

Essays & Fictions

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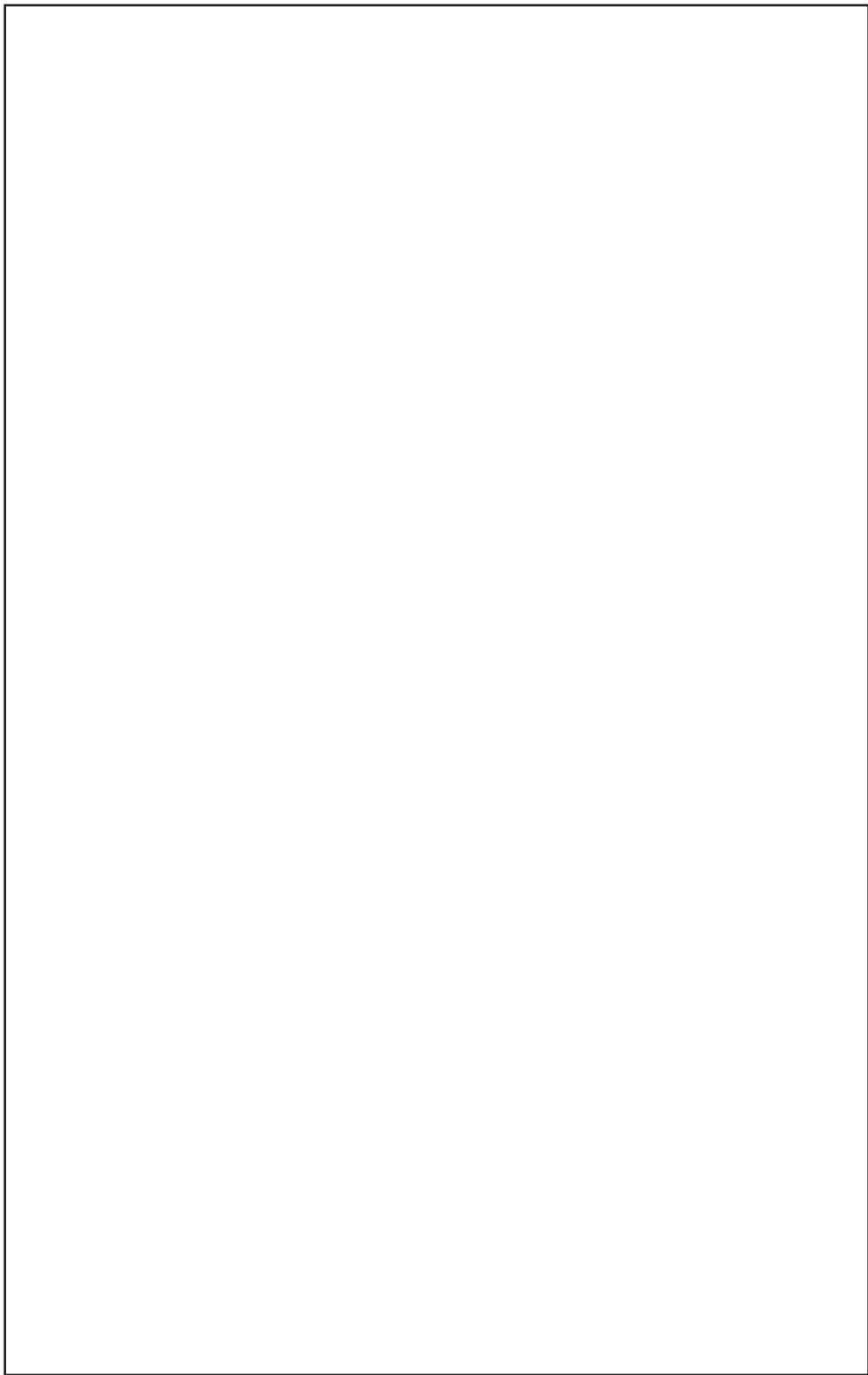
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Submissions may be works of fiction and/or essay, generally not to exceed 10,000 words. Fiction should not be in the American Realist style. Essay should not be straight memoir. Open to all disciplines, ideologies, etc. Work need only be interesting. Submissions should not (and will not) be labeled essay or fiction. Reading periods are February 1 to May 31 for the fall issue and September 1 to December 31 for the spring issue. We do not accept simultaneous submissions, but we guarantee a response within a few weeks of the end of the reading period. Send to EssaysandFictions (at) gmail. Brief "cover sheet" if you'd like.

Content

V.XI

<i>Strange Service Warning from the Night of Oct. 17</i> Joseph Michaels	6
<i>Language Glass</i> Keala Francis	38
<i>Maldita</i> Veronica Vela	48
<i>Sontag, Osiris</i> Adam Klein	64
<i>A Knotted Beach Chair</i> Charles Lowe	84
<i>Markson's Pier</i> David Ewald and Stuart Ross	96
<i>Truinas: April 21, 2001</i> Philippe Jaccottet translated by John Taylor	180
Contributors Notes	200
Patrons and Sponsors	202



*Everything is always annihilated
by literalness. And we cannot help
being born into literalness.
When we open our mouths,
we kill a reputation...*

Thomas Bernhard
(from Prince Saurau's monologue in *Gargoyles*)

Strange Service Warning
from the Night of Oct. 17
Joseph Michaels

I shrink from saying, as science writers often do, that this book is written for the layman, given that its antonym is priest; I dispense demonstrable truths, not revealed ones. Let me merely say instead that I write, although not exclusively, for those who do not make their living from science.

—C.F. Bohren

Wenn wir den plot natürlich jeder ständig beobachtbare parameter der Atmosphäre, wie zum Beispiel Temperatur, und gleichzeitig ignorieren das immer wiederkehrende Effekt der Rotation der Erde um die eigene Achse und die revolution um die Sonne, was wir beginnen zu sehen, ist ein graph der nichts mehr als unregelmäßige schwankungen (siehe Abbildung 69).

—Hermann Flohn, *Klima und Witterung*

WARNING

We interrupt this program. This is a state and regional county emergency. Please be advised. What follows is an urgent message brought to you via satellite from the National Weather Service in Miami, in association with the new State Advisory Committee and/or Community Outreach Cabinet. Under the select guidance of a special team of National Weather Service and NOAA meteorologists, a severe thunderstorm warning has been issued for the following counties for the night of October Seventeen: Lake County in Florida, western Orange County in Florida, Osceola and Polk Counties in Florida, et cetera, with a severe thunderstorm and tornado watch remaining in effect until approximately 11:45 PM Eastern Daylight Time. Doppler radar indicates that currently the storm is moving southeast of Alachua County at an estimated speed of roughly twenty-three miles-per-hour, with a possible tornado vortex signature (or, colloquially, TVS) developing later on as it nears the city. Additional strong storms are or have been spotted as being in-development along the sea-breeze collision, maturing/incrementally progressing in their way throughout this afternoon and continuing on well into the evening inside (geographically-speaking) the current (which is to say: as yet) pandected warning area. Other locations inside the warning area include but are not limited to Valwood, Apopka, Mount Dora, Eustis, Wekiwa Spring State Park, Mount Plymouth, Mount Coriander, Paisley, Oak Ridge, Clement, and Green Swamp Wilderness Preserve. For the county and/or region listed that is not (repeat: not) specifically designated as an inland county, moderate southeast to south winds are to be expected throughout the day, operating in particular conjunction with an oncoming though weakening high-pressure ridge moving in over the Atlantic with a general wind shift to the south and southwest as the day goes on. Southeast winds of five to twelve knots are to be immediately expected during the earlier moments of this shift, with the seas themselves (which is to say: the shores, the waves) starting at about two to three feet with a dominant period of about eight seconds and a slight but increased chop on the more intracoastal waters. A significant, more ultimate wave height has been predicted at around twelve meters (or, colloquially, about thirty-nine feet), as

measured through-to-crest using the average highest one-third of all current waves recorded. Due to the processing of such calculations, however, and the ongoing nature of the human error, please note: individual waves encountered in your time today may in fact present themselves as more than twice (or even three times) the predicted significant wave height. As a polite but urgent message from the National Weather Service in Miami, in association with new State Advisory Committee and/or Community Outreach Cabinet, you are urged strongly not to surf, to wander, to jog along the beach or make false castles in the sand, precarious upon the water's edge. Note: you have been warned. Note: please be advised.

Given the recent reflectivity readings taken across the area, all weather centers in the state have been put on high alert and the storm is now deemed capable of producing such inclement weather conditions as strong winds, large hail, cloud-to-ground lightning, ground-to-cloud lightning, headaches, sleet, snow, seasonal discomfort, cloud-to-cloud lightning, unexpected microbursts, altocumuli with virga, feelings of drowsiness on a soporific scale from medium to intense, adiabatic vicissitudes, anemometric uncertainty, dramatic declines in ground temperature, Andes lighting, pogonip, advection fog and sea smoke, tornadoes at little or no advance warning, and very heavy rainfall. For your protection, move indoors immediately to an interior room on the lowest floor of your home or business—preferably one with a rubber lining. In the case of a tornado, seek out shelter underground, remaining with all loved-ones in a safe, well-lit, and at least conditionally palatable living position for the duration of the storm. If at any time you are unsure of the storm's progress—lacking in particular an authorized and eminently purchasable National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather radio or some similar digital readout device to be used underground for a remote assessment of the storm via the clear and audible reception of polite (read: urgent) Specific Area Encoded Messages like this one—and you wish to go outside and check, refrain please as much as possible from giving in to such an inclination. If necessary, when settling on foul-weather plans, be prepared to remain stationary inside your shelter space for at least two days after entering (any part of a day being a whole day for this particular purpose). If you have not brought a watch with you or yet purchased an NOAA clock/weather radio of your own and

have already lost complete track of the time inside your new and relatively storm-safe abode, however many days your rations last should be (in the end) more than sufficient of an equivalency.

