility that makes

for sentimental remembrance in later years and a hunger to recapture one tiny eyespot shadow of that spark of adventure.

So you hold on to that time, those summer days dwindling down too quickly, and although you don't know it at the time, certain moments will forever be with you, stored like photographs in the old trunk that is you, not subjected to that sepia-wash of time. You hold on to those moments back home during the everydayness of walking around in a house where the slightest misstep causes familiar avalanches.

At home, I always listen for signs my father has been drinking on those nights after he has been in the woods on his day off, knocking his muddy boots against the back steps of the Bernardo Street house, and the wooden sound of his boots against those steps, quick and dull, always preceding his unsteady entrance into the house. My father pulls the squirrels out of the back of his hunting vest one at a time and tosses them on the newspaper spread out on the kitchen floor by my mother as soon as she heard his car in the driveway, saying as she layers the paper, *Talmadge and his mess, Talmadge and his foolishness*, my father tossing the squirrels on the paper, dealing dead and stiff and cold creatures instead of cards. There is no sign on most of them of having been shot down from the tops of oak trees, the hair on their tails when he arranges them in a row the only thing still lifelike about them. A beer retrieved from the refrigerator and sharp hunting knife at hand, he settles down on a low stool and picks one of the squirrels up after a long swallow of beer, his hand and the dead squirrel moving up and down to gauge the weight of it.

He always glances at me standing away, my back against the kitchen counter. *Well, teaty-baby, you wanna try your hand at this?*

He pinches up the skin and fur on the stomach of the squirrel and makes an incision large enough for two bloody fingers.

Y.E.S.: The Origin of Letters

CHANGMING YUAN

Y
You love 'Y', not because it's the first letter
In your family name, but because it's like
A horn, which the water buffalo in your
Native village uses to fight against injustice
Or, because it's like a twig, where a crow
Can come down to perch, a cicada can sing
Towards the setting sun as loud as it wants to
More important, in Egyptian hieroglyphics
It stands for a real reed, something you can
Bend into a whistle or flute; in pronouncing it
You can get all the answers you need, besides
You can make it into a heart-felt catapult
And shoot at a snakehead or sparrow, as long
As it is within the range of your boyhood

E
born to be a double reed
that can be bent into a long vowel
the most frequently used letter
in english, echoing endlessly in silences

if pulled down, it offers two doors
one leading to Soul via will, the other
to Him via wisdom; if turned up right
it forms a mountain with three peaks

like three holy swords, pointing high
one against the sun
one against the moon
one against the sky

Facing always towards the east, it embraces
existence, equality, eternity, emancipation...

S
with a double hook
the sexist, the most charming shape
looking more like a naked woman
in postmodern art
than folded cloth used to cover her body
in an Egyptian tale

always ready to
seduce

Clad Nomad

SEBASTIAN BLOMSTRAND

womb was a
whirlwind that
eroded me into
a rebel within the clause
that is our species in the
neverending sentence
that is the universe
& the syntax of
“i am”
branches out into
a nomad madly clad
in the wardrobe of
a wikidentity,
saudade for
some coherency,
only able to perceive
a buggy captcha of
“home” as this
blurry concept slips
through the holes
in my pockets
when e.g. i smile at
sudden zen in
tiramisu in Amaterasu,
when i dive deep into
dolphin dreams where

le grand bleu meets the big blue,
when i let it be heard that i know
all the capitals in the world
as i exist a recently kissed
swedesweet tourist
in some random hostel
or when i revel in the
easiness of the happiness
that is sometimes penned at
Lakh Tirikh or Szeretlek

home is
where the
heart is but
what's beating
in me is
<3.14159.....
irrational &
out there,
on a neverending
vendetta with
this bold
prepositional phrase
that swaggers
& sways
in infinite
ways.

Banana Blues: For Langston Hughes

ALLEN QING YUAN

I'm bluer than blue
A branch thicker than the root
A banana unlike any other fruit

But my growth has been severed and burned

Like a scale with weight it cannot measure
The music of my white soul
Is melancholy, oppressed
Singing without words
Confined within black bars

I'm bluer than blue
A composer without compositions
A conductor without a baton
To even guide himself

The song beats away as
I'm singing my blues

American/British/Canadian born Chinese (ABC/BBC/CBC's) are often referred to as 'bananas' because they are yellow-skinned but 'white-hearted.'

Labours

ANNA DIMITRAKOPOULOS

I –
an abandoned Virgin Mary
with the fate of man leaning on my square shoulders
chase my husband's hat in fertile minefields
I –
an unloved Elizabeth
with the compact history of man on my half-grown back
search for answers in burning waste lands
I –
a neglected Cleopatra
with the famished dreams of man on my working-class doorstep
shelter 23 worms eating my stiff bones
I –
a despised Mona Lisa
with the vision of man nudging the corner of my oily glare
drown in a teaspoon of water
I –
a forsaken Mother Teresa
with the sins of man dissolving in the bottom of my coffee-cup
whisper my will to the cement-forest
I –
an unconscious Aphrodite
with the children of man clinging on my bare breasts
take my place among the elected

Jackalope Considers Himself a Slow-worm

MATT HAW

> jackalope ▪ n. 1 N. Amer. A mythical horned jackrabbit of the genus lepus temperamentalus.
> —found torn from a dictionary

you know the Chimera
        the Gryphon

and other homunculi
        that populate creation myths

and bedtime stories
        but not even I am sure

what mischievous energy
        conspired to produce me

part snake part lizard part toad
        even my own body frightens

an atrocious foot of earth
        that on a whim

sprouted a head
                a tail

or a stone baby
        delivered from great depths

to pass itself
        between light-laced wings of grass

somewhere between rock
        and the crow's dry laugh

My Mother Remembers Her Mother

OCEAN VUONG

My eyes close into a night
thickened with ash and jasmine,
mortar blasts lighting distance into
shocks of dawn.

In a room lit with light
from another house, you
lie alone
beneath a baby-faced G.I.
What you know as shame is forgotten in
the belly inside your belly.

Hunger neglects pride
the way fire neglects the cries
of what it burns.

Each soldier leaves you steeped
in what they cannot keep: liquor, salt of
lust, the pink dust
of shattered bodies.

There are men who carry dreams
over mountains, the dead

on their backs.
But only our mothers can

walk with the weight of a
second beating heart.

Me oʻi! When they ask me
where I'm from, I tell them

my song sleeps in the toothless mouth of
a war-woman, that a white man

rages in my veins, searching for his name.

I tell them I was not born—
but crawled, headfirst, into the hunger of
dogs.

My Almost. My Always.

HALL JAMESON

I hadn't seen Tommy Lavine for thirteen years. Then there he was in the most unlikely place, bussing tables at the Spring Chicken Café on the hi-line, two thousand miles from the coastal Maine town where we'd grown up. I was in northern Montana for a photo shoot, toting my clunky tripod and camera gear to photograph the elusive grain elevator.

Not so elusive really, there was one every six miles.

Tommy was my first love, and seeing him again sent a jolt through me, but something was different. His posture was stooped and there was a curious tilt to his head, a potbelly that had not been there a decade ago protruded from the waist of his faded Wranglers, his jaw was curiously slack, mouth ajar. He wore a yellow smiley face button on the front of his apron.

"Tommy! Hello!" I said as he passed by my table, but there was no hint of recognition, he did not even glance in my direction. I thought we parted on good terms.

Tommy Lavine had almost been my first. The *almost* was what made him so special. We had spent the day of *maybe* on Crescent Beach, drinking beer in the hot sun and collecting sand dollars, shouting to the clouds and seagulls that we were rich. Then, on the night of *almost*, we had rolled around on a musty blanket retrieved from the trunk of his Chevy Nova, until I made him stop; my

head ached from the hot sun and my stomach burned from the beer and hotdogs. I drifted to sleep on the blanket, Tommy next to me, his frustrated sigh following me into sleep.

I wondered what happened to the sand dollars we had collected that day. I held on to them for years, but they were now lost between apartment shuffling and my travels. I wondered if Tommy had kept any of his.

I tried again, "Tommy."

This time Tommy turned and looked at me, chin hanging as if on a broken hinge.

"I like your button," I said, pointing to the smiley face.