If in an office block or mobile home or any other sort of building without a basement or a designated shelter area, a narrow windowless hallway on the lowest possible floor (though risky) will for the moment be acceptable—especially if it has a rubber lining. Those suffering from claustrophobia and/or other generalized anxiety disorders are advised not to panic, but (rather) to close their eyes, to inhale deeply, to think of larger spaces almost impossible in size and rich in slow composed affect. At a time like this, or so the phrase has it, despite the obvious motivation to do so, consult neither your local physician nor the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (any edition being an edition of use with respect to claustrophobia, having been diagnosed in urban-dwelling European males as early as the nineteenth century). Though seemingly helpful both of these options may appear to be, you lack the proper time and/or leisure now to give these efforts worth, should they have had any worth to begin with—you yourself possessing almost an entire lifetime alone together with your illness, and over the course of which you have (doubtless) apperceived well enough already what it is which you endure. Listen, instead, to the rain outside. Picture it. Hear it. Wet. Hands. Search for its expansiveness, clustered somewhere paradoxically inside its widening sound. Lean back. Breathe. Please. Consider the meaning of the specific word “lenticular”—a stationary cloud wrapped up inside itself and appearing to its viewer like a kind of hurricane in miniature—what it connotes, the asseverative properties of its multiple ilks, in which direction it progresses, the fear it brings to average spellers, how it might apply to you. If claustrophobia is a learned condition, consider the storm a remodeled education. Breathe. Think. Take a minor solace in the idea that you are not alone within your apprehension, though you may in fact be well alone within your narrow hallway.

For those without a hallway, follow advance plans whenever possible, avoiding in particular school auditoriums, larger social halls, and all other types of shelter constructions with a wide and ample roof lacking in interior supports. The mini-tornado, also called a landspout—the most insubstantial (admeasurements-speaking)

of the three broad categories of tornadoes—holds a comprehensive wind force of up to one-hundred miles-per-hour, capable of destroying homes and other relatively fortified structures via an internal aerodynamic ballooning effect spurred on as the edifice meets wind, and is steeped inside a highly pressurized environment, the outside wind force practically squeezing the construction direct through its middle until the roof is lifted off essentially from within. The roof is then sucked up into the funnel along with ancillary debris. Note: you have been warned. Please. We. We interrupt this program.

Note: it is precisely from this action—the grounding of the funnel and its eventual consumption of dirt, detritus, unsuspecting anthropoidal materials—that the vortex gains its darker shade. Though tornadoes themselves figure across a reasonably wide range of the color spectrum, the most commonplace of these colors—and thereby the pigments on the wind you are most likely to come into contact with in your experiences today—are as follows: black, gray, white, forest green (a verdure so dark and lonely it might as well be contiguous with black, except maybe a little deeper), brown, blue, blur, transpicuous, and red. (For a more comprehensive listing and detailed schema analysis of all possible tourbillon colors, visit our website at the links provided.)

Accompanying this image, and a relevant augury for the tornado's nearby presence, is a highly distinctive noise: a loud, oftentimes bombinative din referred to by a pocketful of survived witnesses as quote/unquote "the roar of a thousand trains." The exact emotional trauma that is elicited from such a close and necessarily prolonged acquaintanceship with a tornado is, in the end, entirely subjective and may linger for survivors until many years after the fact; after which the victim, in uneasy sleep, may suddenly awake inside his/her home, fall down the morning stairs, greet the spouse and glowing family, only to find him-/herself (to a notion of much relief) entirely, implausibly cured. In the end, these things, too, can happen. They can, they do. Morning comes up and makes the weather fall away. The idea of it more, perhaps. The need for it, or the human fragile understanding of its malign complications. Turns it away. Shapes it. Please. Makes even the constant constants in George Winterling's heat index formula seem (in their own humid way) quite distant. But, then again, only for

some. For some they can. For some they do. Are. Be. For others, meanwhile, waking up odd hours each night, piling away the bedclothes on excess hobbled trips to the bathroom in the dark, you may do well to note that mornings (as much as they may seem to be) are never quite a definite. Something generous to notice, to feel mistaken by; acknowledging of the nothing there, like a deep-hearted flaw, or just to hobble past. We have been warned. To help manage your stress in situations such as these (which is to say: in situations after a damaging tornado strike), begin first to reestablish only the most basic of routines before moving on to the more markedly complex social and/or meteorological dynamics of living a daily life. Eat meals at regularized times in the special company of select friends; attend mass meetings with local bereavement, weather, and/or otherwise-oriented support groups, assisting daily in the incremental sharing and/or re-experiencing of your past; find a hobby in the form of a creative process; seek out new less-tasking occupations, relocating perhaps to an area of the country less notable for its inclemency; whine; whine; crusade righteous against young mothers and their sweeping away of poisonous cat litter; sleep only fitfully on an unmade bed half-emptied recently of a glowing red spouse; wake up early in the middle of the night (each night) and call up feelingly for a long-distance number previously (weirdly) unknown to you on the kitchen landline telephone—a number, you learn later, linking a smell to it and to the event like skin or warm salt pretzels sold out on the street, which has for six months now (no more, no less) been ruefully disconnected due to diplomatic border issues in the watery southeast. Take free classes at the local Y; follow an exercise program; do one thing for the rest of your life with supreme discipline. Get an embarrassing tattoo paid for at a discount by free-range insurance funds and planted direct into your flesh in a proportionally embarrassing location. Drink. Drink. Cover the mirrors in your house with silk white handkerchiefs, and when anyone asks just tell them they are drying; just tell them you are mourning; tell them for your father; say to them you are Hungarian, it being a kind of naturalized custom there; or just tell them, in a way, what is equally untrue. Write letters. Whine. Drink. Smoke. Name, in consummate sweet fondness, the body parts you have not yet lost. Look out the window (or gaze, colloquially, if you will) at each imminent sunset, watching with some minor-league

intent both the clichéd, complex, sub-existent traffic beating down below (the redundancy of which phrase never actually strikes you) and up above faint constellations, which move and duck in such a way that only the cautious and somnambulant could ever really know or understand to be as just one half of light reflecting itself upon the whole. A reflection, as they say, or as you will tell them, just recently covered. In the end, these things, too, can help. They move. They can. Wet. Close. Elbows. Be. You have been warned: we have been, all.

If your shelter is not reinforced, move immediately to a shelter space which is. Repeat: move immediately to a shelter space which is. While inside, maintain a five foot distance from all windows and apertures of any kind. Any blinds, roll-down drapes, black-out fabrics, knitted curtains, or swag curtain-tiers (with a careful decorative appliqué of maternal embroidery) must be kept shut for the entire duration of the event, even if the storm appears to have entered into a lull. Do not look out. Do not cry, do not fear. The wind sighs loudly, solids turn; a cloud in a twist or the curious mapped-out spiral in your homework not long since forgotten for a difficult math class, unwound cotton like a once-stuck zipper as the rain spills out. Breathe. Think. Please, wet. Blood. Have. In the end, weather, too, can be deceptive.

The best way to deal with severe weather is to avoid it. Lightning is inherent, so use proper judgment when preparing your shelter space and be aware at all times of your potential for flammability. If positioned out-of-doors at the time of the storm's arrival—and with no adequate shelter space having (as yet) made itself available—find your path to a relative clearing; away somewhere from taller, heavier trees (keeping generally about twice as far away from isolated trees as the trees are tall), crawling all the while with stomach and/or nose as close as possible along the ground and being sure as you do to stay at least twenty-eight-and-a-quarter feet apart from any other members in your group to avoid the probable flow of lightning between bodies. Keep your eyes on the western sky and try and recognize the early warning signs of harsh impending weather. Breathe. Think. Advised. To avoid becoming a lightning statistic, know always what the storm is doing. Should thunder and/or lightning be approaching, you should be able (with some proximate degree of accurateness) to determine the following symptoms of an

atmospheric change: acute rise in wind velocity, a sudden reversal of the wind's direction, deep rumbling sounds emanating someplace in the distance (i.e., the sound and/or collective loud discordant sounds of thunder, plural), a general aura both human and barometric of the style color gray, disturbances in nearby livestock and/or farmers' daughters, sustained ozone redolence, the darkening and building up of clouds as they enter the congestus phase with a billowing ice-laden shape not unlike large broccoli florets. Alone, cold—not quite alone, but still—recognize that these are symbols, and you will understand forever what they really mean. Stay where you are. Watch. Have. Know. You will know the rain as an extended congress with the lake, the lightning and the snow as just two ways of turning space electric. See these things, and you will call. Wind inside a vortex spirals counterclockwise; rain falls densely in Unionville, Maryland. Once situated (well and safe) inside the clearing proper, crouch and curl yourself into a seated fetal position in the nearest and/or driest gulley or ground depression, thus making yourself the smallest possible earthbound target with knees together, eyes shut tight, and crossed arms pressed firmly against the chest. Should you have any compunctions regarding this procedure, or should you notice together in the small moments of silence here as you report these rules aloud any fear whatsoever on the collected loud discordant faces of your group, pause charitably for a moment and note only with a proud and elegant baritone register that in situations such as these (statistically-speaking) fatalities are, in point of fact, exceedingly rare—one in six-hundred thousand, actually—and that in addition to the sheer physical rarity of the event there are (to be sure) but three primary non-lethal possibilities for experiencing pain from a lightning strike. First, abundant electrical output from the strike produces a force formidable enough where any non-conducting objects in the nearby vicinity (timber, rubber, most types of ceramics and/or homemade pottery, et cetera) are liable when hit to explode. Second, the flow from such an output also produces intense heat, which can frequently start fires (see below for FIRE). And third, the blastwave responsible for the production of the sonic undulation we call thunder is itself so mind-alteringly palpable and/or acoustically powerful as to rupture or at the very least partially damage the eardrums of most nearby persons, resulting most often in radical hearing loss,

drainage of fluids from the ear (sanguine or otherwise), and an increased likelihood of mastoiditis. Most lightning related fatalities, on the other hand, can be attributed more often than not directly to cardiac arrest. Should a member of your party happen to be struck, either simple CPR or the proficient use of an automatic external defibrillator will be your most effective means for the reviving of the victim. If more than one person among you has been struck, be sure to treat small children and all those who are unconscious first, but only (repeat: only) after it is safe for you to do so. In the end, it has to be this way. In the end. If the person has stopped breathing, begin rescue breathing. If the heart has stopped beating, begin emergency cardiopulmonary resuscitation. If there is no pulse and the victim is not breathing, retreat immediately to a safer place and allow yourself to mourn, remembering now well in advance of your next scheduled camp outing to pack the AED. Mark the time. Mark the place. The way light comes, picketed and lattice-worked, through the leaves of trees even when it isn't warm out. The smell. The blood. Wet, close. The give and the take. Count off the seconds until they turn to minutes and to hours and to years, gaining both a weight in time and this unleaded spark of vitriol as all things and humans do (living or dead) with age. Wet. Hands. Knees. Close. The dirt quietly risen; imbedded in the grooves of an old tree's bark, the dry skin of your joints. We interrupt this program. We interrupt. We. Please be advised. In the situation of some faint sign of life—if an AED is not available and no one else in your party has been trained ahead of time and/or authoritatively certified for the safe and legal administration of cardiopulmonary resuscitation—you may be forced, however unfortunate it may appear, to utilize to the best of your capacity alternative methods of treatment. Examples of these treatments can vary widely in their practice and result according to a multiplicity of sources, and verge often on the supernatural. In the end. Please. A field. For a more unequivocal experiment, however, transport the body with several other members in your group to a large, more readily dilatant clearing at least a mile away northwest from the first clearing in the woods; prop it up somehow (which is to say: the corpse), adorn with metal and other conductive materials, wait to see what happens. A field. Please. The average monophasic shock from an automatic external defibrillator is charged to around three-hundred-sixty joules. (A cloud. Have.) A lightning strike

several miles in-length contains and released anywhere between one-billion and ten-billion joules. (Please.) This should be more than enough. For those victims in your party who are visibly to seriously burnt and maintain already the natural (enough) appearance of being well deceased, stand back and wait calmly for the realization that nothing more on your part can be done (bodily) at this particular juncture. Mark the time. Mark the place. Note aloud and understand, conceptually-speaking, what you have already doubtless been well told: that this day or night or exceptionally tree-lighted, gorgeously unspecified autumnal morning, in point of fact, is not your fault: that there is (in time) a complete complex multitude of movements and points and stretched out moments in the depth of one's experience—moments, events, almost like mirrors gone a little bit dusty and obscure—and that they happen at all in the ways they do is merely a symptom and despite all feelings to the contrary has nothing to do with you. In a day, in the end, as the phrase has it, or just right motherfucking now—please—you are hardly even here. Looking back on the event—through an old photograph perhaps of some charred deserted campsite—you will understand that what you have experienced (which is to say: this feeling now of shame, and something close to indignation at having it rebuked) is a type of selfishness found only in emergencies, something to pass by and overtake just as the rest of it will become, no more real than the deadliness of seasons, the expected rain that never reaches pavement because it is too hot, and surrounded on all sides by a myopia through which you may consider the entire rest of your time's own experience to be both incredibly fortunate and tremendously cruel. Mark the time. Mark the thought. The place. The movement. The dirt and the rain. Breathe. Think. Say what you will. Note: please: you have been advised.

Note: fact: hailstones are larger in Potter, Nebraska.

Note: fact: the added-up seconds of all the world (in the clearing, in Florida, Cuba, Europe and out, in Kansas or Georgia or New York City, and the nowhere where it most wishes it would be, et cetera), this calculated time between an image and its sound, multiplied by point-two, will forever result in a desperate figure. A field. A cloud. Something needing on its surface and quite ultimately wet, like some blank-faced choice to stay outside, to be foolish or brave, made in an instant with a stupid halo formed; streetlight

like a portal, visible for the rain. Wind inside a vortex spirals counterclockwise. You have been warned.

Withdrawing for a moment then from the more hostile aspects of a lightning storm (as the phrase has it), it is perhaps equally beneficial that you make time now and enjoy (for yourself) the stunning visuals and immense pulchritude of nature's very own light show. Not only is it impressive, but it can be enjoyed (or at least, with a certain plaintive aspect to the eyes, looked at) again and again in the presence of all relatives and adjutants in the form of high-resolution lightning photographs. This having been said, however, it might still be noted that (speaking of hobbies) documenting of this particular variety is (almost certainly) not for everyone, and comes itself—even while it may deal so stridently with the more visible aspects of this world—terribly burdened by its own systems of nostalgic worth. A timid scarecrow altered ineffectually with a pork-pie hat stood beside a thunderhead, the steps in metal shadow leading up to a house, and the rusty-green color grass takes on driving County Route 153 only some few feet beyond the New York boundary coming from Vermont. In the end, this flatness, this scale and longing—these are the things that pictures do. Should you (thus) feel too necessarily old (or perhaps just too healthy and too necessary, in all) to find yourself so caught inside the avocations of such wistfulness, there is in addition a wide media and consumer outlet capable of providing substantial, surprisingly full funds for known and/or emerging weather photographers and their stark captured images of the rarer permutations lightning has been known to take. Specific examples of these permutations include but are not limited to bead lightning, staccato lightning, cloud-to-cloud lightning, and the scarcely photographed ball lightning, likened often by its voyeurs to nationalistic once-a-year fireworks and mistaken just as often for the verified/verifiable proof of extra-terrestrial-flown unidentified flying objects when seen on dark nights by the lonely and the hopeful and the heartbreakingly misinformed. These things, too, occasional pictures have been known to perform. To take a lightning photograph, mount your camera on a tripod—preferably plastic in its majority constitution and/or minorly equipped (at the very least) with rubber bases for its telescopic legs—pointed in the general direction of the storm with aperture set to about f4.5 and lens focused at infinity, or perhaps a trifle closer. Set and/or

adjust your shutter speed at about one-fifteenth or one-thirtieth of a second, snapping the shutter only once you see or (at the very least) sense that the electrical potential between two centers of charge (repeat: any two: ground and cloud, cloud and aerial array, et cetera) exceeds for the most part twenty-five thousand volts per every inch that separates the two points respectively, resulting by rule in a negatively charged initial stroke—also called a pilot leader—which advances groundward from the cloud base in a rapid sequence of discrete mobile return strokes that ascend from the turf or otherwise-oriented field position at roughly lightning speed (i.e., one-tenth to one-half c , provided c here represents the speed of light). When finished, retreat rapidly to a secure area free from natural danger (a task which is, though enduring, not entirely impossible, as it turns out), listening intently and with great wonder to the cannonade far off. To take a lightning photograph, one must be able to see something in nature not readily accessible to the average outdoor-going hiker; to see a kind of beauty, and yet at the same point to know that you are skeptical of just how beautiful it all actually appears. Mark the time, the place, the memory now captured on its print or the equilateral (or close enough) currently digitized/pixelated form thereof. Allow uncertain spacing between your toes and feet, and realize somewhere in faint cognizance the sheer ambiguity that is being and/or has been just recently observed—even, to an extent, manipulated—in such a process as this one. You have just caught a moment, and in doing so will not help but recognize how significantly fragile and even artificial the movement of things is; how they move at all, or so you might wonder staring at the perfect stillness of your latest work, remains (almost always) the property not to be known. That they move too fast, in truth, in fact, en pointe, is another such datum. As is the way with visible things, and as is the way with extant technology (so the phrase has it), though you will doubtless never be able to capture that precise charge or pilot leader which first triggered your artistic muscle outside in the storm, there is still a chance of photographing one of the many subsequent strokes and unbranched lines which follow usually within fractions of a second. This much, it is true, seems perfectly sound.