He covered it protectively with his hand. "It's my favorite," he said, frowning at me. He blinked once, before turning and carrying his bin of dishes and cutlery through the swinging doors of the kitchen. A waitress approached, her mouth kinked in a knot of perplexity.

"Are you friends with Tommy?" she asked. Her named tag read, Carol.

"Yes, we went to high school together. I don't think he recognized me." I laughed.

She leaned over and put a hand on my shoulder. I fought the urge to shrug it off and slide toward the window. "You probably haven't heard then, about the accident."

I perked up in my seat and leaned toward her. "Accident? What accident?"

"Tommy was in a horrible car crash about three years ago. A hit and run. His head went through the windshield. It left him a little...damaged."

"Damaged," I repeated. My breakfast of corn beef hash and scrambled eggs rose in the back of my throat. "Oh my God."

"So he probably wouldn't recognize you," Carol continued.

"Were the two of you close?"

"Yes. Very. We both..." my voice trailed off. I wanted Carol to go away.

"He's a special boy," Carol said.

The voice inside my head screamed, *He's not a boy! I used to be in love with him!* Yet, as Tommy came out of the kitchen, head hung, shuffling slowly, I realized that's exactly what he was.

I was supposed to depart the following morning to head east toward Havre, then south to Great Falls, but instead, I checked to see if my room at the motel was available for another day. The motel clerk looked at me as if I was insane, and said, "You can book the entire motel, if you want. It's the slow season."

It was June, but I didn't argue with him, things ran at a different pace this far north. There was plenty to shoot around here—an abundance of nothing, but sparseness often made for the most compelling photographs.

"Why don't you stay a week? Stay the month, and I'll give you a special rate," he added, smoothing his greasy comb-over with the flats of his fingers.

"As tempting as that is, I think I'll just stay one more day," I said. "But thanks."

Pickup trucks packed the lot of the Spring Chicken the following morning. I brought my Mamiya in with me, thinking I might shoot the locals during the breakfast rush. I placed it in the center of the scarred Formica tabletop and craned my neck to see if I could spot Tommy in the kitchen. I turned my attention to the menu, peeking over the top every so often, but I did not see him. I wondered if he was working today. There was something tacky and brown dried onto the plastic coating of the menu. I scraped at it with my fingernail.

"I used to know a girl who took pictures," a voice said. I dropped the menu. Tommy stood there studying the camera. "She was pretty." He smiled.

"That was me, Tommy," I said, smiling back at him.

"No, it wasn't. You are too old!" He laughed. "But you're pretty for an old lady!" He added, grinning.

"Thank you," I said. "Do you remember Crescent Beach, in Maine? When we were young, we used to go there."

"Yes," he said, nodding.

I leaned forward, and asked, "You do?"

"Yes. I like crescent rolls very much. My mom used to make them for me. They don't make them here though." He frowned. "Why don't they make the crescent rolls here, Carol?"

Carol sidestepped in our direction.

"I don't know, hon. Why don't you go ask Daniel?" She turned to me. Tommy shimmied toward the kitchen. "Well, good morning! Nice to see you again. What can I get you this morning?"

"Two eggs, over easy, wheat toast, and bacon, crispy," I said, my eyes following Tommy.

"You bet," Carol said. "What's this crescent roll business? That's a new one."

"Oh, we used to spend time at a place called Crescent Beach when we were young. I was asking him if he remembered. Apparently, he doesn't," I said quietly. "But, he remembers his mom's crescent rolls."

"Don't feel bad, hon, he has a hard time remembering how to tie his shoes some days. He came to work one day with his pants on wrong-side-out. He does the best he can. Everyone in town looks out for him. Tommy's a sweet soul."

"He's younger now than when I saw him last," I murmured, and Carol shot me a strange look.

"Do you live here now?" Tommy asked when I slid into the booth the next morning.

"No, I'm just passing through, taking pictures," I said, pointing to my camera. "I'm leaving tomorrow." Much to the delight of the hotel clerk, I had booked another night.

A strange look passed over Tommy's face. He looked away.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"I was hoping that you were going to live here now," he said woefully. "I knew a girl once. You make me think of her. She had red hair like yours. We lived on the ocean."

"That was me, Tommy! I'm Meghan. I'm all grown up now."

"You're not her."

"I am, I promise."

"Then how come I'm not older too?" He sighed shakily, and just for a second, Tommy was there, my Tommy. "I don't remember her name. I loved her. I don't remember how I got here." He looked around the restaurant. I stared at him slack-jawed, words caught in my throat.

I loved her! He'd snuck that in there as if it was nothing.

"You had a little accident, Tom," I said. "It makes it hard to remember things. Her name...*my* name, is Meghan."

Tommy shook his head. "Yeah. My accident. It was bad. A man hit me, and then drove away. Daniel and Carol call him bad names."

"He shouldn't have done that. Driven away."

"I know," he said, clapping his hands together so suddenly that I jumped. "Are you having crescent rolls for breakfast? Daniel made some for me this morning! I'll share them with you."

"Really?" I laughed. "I'd love some."

"Daniel!" he yelled. "My new friend, Meghan, wants a crescent

roll. I told you people like them. They are so good! That's why my mom made them for me." He shuffled toward the kitchen and I exhaled through pursed lips as I watched him disappear through the swinging doors.

My new friend, Tommy.

Tommy brought a plate of crescent rolls to my table as soon as I arrived the next morning. I offered him one and he slid into the seat opposite me, spreading a huge blob of strawberry jam across the top of it.

"These are the best," he said, his mouth full.

"They are really good," I agreed, smiling at him. They were cold and clammy.

Carol came over. "I hope you'll send us some of your photographs. I'll hang them up in here. Brighten up the place a bit," she said, pushing a plate of hash and eggs across the table. She fingered a fake spray of ivy pouring from a plastic planter on the shelf near my booth.

"I will. I promise," I said. Carol held a small bag in her other hand, she handed it to Tommy. "Do you want to give it to her," she whispered, and he nodded, grinning.

"We made something for you," he said, suddenly shy. He handed me the bag, then stared at the table.

"Thank you!" I placed my hand on Tommy's and squeezed. "Thank you, Tommy."

He sniffed loudly and looked at Carol, who smiled and nodded. "They're crescent rolls!" he said. "Daniel made them this morning. You can eat them for lunch," he paused, "but not while you're driving. Okay?" His eyes filled with tears. "I had one, though. Sorry, Carol! They are so good. They're my favorite"

"That's okay, Tommy. I'm sure Meghan doesn't mind."

"Hey, they're impossible to resist. I'm glad you had one!" I leaned toward him. "Hey, Tommy, I have a huge favor to ask you."

"What?" he whispered loudly.

"Would you let Carol take a picture of us together?" I cleared my throat and closed my eyes for a second, then opened them and looked into his hazel eyes.

IN FOCUS

MOHSIN HAMID

The Reluctant Fundamentalist

(excerpt from chapter one)

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services.

How did I know you were American? No, not by the color of your skin; we have a range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier. Nor was it your dress that gave you away; a European tourist could as easily have purchased in Des Moines your suit, with its single vent, and your button-down shirt. True, your hair, short-cropped, and your expansive chest—the chest, I would say, of a man who bench-presses regularly, and maxes out well above two-twenty-five—are typical of a certain *type* of American; but then again, sportsmen and soldiers of all nationalities tend to look alike. Instead, it was your bearing that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation.

Come, tell me, what were you looking for? Surely, at this time of day, only one thing could have brought you to the district of Old Anarkali—named, as you may be aware, after a courtesan

immured for loving a prince—and that is the quest for the perfect cup of tea. Have I guessed correctly? Then allow me, sir, to suggest my favorite among these many establishments. Yes, this is the one. Its metal chairs are no better upholstered, its wooden tables are equally rough, and it is, like the others, open to the sky. But the quality of its tea, I assure you, is unparalleled.

You prefer that seat, with your back so close to the wall? Very well, although you will benefit less from the intermittent breeze, which, when it does blow, makes these warm afternoons more pleasant. And will you not remove your jacket? So formal! Now *that* is not typical of Americans, at least not in my experience. And my experience is substantial: I spent four and a half years in your country. Where? I worked in New York, and before that attended college in New Jersey. Yes, you are right: it was Princeton! Quite a guess, I must say.