Having finally completed (now) your first photographic session—the first, as is said, of a quite hopeful many—develop the

pictures (should you have used raw film for the project) either at home using your own personal darkroom with chemicals and plates and sundry bought optical apparatuses, or more simply the sterile wiped-down back-services counter appearing at your local pharmacy and charging the sum total of: not much, for crispy negatives and double prints. If making use of your own darkroom, be sure not to rush. Take your time. Ready your place. Wet. Feel. Prepare your tank and stop-baths with an almost prodigal care; develop the film using only highest quality photographic fluid not previously watered down for adverse (technologically-speaking) methods of frugality; and remember always to assemble your necessary materials ahead of time so as not to flounder in the dark. Wash and dab—not daub—lightly (read: lightly) with homemade wetting agent and hang your negatives to dry. Return to the darkroom in due time, closely examining the work for wet spots and/or significant impurities within the frame, appearing now in its primitive form quite grim with subtle light and an iciness streaked through the shadows' base. This is the way a negative looks; this is the way, as it turns out, it feels. Pale. Dark. Blood, and a touch of what is evil. Hands. Eyes. Wet. When at last your first prints have been made, store the photographs at home in a sizable old book placed gravely on a top shelf somewhere and capable of being dusted on occasion. Label the book. Mark it. Please. Be. What you do with the pictures (or, for that matter, just the book) after this is entirely your decision. Sell them for a business check to prominent magazines of fulminology, disregard them completely as a wounded father might his daughter, show them to co-workers when they ask about your weekend habits, to old friends at regularly scheduled dinner parties, or the local potentially meteorological-in-nature support groups you begin (at first hesitant and well-caffeinated) to attend each Thursday night. Frame them in cheap frames. Protect them from greased hands. Wet. Dark. Spread. Live with them, as you must. As you yourself have chosen to. To drink the coffee, too hot in its cup, and say the names of those you've hurt. Look at them faintly in the bluer hours (which is to say: the photographs, the palimpsests), almost worsening your grief while you sit at home alone and staring through a face, hollow at the picture frame, apoplectic in annoyance, spreading mucus like a slime across its valent gloss as you weep incrementally softer in feigned transportation. Breathe. Hands. Eyes. Nose. Wet. In the

end, at a time like this, to do anything otherwise would be naturally foolish—optimistic, transcendental, attritional, and double-dealing—although weather, it soon comes to me, is an enterprise of fools, both in typical contingency and by short-term conversion.

Breathe. Think. Look at how the hailstones fall—please be advised.

Note: fact: a middle is coming, an ending to follow, the whole of the thick clouded mess beginning to be heard. We ask for things. We offer. We travel by entry-points, hidden in its bedrock like the city in itself, and promulgate the way. A light. The dark. A bloodied nose.

Early July, 1961—a Wednesday, and later on to be recounted in some odd historic miscommunication of an already corrupt context as the exact same day a half-bushel full of peaches falls unexpectedly from the sky onto the heads of five litigious and inebriated masons from Shreveport, Louisiana—the exact same time perhaps, or give a little for delay and the requisite re-centering of time zones, a single psychologically stranded bolt of lightning in the late evening nearly one thousand miles off from New Orleans' suburbs makes fair contact with an abandoned tobacco barn in the middle of a field somewhere in North Carolina, setting fire to the field (see below for FIRE) and killing the eight souls trapped inside; while outside, in the near-dark, a handful or a pocket (at the least) of improbable yet present witnesses stand devastated; they stand, they look, they offer in the little ways they have; they report a sulfur smell to the authorities and something (they say, they give) like the ripened pork-rind grease of an early morning fry-pan; go home; eat; stir; shit contemplatively in their respective homes; attend together two weeks later a reckless string of small mall-staged self-help seminars and fringe group tattoo parlor crawls for the next few desperate years of life, only later emerging up from something like a sleep to fall down brightly the morning's stairs and tell their loved ones gathered all around the table for what would normally appear to be (but not since the accident, the night, the storm if a single bolt could be so called) an impromptu breakfast party filled with smiles and a little bit of peeking sun, the whole town plus the sexton spilled out inside the kitchen nook, tell them all for no particular reason except that it feels right and maybe even good that what (in point of fact) they are now actually afraid of: terribly, gut-looseningly afraid—

they finally just realize even in themselves—is not lightning exactly or darkness per se, but the smell: the smell of the field and the barn after the strike, the grease and the smoke and fat, delivered to them express, belched screamingly each morning on the weekends from some late aired awful scent of bacon spitting in a pan. Crisp. Dark. Blood and oil, water and salt. The site of the fire is roped off for weeks. They come and stare. They ogle. They sniff. The dirt gets in the wood, onto their hands, in the prepped tobacco leaves they still use to smoke. Yellow and black tape stretched across the barn's burnt outer frame under the local guidance of select law enforcement teams. A rawer sky, a pretty nice day, and thus only after the storm is made officially to pass, and everything else nearby is made or (at least) halfway headed in the right direction (as the phrase has it), and everything is said for the first and the last time, is it at last told en masse to the surrounding neighborhood such as it was with charred gaps in population and sexton and all that the eight poor victims of the burn were, (in point of fact) at their time of untimely deaths, perched upright on metal bucket seats.

Black. Wet. Eyes and nothing more in the sense of mattering and memory.

Temperatures are hell, hailstones fall densely.

We breathe. We offer. Close. Close.

The weather, too, exhales.

Note: fact: thunderstorm rain may produce flash floods. Stay out of dry creek beds and other unsafe zones. If you live along a river, consider relocation. (Wet. Please be advised.) Contrary to ostensible opinion, it is not too late to do so. To run. To flee. To jump. (Away. Close.) Discuss the matter first with all affected members of the family and/or personal financial confidants, using as an incentive the absolute tremendous boon you stand now to acquire in the selling off of valuable waterfront property desirable to consumers even in the most devastating of housing market recessions. (Have. Offer. Wet.) If a tornado is approaching, in no way should you attempt to outrun the phenomenon—this will not help. In the case of flooding, you may be forced to swim; in the event of drowning, you may have to hurt. Keep alert for any changes in the surrounding areas, and try to breathe regularly. (Think.) Updates are to be expected.

Should you feel so obliged (in any way) to assist us with the information effort, report all weather changes to your nearest

law enforcement agency, which will then promptly relay that information either to the National Weather Service directly or to the new State Advisory Committee and/or Community Outreach Cabinet, in strict compliance with the recent and/or neoterically implemented NWS/SAC/COC news-weather regulations. Note: fact: this is not a drill. The organization contacted will thereafter inform the next and so on and so forth until the situation has been formally announced. Due to recent alterations in the system, however, if you are in any way unhappy with or feel misrepresented by these proceedings and you wish to file a healthy/productive/non-threatening complaint, the SAC/COC complaints offices are available now twenty-four hours a day (save for a brief respite on Sundays in between the hours of eight and ten, ante meridiem) and can be reached whenever necessary (save for those hours recently above mentioned) by dialing the extension number 0225 and clarifying via a momentary for-your-convenience conversation with the automated telephone operator as to which specific organization and/or subcommittee you would (in fact) most like to deal with in the processing of your particular aggrievances (which is to say, finally: the State Advisory Committee or the Community Outreach Cabinet). Note: fact: repeat: this is not a drill. If, on the other hand, you would like to file your complaint with the National Weather Service or the National Weather Service-affiliated National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (and not, specifically, with the State Advisory Committee and/or Community Outreach Cabinet), this is also entirely acceptable and can be achieved with relative for-your-convenience alacrity by dialing the extension numbers 0223 and 0224, respectively. These numbers, too, will give you diction for survival. In the end. In the dark. At the time of storm's arrival. Please note, however: it is the National Weather Service's distinct wish that you might abstain from doing so, at least on a landline telephone, while a severe thunderstorm watch is still in effect, thus acting on your part in responsible correspondence with the annually-published NOAA Weather Safety and Awareness News. In the end. In the dark. In the dark. To assist with this and the quelling of all random temptation of the like with a tendency to seep in, all of the organizations and/or agencies mentioned above will (during a severe thunderstorm only) temporarily disconnect their telephone lines, acting once more in legally mandated correspondence with

organizational guidelines clearly listed in later background sections of the annually-published NOAA Weather Safety and Awareness News. These things, too, are meant to help. To obtain your free citizens' rights copy of this NOAAWSAN, visit your local pharmacy (the same one, presumably, just used for the possible though not altogether necessary technician-assisted development of your now-bound nature photographs) and look for the stacks beside the checkout line, directly adjacent to the elderly vested employee with a name like Betty or Mae-Sue (or Marjorine or Ellie or whisperable in quaint times) and rheumatoid arthritis and second-stage mastoiditis and absent limbs she has not named and mortgage loans and two sons buried in a Broxton cemetery on the very special section of the lawn where neatly maintained crabgrass angles itself gently in an obtuse sort of way and turns in smoothly against the hedgerows by the ferric exit gate—who feels more than you because of not somehow her own divinity but simply she has felt so much—who laser-scans the barcodes on your selective purchases, and scans those (as well) of the persons after you. In the end, in the dark, she is still there.

Note: fact: this is not a drill.

Please. Be. You have been warned.

For a third option, if this is all too complicated and you wish to stay as far away from the information effort as is humanly feasible, simply wait (wherever you may be) in a calm and collected manner for the storm to pass. Be. Have. This will all be over soon enough. Take a deep breath in, and think. Please. Have. In the end, just look at how the seasons change. A field. A cloud. The end.