What did I think of Princeton? Well, the answer to that question requires a story. When I first arrived, I looked around me at the Gothic buildings—younger, I later learned, than many of the mosques of this city, but made through acid treatment and ingenious stonemasonry to look older—and thought, *This is a dream come true*. Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible. *I have access to this beautiful campus*, I thought, *to professors who are titans in their fields and fellow students who are philosopher-kings in the making*.

I was, I must admit, overly generous in my initial assumptions about the standard of the student body. They were almost all intelligent, and many were brilliant, but whereas I was one of only two Pakistanis in my entering class—two from a population of over a hundred million souls, mind you—the Americans faced much less daunting odds in the selection process. A thousand of your com-

patriots were enrolled, five hundred times as many, even though your country's population was only twice that of mine. As a result, the non-Americans among us tended on average to do better than the Americans, and in my case I reached my senior year without having received a single B.

Looking back now, I see the power of that system, pragmatic and effective, like so much else in America. We international students were sourced from around the globe, sifted not only by well-honed standardized tests but by painstakingly customized evaluations—interviews, essays, recommendations—until the best and the brightest of us had been identified. I myself had among the top exam results in Pakistan and was besides a soccer player good enough to compete on the varsity team, which I did until I damaged my knee in my sophomore year. Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of the meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. And for the most part, we were happy to do so. I certainly was, at least at first.

Every fall, Princeton raised her skirt for the corporate recruiters who came onto campus and—as you say in America—showed them some skin. The skin Princeton showed was good skin, of course—young, eloquent, and clever as can be—but even among all that skin, I knew in my senior year that I was something special. I was a perfect breast, if you will—tan, succulent, seemingly defiant of gravity—and I was confident of getting any job I wanted.

Interview with Mohsin Hamid

SREEDHEVI IYER
ADNAN MAHMUTOVIĆ

INTERVIEWERS

The Reluctant Fundamentalist has been released as a film directed by Mira Nair. You have collaborated on the script, and coincidentally, Salman Rushdie has also engaged in writing the script for the film adaptation of *Midnight's Children*. Were you interested in the telling of the same story on a bigger platform, or did you go for creative control over the vagaries of film adaptations?

HAMID

I didn't have creative control. I was desperate to not write the screenplay. I thought better to not be involved, because it's very hard to be involved in a project, which I had initially written, but then had no control of. It was especially since Mira had the vision to include both the corporate world and the Pakistani world. She met with me and Ami Boghani and an L.A. based film writer to do the subsequent revisions. So there were more people who were really involved in writing it, Mira, Ami, myself, and William Wheeler. So if it is good they deserve all the credit and if it's not good I deserve all the blame.

INTERVIEWERS

Why didn't you want creative control?

HAMID

Not that I consciously avoided it, but its not often that the writer has such creative control. I think what happened was that Mira was always very respectful to the intention of the book, and was always engaged with how we would go about it but we always discussed and argued about it and she almost had me decide how it should all happen. That is almost never the case where the writer is concerned, in film. The writer's role finishes at the point of the book. And so I thought, pick a filmmaker you trust to make a film about Lahore, it's their medium and let them tell the story.

INTERVIEWERS

How well do you think it translated into the other medium? What was gained and what lost in translation?

HAMID

Well film and books are different media in the first place. There are the basic elements like the different visuals, the existence of soundtracks, for example, to evoke certain emotions, so many things that a book actually does not do. So they're very different forms of storytelling, and I wouldn't say there has been any loss or gain in any kind of translation, but that they both might share a certain common DNA.

INTERVIEWERS

Did you have any say in the casting and how did you react to the choice of actors?

HAMID

I didn't have any say in it at all. Mira was very good at always keeping me in the loop and keeping me hands on, but the casting was very much by Mira herself and her team.

INTERVIEWERS

We thought the casting of Changez was great, by the way.

HAMID

A lot of care and attention was taken on this, and Mira looked at many men, a huge range to look at to seek the one who would do justice in all forms, finding good characters, for example with Riz Ahmed, who could look like he belonged in the New York context, and then could also look like Om Puri and Shabana Azmi's son. There aren't that many young South Asian men who could fulfil this.

INTERVIEWERS

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the character Erica has written a novella and you write that novellas are tough to sell. Your book is a novella, perfect for a reading in one-two sittings. Was the meta-fictional element a way to comment on the value of novellas? Did you have trouble selling yours?

HAMID

I mean, it's a very short book. That's always tricky. There's a thought surrounding books similar to that of grocery stores, in terms of shelf space, or advertising space. If you have a book that's a thousand pages long and then you see this sort of an inch thick book, it sort of comes under some consideration.

I myself really gravitate towards short novels. Eventually with novellas and short novels there's a distinction that you need to make. It depends on how a story grows. In some instances it's like having a short story—when does a short story becomes a novella, a novella a novel—it becomes a sort of arbitrary existence. For me the distinction is irrelevant, and in any case in many ways a novella is like a long short story.

If you're writing a novel that's trying to do difficult things, formally, politically, aesthetically, if you make it small, it's less intimidating. So, many people who don't really read novels have read this book. I've seen people go, Oh look this is a big slow book, can't stand it.

INTERVIEWERS

It almost sounds like an anti-thesis of Rushdie, in a way.

HAMID

I don't know about that, but I come from a place where a lot of people I know, friends even, who don't read books.

INTERVIEWERS

You take years between novels, and you mention how difficult it was to finally finish *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. How many drafts did you have to go through, and once you arrived at the final draft, how did your editors perceive it?

HAMID

The two books took seven years each, although ten sounds better. And the third book has taken six, so I've speeded up, I'm happy to say. I don't exactly know how many drafts, probably half a dozen. But the first few drafts, I would throw away, and nothing would ever remain of it in the next draft. So you could say, after a few drafts, you would find two or three that began to look like bits in the final version. With *Moth Smoke*, this was done through help of my agent Jay Mandel from William Morris, a great agent I stumbled into, and with whose support I spent a year and a half just revising. With *Reluctant*, I felt I had a draft that finally worked, and I sent it to my agent and said I hope you like it too, and luckily they did.

INTERVIEWERS

Yes, sometimes throwing away a draft and rewriting it can increase fluency in the prose.

HAMID

With a novel I do want to know how other people view it, and for that I have to get it wrong a number of times. It's about knowing when to let go, mostly.

INTERVIEWERS

With regards to your creative process, do you read and write Urdu

or any other non-English language, and do you think it informs your writing in English in any conscious or unconscious way? Do you read while you're in the middle of writing a novel, and are there any particular kinds of books and writers that you pick depending on what you're writing at that point?

HAMID

I don't write in Urdu. I don't read in Urdu either. I mean I do read street signs because I live in Pakistan and all and Urdu is part of my life but I don't read Urdu books. Since high school, I have probably read only three or four Urdu books. English is by far my better language.

I do very little research while I'm writing, I can tell you that a quick Google search is quite enough for me. I still don't need to read books while I'm writing to figure out how to do things but sometimes, when I'm reading, it will teach me something. I mean I had three or four drafts of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and I had first read *The Fall* about 20 or fifteen years earlier, but it was in looking at it again, that it suddenly clicked in my head that this dramatic monologue could work. I'm actually more nervous when I'm in the middle of writing something of reading something that will end up totally screwing up my style or tone or etc. I don't want to be influenced in my writing by what I'm reading but that said I do read while I write, and I am influenced by what I read.

INTERVIEWERS

A Singaporean teacher and poet, Kirpal Singh urges contemporary writers to once again try and be teachers like old poets, especially from the East, who have been regarded as dangerous. Do you think such intentions in an author will be advantageous or detrimental to their craft

HAMID

As a writer, you're a student. I think good teachers are students who talk to other students about what they've learnt. In that sense yes, but more the sense that here is the wisdom that I have, come get it as well, but more so, I'm writing in order to figure some stuff out, and these are the things that I think we have figured out, and we can also figure things out together—in that sense, of being a teacher.

And the fact that someone is reading your books is an indication that they are interested in the same things you are interested in figuring out, because they picked this book out of many so there's some degree of confluence so as long as we can say that the teacher is a student, then yes I would say, there is a role.