If you're just now joining us this evening—just now tuning in—at approximately 6:42 PM Eastern Daylight Time, a select team of National Weather Service and NOAA meteorologists detected a severe thunderstorm capable of producing quarter-sized hail and damaging winds in excess of sixty miles-per-hour. The storm was located near San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park just south of Alachua County and moving at an estimated contemporaneous speed of about twenty-three miles-per-hour. Mother, father. Talk. In more recent developments, according to a new wind pattern just analyzed—taking into account (mainly) the systematic rotation of the currents and concomitant anemometric flow—it has been deemed now highly unlikely that this storm (intimidating as it

sounds) will stretch beyond state lines. Rather, for those interested in their geography, it should only hover, suggestively, somewhere amid the coasts—bounded almost by them, coloring in this state alone and changing the very relevance of anything that lies without: a message reproduced, yet in its reproduction quite limited of scope: earthy now and changed as an excuse. Talk. Cloud. In Georgia, then, there is no squall; in New York, then, no Wilhelm Dove. In Florida, however, in light of past months' drought conditions, and in direct conjunction with the quickened wind, even firestorms remain a threat, rolling as they do across the flatter lands and vaguer zones which separate our counties (if they ever needed separating to begin with). That there will also, likely, in the course of tonight's climate event, be a large amount of precipitation means nothing to the detriment of these fires. After all, how could it really? How could it, when you think?

If ever in direct contact with the flames, withhold yourself as long as possible from having distressed thoughts. Appreciate, instead, the rosewood color spectrum and complex thermogenic satisfaction which is exuded from the holocaust. Hot, bright, a feeling in a would-be dearth of same. Spilled out. Up. A lick and then it's gone. Equivalent with common sense—disregarding excess adipose and/or density/frequency of methane gas reserves—the human form will not burn swiftly, a total anatomical cremation requiring anywhere between one and two hours of broiling at tremendously high temperature, beginning at mid-section and stretching out from there: drip: hot: wet. And don't forget the smell. (For a more comprehensive listing of flammable objects found typically inside the home, visit our website at the links provided.) For continued health and safety of all loved-ones in the situation of a blaze, reduce all furtherance of indoor air pollution: discard any food that has been recently exposed to heat, smoke, or soot—placing overt anguish in the making of fruit salads and preparation of your child's formula (should you have, or wish, or have anyway, a child to begin with)—and should smoke levels rise to an unsafe extent, and should your vision cloud by residue, should one foot stumble on the area runner never quite made straight despite a generous allowance paid, should a nose break, should there in fact be blood, should a member of your family misplace his bronchodilator and should that afflicted party fall both on hands and knees to search

quite ashly beneath armoires, and in the aggregate confusion caused with such a spectacle around this sick boy's wheezing gasp should you yourself begin to cough, to note faint flutters in your chest, and should there be at such a moment no alternative asylum, refrain please as much as possible from lighting scented candles. Using wires, flame-retardant rope, time off, and excessive mounds of dirt, create a thirty to one-hundred-seventeen-foot combustion-safe zone surrounding your house. A circle like the best and most mathematical of circles: thoroughly imperfect, ultimately unsustainable. Offered. Wished. Gained. And as you work so dutifully upon this misshaped project you've begun, take time (on occasion) to just reflect a bit, to look up briefly to the house and the family you've left immediately beyond your broken ground, standing both somehow obnoxious and terrifically affecting (almost elegant) in the center of your yard. Your yard. Your yard. Wet. Wipe the sweat and dirt away, the ash, the soot, the heat, the smoke grown rigid in your lips' cracks, and even though you fail to smile, note at least that there is such a thing (wonderful/improbable as it may seem) as a kind look in instances of intense fear. Note: fact: this is no drill. No message. Note: fact: beautiful truth: now, most certainly, is not a time to panic. There is still work to do. Other measures to be taken, facial structures to be remarked upon and seen (or at the very least noticed) for the first time. Mark the feeling. Mark your place. Right here. Ground: wet: your yard. The grass quite nearly burned, and the earth now grown richer in destruction. These things, too, disasters can manage. Warm: soft: here. A field. Meanwhile, other measures to be taken in the reduction of your family's potential exposure to flames and radiant heat include but are not limited to a highly routinized schedule for the mowing of all grass, removal of propane tanks from within the nearby area, and the regulated disposal of all stove, fireplace, and grill ashes via placement of said residue for no less than two consecutive days in a metal bucket filled with water, after which the ashes (now cold) must be transported an additional fifty feet outside your thirty to one-hundred-seventeen-foot safety zone and buried quickly in a pure colloidal soil. These things, too, one must learn to manage. When marking off your safety zone, set aside all household items capable of use as fire tools: axes, rakes, oriental silk hand fans, assorted saws, and several shovels can each be used to fight off smaller fires in the home and/or on the grounds (your

ground) before emergency responders must be called. Vacuuming, though tempting, is extremely ill-advised. As is micturition, or so it would seem, for the means of personal extinguishing. Additional storms are to be expected. Landspouts are to be expected. Fires and rain and loss and violence and heartbreak and the inevitable stoic task soon undertaken of having to rebuild are all things to be expected. Temperatures are hell in Saskatchewan, Canada. The presence of a thunderstorm is the first stage in the development of a severe tornado. Please be advised.

In 1917, a single whirlwind over the course of one seven-hour period razed two-hundred-ninety-three miles of privately owned farms bridging the borderlands between Illinois and Indiana. Habitants stand devastated, partially (almost entirely) alone. They lean sunward in the roughhoused fields, set out to the untrue wish of having to recover (even only then perhaps to describe: to wives, to children, to husbands, and insurance agents) in some vague and impossible way what is now indefatigably lost. They inhale. They wonder. Some even bleed. In a way, standing there, they know something that is more than human. A cloud. A field. At times a storm is felt. From other points it is merely viewable. A boy substituting his own breath for time spent on doodling at homework. A plain but gorgeous woman—gorgeous, in point of fact, inside her pain—who stands before a room and teaches violently. The spiraling wheels of a delivery truck lost and racing somewhere in downtown Manhattan, wheels that rush right past you on the sidewalk and substantiate a cross-breeze that makes you feel like nothing so much but to fall like trees or leaves or paper plates into unknown uncouth arms, sucked in somehow by someone else's air. A watch, a place. Wet sound. Please. The noise of movement, a feeling of some shift—drooped eyes tied up in a blindfold, all ultimately present, right here. A banquet ballroom filled with men in Stock Exchange colors—some saluting, some hands over breasts, others more simply confused—as they sing aloud without musical accompaniment the national anthem, a difficult song, in a collective loud discordant voice that sounds like wood and oil. Breaths taken, brothers lost. Just that close. Wind inside a vortex spirals counterclockwise. Habitants stand devastated. Note: fact: please be advised.

We interrupt this program. We interrupt. We interrupt.
We.

Rain falls densely in Unionville, Maryland.

You.

For those with shelter, though evacuation is unlikely, keep a small tote-bag at the ready should the worst occur. Blankets, blank checks, flashlights, penlights, flares, fusees, ponchos, pocket-knives, inflatable air mattresses, foldable chairs, wax-tipped extra-long incendiaries (see above for FIRE), respirator masks, rest-territory maps, items of personal hygiene, items of personal identification, small games, cards, comfortable clothing, prescription medications, incomplete tax returns, important family documents, portable valuables, and small nutrient-rich snack bars are all items you are recommended to include. (For a more comprehensive listing of suggested emergency supplies, visit our website at the links provided.) Use proper judgment when preparing your shelter space and be aware at all times of your potential for fallibility. In the end, weather, too, can be deceptive. In the end. In the end. Here it comes—everybody staring. An entry-point in the thick of things, a window not yet shut. A field, a cloud, what is a vacuum tooling against advice its little electric motor at the center of a twist. Lock all doors, utilities may falter. Confer nightly with your neighbors with regards to a more extensive and holistic community safety plan, working together on a set of mutually inter-reliant and/or accommodating off-hours to create a thorough catalogue of useful skills and/or any and all other statistically important attributes available within the neighborhood—examples of which include but are not limited to any medical or technical experience, individual citations of agility, individual citations of a lack of agility, whether anyone has pets, and (in case of an emergency) which of those pets are loved. Begin stocking up on water and other hydrates, avoiding in particular caffeine or alcohol. Drunkenness will not assist you in this situation, nor will a hyperactive mind. Take the time, instead now, to calm your nervous system. At the current moment, should you have any doubts and/or compunctions pertaining to your immediate or significant or (as the phrase has it) ultimately evolving constitution, try counting to ten in a neat and level voice starting all the way from the beginning with zero and working your way up to ten. And even though technically you are counting up, attempt (rather) to conceive of the numbers as being (for whatever reason) in mid-fall—precipitated somehow, like an exercise in gravity, its

wares, its verified/verifiable containment of the materials surrounding you. A field. A cloud. Breathe, think, prodigiously perspire, and look deeply at the faces of your group. Close. Close. Offering. Some even bleed. Gravity, after all, in the strictest sense of its terms, is not a universal principle. As you consider these things, thinking and breathing and whatever all else, try at least for the moment to keep your mind off thirst. An inability to cry is one of the foremost signs of critical dehydration, followed usually by very sharp muscle cramps and palpitations of the heart. To begin the rehydration process, take brief sips of either bottled water or any number of electrolyte-heavy sports drinks available at local stores and/or pharmacies near you. Should this strategy begin to fail, you may find it necessary either to spray and/or lightly mist the outer layers of your afflicted party's skin to help facilitate the moisture's evaporation into dermal tissue using a small spray bottle filled to (at the very least) the halfway point with either lukewarm bottled water or any number of electrolyte-heavy sports drinks available at local stores and/or pharmacies near you. If you are at all uncomfortable with the performing of these operations on your own time, storm relief centers sponsored by the American Red Cross (in conjunction, in particular, with the more local and/or above mentioned Community Outreach Cabinet) will be set up across the city of Miami and its outer-lying neighborhoods, offering assistance to all those in need. In the end. Need. Have. Please be. Regular public shelters available under emergency conditions will accept anyone who is self-sufficient and/or needs professional assistance in performing the activities of a daily life (should there be any to begin with). Individuals not meeting the above criteria (dialysis, oxygen dependent, nebulizer, and hospice patients specifically included) will be transported gratis either to the Special Needs Shelter or to an appropriate health care facility. Preemptive registration, though not required, comes quite recommended by its staff to be allowed entrance into these public shelters. Please note: fact: seating is limited. (After all, how could it actually be otherwise?) If you happen to own storm shutters or any other forms of household fortification, now is the ideal time to put them up. If you have no storm shutters, and are in no way amenable to the option of go buying them, feel free to make your own using whatever materials happen to be available from a harmlessly salvageable point of view: plastics,

metals, fiberglass, pieces of wood, et cetera. Desks, chairs, longcase clocks, and infant cribs are known to yield the most. That this is potentially an act of the extreme—that you will, at some future date (no doubt), grow to regret these indiscretions enacted here this day upon your furniture—is exactly the point of this whole operation, your very extremity of force and lack of associative control within the situation (should you be willing to comply) serving you now as a kind of quiet intrepidity: shielding you and more from events just like this storm: it, too, being a force of boundless culmination. Hailstones are larger in Potter, Nebraska. Rain falls densely in Unionville, Maryland. Take a large breath—the kind that almost hurts—and know that you are here. Close. Wet. Hands. Thighs. A cloud, a field. Mother and Father, the faces both melted as the words occlude. A boy but middle-aged and sitting at home like a metaphor not yet thought full. He sips coffee. The doorbell rings. He gets up. Forty-four thousand storms occur each day. Hailstones are larger in Potter, Nebraska. A bachelor living on Long Island with his aging sickly parents one late morning in the month of September, 1938: on something like a whim, and feeling (admittedly) a slight quotient undesirable, he purchases by way of mail-order rebate a high-fashion glass barometer from the catalogue brought out at Abercrombie & Fitch. Symbols. Letters. Warm to the touch, its thin rough pages having steamed in the mailbox all day long. Upon delivery, the package itself is soon unwrapped—coffee-colored paper torn away quite fast, the needle of the device found stuck at HURRICANE, with the brand new owner feeling miffed. Letters. Symbols. Rain falls densely in Unionville, Maryland. The bachelor—free time now significantly and/or ultimately on his hands (being that he is, after all, a bachelor)—takes it upon himself to jot down an irate letter to the employed staff at A&F, filling it with vile words and the newsprint photographs sketched out by someone else's penciled hand, cut out direct from the magazine itself for an object (startling) comparison to his own box camera snaps of the broken item bought/described; the whole thing destined (in the end) for someone not totally responsible, a scintillant well-underpaid professional member of that aforementioned employed staff, and feeling slightly guilty now and so much more than just a little undesirable he does the awful thing and licks the sealing wax on his own paper envelope, the abject bitterness of which quite startles

this grown boy's tongue. In the end, weather, too, exhales. It offers. It binds. In the end. Temperatures are hell in Saskatchewan, Canada. The doorbell rings. You get up. Returning from the post-office, nodding unctuously to the half-crippled arm-in-sling paper-boy on whose oblivious/aggrieved route the bachelor with his family so happens to live, and feeling at the moment in the barely more than friendly nod (now more so than ever, really) outright harrowed on an intimate or at least personal/inimical scale with regards to his own choice to write such a horrid letter in the first place, he looks down now somewhat woefully at the hard pre-cast concrete walk so sparkling and shiny now, just months or years after installation and its first steps footed, a country in motion now after much time left standing, with an upward sloping GDP and everything, and the paper-boy in turn feeling something like this newness or excitement of the tiles beneath your feet just recently repointed nods back even to your nod back, glad to see a person, glad to be a person, glad to be outside half-crippled with his arm in a fucking sling, so sad in its sight, so outright pathetic the bachelor thinks later (which is to say: bathetic), but he remembers it all, every step, how he even (this kid) just so slightly tries to wave, the goddamned good-hearted kid that he is, stretching, groping, spilling his papers all over the new-day/new-deal street, but quite naturally cannot, a sigh, a bloody sneeze, seeing as he does it all with the wrong hand, with its useless arm attached and scarred, the doorbell ringing in the distance and our man moving away—the bachelor on his own, feeling less and less desirable by the minute here, returning home: he makes a well-memorized near-instinct left turn on the next block of his small neighborhood street and finds above all else his house is gone: torn down in total, his parents in heaps, taken away by some foreign wind, and the brand-new barometer presumably along with it. The bachelor stands devastated. The bachelor lives alone. He hears a sound. He gets up. He jumps. Away. Please. Temperatures are hell in Saskatchewan, Canada, and hailstones are larger in Potter, Nebraska, and rain falls densely in Unionville, Maryland, and three thousand electrical storms are happening right now. Inhale at your own leisure; exhale when of necessity. Fetch the mail. Fetch the shutters. Eyes. Be. The night goes inside and storms roll on. It stays. It repeats. The names of things, the people left. The distinct ridges of the clouds, their shapes, their heft, the mystery words once meant

to describe same. In the end, the weather, too, can be deceptive. In the end, please be advised.

I myself have seen mad ravers stuck outside in lengthy storms: a series of choices nearby impossible to make yet in this motion just the same: a fascination with the way they take up room. How a single storm might make itself around one single man—a kind of colored wrapping for what could be in some select circles (in all honesty and truth and even slight discomfort with the very phrase) considered that man's soul—a man who has no other choice than but to grow quite hollow in his stance, like negative space inside a condensation funnel, the storm, in turn, thus filling him. These stories, for the most part, are all false. The differences are transient; new records are being broken every year, the past is always changing. It is happening right now. Sometimes, even, it is us: magnifying our discomforts, shuffling its laminated pieces.

Please. We. Wet, hands, eyes. We.

We interrupt. We interrupt. We interrupt this program—please be advised.

For those with family close by, in the now near-ended midst (read: mist) of a storm like this, during sparse moments and the great awkwardness of a protracted fear, it is not altogether inconceivable that boredom should become your worst affliction. To quell ennui—which, should the situation worsen, could prove to be quite fatal—be sure to prepare well in advance of the necessary time together a general relaxation and/or board-game themed corner for your shelter space. Surface-wise, a series of bunched rubber mats may seem preferable. If you lack board-games or the will to play, print out the lyrics to several of your favorite songs and make wise use (finally) of the family's bookshelves. Breathe. Think. Eyes. The inward-falling materials of a room, yet something more within it, only recently set apart. A blindfold. A bloody nose. The leaves, the seasons. A cloud. Gathered in one corner, huddled in a mass, look at your family, their names in memory a set of words and symbols dutifully carved; see these things, and the room will call. Please. Despite whatever positive urge you might feel inside your situation (which is to say: in your room) towards a certain element of literary topicality, classic storm literature—such books as *Paul Clifford* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton or Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—may, for some individuals, be found too depressing

and/or textually (read: texturally) dry, and can contribute easily to a collective lack of ill-weather morale. If you believe this might apply to your own family, consider (rather) joining your voices for a song, for something even like a dance, or the barely perceptible movement of a voice along its slide, like the much more jovial (perhaps) and well-regarded tempest-ballad “Jumping Sight”—attributed now to an anonymous Jewish American author living contemporaneously on Ocean Parkway in west central Brooklyn, though first sung in early 1963 as the eleventh and final seven-shape note-influenced track for the fourth studio album of the late (immense) jazz vocalist “Little” Jimmy Scott, titled *Falling in Love is Wonderful*—

Wet and wild,
Some great jumpin’ sight—
Out in the parlor, one pure second’s glance;
Just what can I be seein’ here
On this fine autumn’s night?
In the great room,
Left, then right—
Oh brother, oh sister,
What a fine low sight.
I look high and I look low,
Oh wet, and oh wild,
Some great beautiful delight.

For three additional verses and one optional refrain, the song goes on: breathy, moist, familiar in a way a child is, endlessly moving: climaxing eventually in a somber trumpet solo to be played out in a traditional hexatonic blues scale and capable of homemade substitution with a hum or scat singing session. Please. Now: be. Breathe, exhale: up from the gut, and out over the head through a parched mouth: a system of community: of anatomy: of this sharp thing, in its way, known more than understanding. Those uncomfortable with their own voice in lyric, however, may instead choose prayer as an adequate avenue for hope. The designated appropriateness of such an activity—of, in point of fact, all activities—and thus the family’s decision to include it in your rainy day itinerary, rests jointly on the collective loud discordant dispositions of all those involved; and however inappropriate they

seem at first to be, beneath their very inappropriateness is hidden (which is to say: occluded, almost clouded) one necessary fact, as integral and somber (perhaps) as that same blues trumpet solo glanced at only above: beyond all argument and strict mark of content alone, these activities and others will keep you from the storm. A cloud, field, a method of knowing what it knows it to be. A link. An entry-point, all for the best unregistered by crowds. The end. A cloud. For those avid humanist members of the family (then), consider reciting the so-called SENSE, or the Secular Expression of a Non-Secular Expectation, anonymous and popular in its aporetic origins, and reading as follows:

Undecided, much derided,
Feel like just a kid.
We've confided, so it's your turn.
Save us what we've bid.
Each an evening, hard knees kneading,
Feel like just a kid.
Much confusion, good chance illusion,
But please now just save us what we've bid.
Non-electly, circumspectly,
Feel like just a kid.
Can we see it now, concrete solid,
Can't you ever save us what it is we've bid?