I think a book as a physical object that has words inside it is pretty meaningless. What is needful is the reading of the book. And in that sense, I don't think a writer operates on his or her own. A writer only brings in one half of the DNA and the reader brings in the other half and creates this organism of a read book. So in that sense I think my novel is—with pun unintended does invite implications to correspond, very much so.

INTERVIEWERS

Speaking of teacher/student relationship, your character Changez comes to assert his choices more and more towards the end, but remains open to influence from many different people along the way, people who are different to him. However, none of the Americans really change. How important was it for you that these influences shape Changez's life-altering decisions?

HAMID

I think he is very shaped by the world around him and in a sense

his fundamental dilemma is that he is somebody who is very permeable to being influenced. A part of him doesn't want to be. He wants to be somebody who isn't overly influenced while he is able to remain himself—he questions if he's Pakistani but he really isn't anymore. So that is his arc, but as far as the other characters are concerned—certainly with Erica I try to make this point—that this novel doesn't contain all stories. The best stories transcend these stories, so we don't really know what happened to Erica, we don't know what happens to half the characters, so I certainly didn't mean to imply that narrative characters were not open to being influenced. But what Changez goes through is to some extent become somewhat unmoored due to influence. One of the fundamental dilemmas he faces is what people face today, that they are influenced and left adrift and there's a struggle in trying to deal with that.

INTERVIEWERS

In the end of the book, when Changez talks about osmosis, influence is going on whether you want it or not.

HAMID

Exactly. In the absence of Erica, there is still a relationship there. That is the example of this, we aren't these self-contained human beings that we'd like to be, we are susceptible to things and I think a core challenge of contemporary existence is everybody is susceptible and we realise we're susceptible to many foreign and different things, and it frightens us.

INTERVIEWERS

There has been a lot of discussion online, in blogs and bookclubs, of Changez's relationship with Erica, including the lovemaking,

which has Chris almost as a cameo presence. How necessary did you feel the lovemaking scene had to be, for the purposes you were trying to achieve? Do you think the narrative and the depth of Changez's and Erica's relationship could have survived without it?

HAMID

I don't know, it was the way it was imagined. It is hard to take a piece out of it. The scene is important in that the novel pivots in three main places, one of which is when 9/11 happens and one of them is where he finally makes love to Erica. It is in Changez being someone else that it happens and what does that mean, and who is he and what is this thing, and then of course he goes back to Pakistan and sees there's the war and then he goes off to see Juan Bautista. Those for me are the four key pivots of the novel, with the Chris scene being among the most important. It's a tragic situation in a way. That the lovemaking, and degree of love, and the falsehood it needs—these two lovers in loving each other is disturbing and also noble and there is a certain disturbance going on as in which Changez is she falling in love with and the scene that you refer to where Changez channels Chris is part of that effect.

INTERVIEWERS

It's also a part of the reader's interpretation, isn't it, of those events and what kind of analogy they make for Chris and Erica with regards to Changez in a way.

HAMID

Absolutely I think so and the idea is to touch on some of this unaccountable stuff and then it will echo around in the narrative for the reader to make of it what they will, what do they think, whether Changez and Erica had some lyrical, true to form kind of love

or something weird and messed up, that's very much the reader's formation, for me. I don't have a definitive conclusion on it at all.

INTERVIEWERS

That brings us to how much you keep them in mind when you're writing the text. You've picked the dramatic monologue which then makes Changez an unreliable narrator who then plays a really tricky game with reader sympathy as we're constantly on this guessing ground to see how this is going to end and who the American really is etc., but it also seems to be a pointed exercise to provoke a particular kind of reader/audience, and we were wondering if you were conscious of that, and also whether you've ever considered how a non-Western audience would have responded to such a narration?

HAMID

I didn't think of it as something that is necessarily for a Western audience. I thought of it as a story in a space about which many people have feelings and stereotypes and impulses. And so whether those impulses are Pakistani or American or, you know, even within Pakistan, there are many who have different impulses, and many Americans, etc. But what I wanted to do was to create something that took what I think to be a common area, to embark on a discussion which consists of the element of fear, and then make that as something that can be read as a novel. So it wasn't necessarily done to provoke an American reader to feel a certain thing or a Pakistani reader, but instead I was trying to say that you take a book which doesn't talk about religion at all or any violence, really, at its core. And the same thing for the American, really, we really have no evidence whether he's predisposed to violence either.