In the end—in a choice of song, prayer, boredom, and calculated disorientation—there is little difference between the four, this entire question of belief fading eventually like a pair of old wet negatives into the slow and markedly easier matter of select company. The little houses glittering on the shore, the family as unit; the dream of constructs being real but with a scent or sight like fantasy. What is visible, what is hermetical, what is dematerialized, awkward, affected, incandescent, and/or blisteringly asinine from an alternative perspective—these things are, after all, the very axioms of one's belief. And, for that matter, non-belief as well. The very precepts. The very precepts. A sigh. Together, forming their group, they are its charm, its music, its starry-eyed disciples, and storied day-histories. Its notion (its fact, its sublime fatal conviction) to do more at any one point (in fact) than simply panic. One way or the

other, you may consider it lucky that you lack the proof.

As you prepare your shelter space, moving agitatedly between the rooms, stop for a moment to reconsider your belongings—your family plan—and think about anything you may have missed. Mark the time. Note the place. Right here. Ground—so close. Look at the pictures on the wall, and the ones kept hidden in their spines. Fetch the mail. The shutters. Close. Wet. Reel in the lengthy green garden hose that slides like a snake in an outdoor pool and dribbles water incrementally the more its rubber is compressed. Put up all storm shutters. All curtain-tiers. Close them. Tight. Hands. Wet. Think, breathe. And ask yourself these questions. Do you know where your children are? Did you turn off the water pump? Do you care where your spouse is? How many adult beverages have you consumed, just solely on this day? This week? This month? What kind? What, in point of fact, actually, is an adult beverage? Is it taller? Drier? Less satisfying to the tongue? Served in a glass that might just break, or something else entirely, more linked than age to the wrinkles in your eyes? Who are you? What is your name? Did you save up money ever in your life, comb through data columns and pure number systems, purchase with a prejudice at regular intervals (birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, et cetera) for your progeny a sacred cache of government war bonds? How much are they worth? How much are you? What do you see exactly when you look up at those old pale picture frames, practically blank from decades of mercurial exposure to the hallway's light? Do they help you to remember something? Anything? What about to know something, to feel it, to hear it in the registers of one's dark physical absence from a place so much different than mere remembrance? Anything? Something? Who are you? How do you breathe? How do you think? How many thoughts are had in a single moment of your time—true thoughts, pale and new and wonderful? Can you hear the words, or only see them? Do they melt? Do you? Do you ask yourself a question, fearing not the answer but the fact that you might be its target? Packed up inside the tote-bag next to your door—your sharp loud discordant belongings—just how many of these assorted items can be called truly new? Bought last week? Purchased this day? Which ones? Why? Do we live, as the phrase has it, only in the past, or is it modified but briefly by the dull future? Are we? Are you? What are the three broad categories of tornadoes, and are they all so obviously

named? What is your name, for that matter? Can you say it? Can you speak up? Can you lean in or kiss? Can you repeat that name, as they say, introduce yourself, using only the accent and/or regional dialect of its origination? If not, then why? Why bother? Why breathe? Why do you stand there, staring so much? Why do you not speak up? Is it the source of the sound somewhere in the wind, or are you actually just moving closer? What are, in fact, your most necessary expenses—not counting yourself? What’s that, you say? What’s that? Have you ever hoarded spring water in large tight plastic drums for seven whole years in a dark concrete basement before ever even having the chance to properly use it? Sulfur or mineral? Stagnant or drinkable? Do you have a means for transportation? And what of evacuation? What of pets? What of food? What of dinner, of dessert? How about an appetizer or a meal or (at the very least) some faint smooth ripened fruit aperitif? How, in point of fact, does one pronounce the word “aperitif”? Did you turn off the car, lock its two doors? Did you flip on the radio and see an image in a voice? Are you safely inside, or somewhere quite else? Did you turn off the water? Did you turn off your speech? Are you being green enough? How about your spouse? Who built this place: this home: swarthy workers in off-white t-shirts and no hardhats or wallets in sight—what were their names? Where were they from? Did you ask? Did they tell? Could you even understand? Is precipitation really not a detriment to the creation of a firestorm? How could it not be? For what remotely adequate reason would a right-minded, politically-correct person mist sports drink (electrolyte-heavy or otherwise) on the outer organ of another human being? Much less one who is suffering from critical dehydration? Is this real? Is it a joke? How could it not be? Do people only say these things, or do they say them, or do they say them? Are all human beings, in point of fact, persons? Are your children? Your siblings? Your parents? Are you? And what about that spouse? What of the house? What of the ceiling fan and its war against your concentration? The walls? The closet? Its dark? What of the illness known as claustrophobia, and what of the high-minded nineteenth-century European men who were afflicted? How high-minded? How afflicted? How, as the phrase has it, European? And why not the women? Why not the women caught full-bodied and right-minded in the bright raw lengthy storms and trapped to death

of fright in the angling hallways like trout with hooks fresh in their mouths? What might they be like? What wallets would they carry? What might their names be—which is to say: if it can ever be agreed that they had any to begin with? Are you a person of integrity? Of honesty? Of that weird contextualized property people refer to only as the sagacious? And how do you know (really) what it is you might suggest? How are you wanted? When are you needed? Did you feed someone today? Attend some meeting at the local church? Get a fine strange tattoo on the upper portion of a nicknamed shin or a right arm useless and immobile now as a stale loaf of bread? Have you made love today? Did you leave the lights on? Was it sober or otherwise? How about this storm, did you whisper? Awfully wet out, did you say? (But is sex all, does someone wonder? Just about, maybe replied?) Did you walk somewhere? Did you make it private? Dance? Did you buy gasoline from the nearby station and cart it home in bright red beakers with pert yellow spouts? Have you sung a song or told a joke or prayed ambiguously, holding hands as though only rubbing them together for the task of putting up storm shutters, looking as you do quite blankly at the ceiling and embarrassed that you may be seen? What is your name? How old are you? How about in weeks? In days? In hours? In time spent brushing teeth or putting on a pair of socks? Walking the dog, grumbling about walking the dog, waiting for a phone call, waiting for some friendly line or family connection to resurrect itself at last and un-disconnect? Waiting for a paycheck, for a parent to expire, for a gallon of milk bought too hastily in decadence to do the same? For the silent perfect spaces like an ambulance with quiet lights, where corners meet before they all fall off (herky-jerk) while diving into sleep? Can these spaces be called churches? Are they quiet enough? Holy enough? What, in point of fact, would be the difference? Do you see the lights from where you are, cuddled up inside the back nearby the forlorn stretcher? Do you ask the man? Does he ask you? Are they so silent as they really seem, or just wrote blank with loud intensity? Is there a meaning to life? Is there a God actually, or just a set of vocal chords? How many witnesses make up a pocketful? Twenty-six? Twenty-eight? Twenty-eight-and-a-quarter—and for the record: just why not? Why, in point of fact, not? What exactly can one mean, or understand, or live, even, walking through the empty living room beneath a vast plaster-job of

wrinkled roof and sheet rock gently stapled, blurting out the words in quick succession with a modified regional yet equally (somehow) vast computer accent, “the inconsistency of hope”? Just what exactly is “the inconsistency of hope”? For whom is hope consistent? For whom is it expected? And when, ever, is that expectation met? When, ever, is hope some comprehensive figure like a thousandth smoke-screaming train pulled out at once from an old ghost station? Whose ghosts? Where? Why? Which? Where? Where, if I may ask, are the witnesses to that? Any takers, do you say? Not likely, should someone pipe up? Pipe up? Why? Why should one think? Why must one breathe? A field? A cloud? A foreign wind? To what extent does drowning and/or suffocation really physically hurt? Who, in such a case, is hurt the most? You, the living; or they, the dead? Who is Heinrich Wilhelm Dove, and why has he fallen out of favor? Who, then, is Hermann Flohn? How many constants are there in George Winterling’s heat index formula, humid or otherwise? How many variables in total? How many people (actually, or so the phrase has it) care? Is all of weather just another form of gravity? Of sex? Of fear? What isn’t? What, in such an instance, might *c* represent now? What’s your name? What color is your hair? What timbre is your voice? How long, in fact, is your attention span? For whom do you work? For what do you achieve? What do you see? What makes you feel pain? Which nationality are you anyway? Are you human—and what kind?

Breathe. Think.

Be.

Wet.

Please.

Hello.

If, at this time, you should begin to feel a little overwhelmed, inhale slowly and note only that what you are experiencing is the natural response. Do not panic. Do not fear. Do not loiter, do not riot, do not rush or run or walk briskly on wet floors. In the end, these actions, too, can ruin nights. In the end. Take small children by the hand. Hug them: breathe: the smell of skin like nutmeg ground. Reassure them of the safety which, conceptually, you represent. The storm is not yet, the leaves have yet to change their color.

Steady yourself.

(End.)

Breathe.

(In.)

Maintain a neutral disposition.

(Hello.)

And remember—if you can hear thunder, you are close enough to be struck by lightning.

Acknowledgements

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Language Glass

Keala Francis

Dear Reader,

Once there was a little girl who climbed into a shell to get out of the rain. She felt safe in this curled-up shell by the seashore. She stayed.

What do you think? Where were her parents? Did she have a family who cared about her? You cannot know, can you? This information is not in the text and psychoanalysis has fallen out of favor.

Do you think, though, that she stayed in the shell until she died?