INTERVIWERS

Because it's all happening in our heads.

HAMID

Exactly, it's all happening in our heads, so for me it was really conjuring some story out of shadows, getting people out from these shadows and see how they talk. At the end of the novel, and it is what it is, hopefully it will get the reader thinking to go, Well okay here's what I thought was happening, and why did I think that. My hope is that they begin to realise that it's they who've added to the whole. So it's less an attempt at provocation in the book and more an attempt to get the reader to revisit their reactions and mirror the book back to them, probably.

INTERVIEWERS

Changez is quick to point out America's nostalgia for its past, post 9/11, and yet indulges in the same with regards to Lahore and Pakistan. Do you view cultural nostalgia as a common and similar ailment that plagues both nations, or do you see one being more dangerous than the other?

HAMID

I think that nostalgia is a spiritual kind of question. I say that in a secular sense. What I mean by that is that nostalgia comes from mortality. We know we're going to die, we know we're going to get old, we don't like getting old but we're certainly going to die. And once we become adults, that creates sort of a shade over the future, which makes the past look better. And out of that stage is born nostalgia. Our most basic spiritual questions—which don't need religion to answer them—that need to be addressed is how do I make sense of it all. That kind of stuff, these existential spiri-

tual issues. The more we are uncomfortable with this and these issues are left unaddressed, the more powerful nostalgia becomes. At the moment we have an environment where organised religion now has become very much about politics. And as much as it takes someone down political paths, it becomes like following spiritual paths.

And meanwhile with non-religious responses, or whatever secular responses, it seems the dominant secular mode of our time is consumerism. Such a mode does not actually attempt to deal with these spiritual issues but to commodify the anxieties that come from there, in that I'm not going to make you feel better about the fact that you're going to become old and die, I'm going to sell you some cool clothes and expensive cars and etc. So I think we do have this kind of crisis right now where the old religious based responses are being attacked by politics and the new secular responses actually make our spiritual crises worse. I think for that reason we, maybe for the first time in human history, are really victims of nostalgia, whether that's European countries before the immigrants came or America in the 1950s or the Ottoman Caliphate and that kind of stuff. We should know of course that these nostalgic impulses are nonsense. You can't look back. We are vulnerable to misleading ourselves when we feel so strongly nostalgic and I think that is what I was trying to play with, that that exists.

INTERVIEWERS

Earlier you mentioned the importance of being a student, of being open to dialogue, and your work is always in dialogue with other works, but instead of seeming to reference other works at random, there is a selectiveness to it, which makes the story resonate even more deeply, for example with *The Fall* which reverberates through the story. Is this a conscious practice on your part?

HAMID

I think there are different kinds of references. Some, for example, are what I would say are repayments of debt. For instance, Valparaiso's Juan Bautista, similar to the character in *The Fall* called Jean Bautiste. And *The Fall* is also executed in the dramatic monologue in this way, so both this aspect of the novel and in the character's name, is sort of an acknowledgement of a debt. And with these things of course some funny things happen. Juan Bautista is of course also John the Baptist, who in this case baptises Changez, so its just in the way one can use different references, I think sometimes these are meant as particular kinds of signposts in others as acknowledgements but mainly they're meant purely out of love, I mean Changez is on the beach, he looks at Erica and he thinks of Mr Palomar. It tells you about what kind of life Changez has had, it tells you about the situation that they're in and it also says that I love that book, and I love that writer and that book is important to me.

In my new novel actually, there are still echoes and references not so much intentionally because of an insider game I'm playing, which I don't particularly like, because most people I know don't really understand what these references are. I also think branding is something that is ubiquitous now. As soon as we talk about things like the music the character is listening to and the places the characters talk about which I think is a description of our world but also is dehumanising in a way. Even artists have become kinds of brands, I think, so in my new novel I've tried to debrand as much as I could.

ESMIR PRLJA

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