No, Dear Reader, she did not.

One day it happened that a man was walking by as she poked her head out of the shell to feel the wind that blew, ferocious, across the bay and Alcatraz and the Golden Gate Bridge where people attempted suicide more than anywhere else in the entire world. She got that statistic from Wikipedia, which was apparently pretty accurate: by 2005 more than one-thousand two-hundred souls (can one really say that these days?) had jumped, meaning that, on average, one body every two weeks hit the water at seventy-six miles per hour.

Oh, how old was the shell girl when she climbed out? She was twenty-five. She had been in her shell for fifteen years. She had, of course, Internet access.

The man passing by at that same moment when she stuck her

head out – coincidence? fate? deus ex machina? – liked her green eyes. He asked her out to dinner. And what do you think she said? Was she scared of this strange man? Was she hesitant to leave the shell? Did she fear, so to speak, this jump?

No, she did not. She agreed. She thought that perhaps the shell was small and confining, although she had, of course, read all the classics along with some postcolonial literature and Edward Said.

The man placed her into a shopping cart, which he stole from the Marina Safeway, the hottest pick-up spot in San Francisco, located close to the fields and the beach and the bars and a nice little restaurant where he hoped to impress her with his worldliness.

The woman – her name, if you are interested, is Anne – had carefully pulled out her shoulders and arms, so that she could steady herself in the shopping cart. The man was a rather bumpy pusher. She smelled the sweet asphalt drying after a downpour.

The man – his name, if you are interested, is Jess – took her to Pizza Hut[®]. Anne could not believe the incredibly fantastic taste of pepperoni lover's pizza[®] and Pepsi[®]. And once, when Jess told her a joke, she laughed.

What was the joke?

How do you make a tissue dance... Put a little boogie in it.

Jess liked her laugh, so he asked her on a picnic. And what do you think she said? She didn't have much choice now, did she? Anne lived in a shell and had not yet come out, fully, so the shell operated somewhat like a closet. She had pulled out only one leg. She had not, quite, disavowed her shell.

They picnicked on top of Mount Tamalpais under the stars. Did they ever speak to each other or was their growing potential for love based solely on physical attraction? These questions may constitute separate questions depending on, let's say, subjectivity. For Jess, the answer seems likely to rest on green eyes, but that is only because that is all you've been told about what he liked. Jess and Anne may have had some very intellectual conversation about Foucault and the genealogical trap of the shell for the woman, all the while cutting long strands of cheese with their teeth and sipping pinot noir. Anne may have revealed that society had, in fact, forced her as a ten-year-old to go into a shell before

puberty so that tweeniness could not intervene in her intellectual development. Anne was, after all, extremely bright, and how sad it would have been to spend fifteen years pretending that she was not so.

Jess, despite his frat guy looks, had a job as a CTO. Do you know what that is, Dear Reader? Of course you do, that's a Chief Technology Officer. What is his job description? Well, you know that poststructuralism has made such terminology a floating signifier. So, the meaning of CTO will change over time and space, as well as tax bracket. What mattered was the car he drove, which was a Toyota Camry. His money was all tied up in stock options, and the market had tanked.

Anne, though not so intrigued with his class status nor for that matter his car, decided to pull her other leg out of the shell and re-enter the world of language. Her legs became signifiers. What for? Well, as you know, that depends on the gaze.

Jess's gaze confirmed his opinion, and he asked Anne to marry him. Anne hung her shell by a thread around her hips. She said, "I will." A performative speech act.

She began to study classical rhetoric at Berkeley as an unclassified student – her transcripts were non-existent. She survived on Oreos[®] and talent. Judith Butler loved her, despite Anne's clinging to heterosexuality as a potential trope for love.

Jess and Anne had a beautiful little wedding in a small church on the outskirts of Napa. Anne did like the wedding. The sun was shining and the champagne was bubbly. Everyone said they were the perfect little couple.

Jess's company had gone public, thanks be to Marx, a federal subsidy for solar panels, and capitalism's insipid flexibility. Jess donated the Camry and purchased a BMW. Do you really care which model, Dear Reader? Oh, I suppose you do. He wavered over a Mini, for its cool factor, but ultimately went with a pre-owned 535xi wagon.

Jess anticipated children. Anne hated it. Not the children, not even the car, per se, but the rhetorical statement that such a car made and Jess's assumption that she would sacrifice her intellectual career for motherhood. Jess was a bit confused as he had never thought of motherhood as conflicting with career. Jess was, of course, male. To his credit, however, he never expected

Anne to stay home and tend to the brood. He thought that a civilized woman should work and hire and manage domestic help.

That concept, however, was so 1980s. Anne had covered feminist theory. She knew that Derrida was not simply the American pronunciation of *derriere*, although sometimes she thought that the similarity was, perhaps, insightful.

While Anne was writing her dissertation, she became pregnant. She realized that maximizing her use value suggested that the job of housewife made the most economic sense. Jess agreed, although he certainly did not insist. He had cashed out and opened a restaurant, a lifelong passion. His motto, "Life's a crepe!" Anne had no idea what that meant.

Anne thought that the world was a big place with lots of small ideologies that meant all of jack shit when her breasts turned into cantaloupes and her baby had colic.

Anne stood at the mirror in their bathroom with his-and-her sinks. Anne's engorged breasts hung, not perky, but huge, from her chest as if they did not belong to her. Bright blue veins ratcheted the skin and her areolas were ghastly, dark and ugly wounds for the newborn to suck from. The baby screamed and screamed and screamed. Anne had no more energy, nothing, desiccated to the bone.

Constant cries: Imagine it!

Anne jostled, bounced, lunged, sang, shushed, swished, put down, picked up, and finally, left the baby in the crib to scream while she went to cry in the shower, where the hot water burned and made her breasts burst with milk, squirting onto the stained tiles.

Jess watched his wife's c-section scar heal, wicked and yowling on her bloated abdomen, her gut still swollen from childbirth. She was pale with dark circles and sunken eyes. The real glow of motherhood.

But wait, Dear Reader, has the story taken a wrong turn? Did Anne sell out her independence for a family? Should she have more domestic help?

And here, Anne realized, she was stuck. Domestic help had already quit on her several times. This little being, the size of a football, was hers. And his. He was the father of her child. This awful, screaming baby was their child. And she loved this child

more than anything. It was the first time she realized that she would consciously die for someone else. Some days, she felt she was dying for this child, this sweet, screaming baby girl, who she would die for.

Anne began to think back fondly, nostalgically, for those days before her shell. Remember those days? You thought it was so tough then. Would you ever go through puberty? Did your best friend still like you? Could you stay up past 7:30pm because the Walt Disney Sunday Night Family Movie was extra long that night? Would you get ice cream even if your parents caught you feeding your peas to the dog?

What Anne would give to feed peas to the dog!

Did you know that fish eat frozen peas? Yes, fish in the ocean. Anne and Jess, on their honeymoon, fed fish frozen peas at Hanauma Bay. Anne and Jess hiked down the hill from the highway. The peas sweated in the bag and melted a bit, too. The fish darted, curved lines with heft.

An eel swam straight at Anne, a gaping mouth and creepy bulge on its head. Anne floated stock still in the water, the world outlined by a black rubber mask. Her breath rasped in the snorkel. The eel, so ugly, swam beautifully, with a curvy, swooshy body. The mouth opened wider and she felt the bubbles brush against her cheek as the eel snapped a fish into its jaws.

The baby suckled at Anne's breast, nestling into her flesh, pressed gently into her shrinking belly. Then the baby screamed. And screamed.

Why is there no cure for colic? Do you know this answer? If so, you will make more money than Jess ever did. Jess said to call the doctor, tired that Anne could not solve this problem. She was not a natural mother. Nature made women to take care of babies and Anne could not do it. But then, as you will recall, Jess and Anne had already possibly had a discussion on Foucault and so arguably Jess knew that such a perspective was totalizing and ignored the balance of power inherent in such a normative heterosexual relationship. Real truths come out, though, when characters are under duress.

"Does she have a temperature?" the nurse asked over the phone.

"No," Anne said.

“Is she vomiting?”

“No,” Anne said.

“Is she gaining weight?”

“Yes,” Anne said.

“Sounds like you just got a tough one.”

“Is that fucking medical advice?” That’s what Anne said to Jess.

Anne never wanted to kill the baby. She wanted to kill herself. Or Jess.

She had this extremely vivid waking dream. Could she call it waking when the line between awake and asleep had been erased? Who knew there could be neither? Dear Reader, did you know that you could be neither awake nor asleep and still not be dead?

Some days, she felt like an alien had spread its tentacles to cramp tight on her shoulders and then pulled her neck muscles into her brain. Some days, her baby was Sigourney Weaver’s alien. She felt like it was only a matter of time before that alien ripped straight through her core and came out singing: “Hello my baby hello my darlin’ hello my ragtime gal...” And she imagined plunging from a ledge into the fiery futuristic smelting pot below her, holding that alien to her chest like love itself.

And, then, good god, the conversation!

SUSIE

Oh my god, Anne, this latte tastes so good. Kudos to Jess! God bless caffeine. I am soooo tired. Little Jimmy is teething.

JEN

Oh, Susie, your poor sweetie. Teething is so tough.

ANNE

There should just be a button. One day, you push it and – whoop! – up come all the teeth.

JEN

You are so fun-ny? Isn’t she funny, Suz?

SUSIE

Isn’t she, Jen? (*claps hands, turns to face Anne.*) You should write

E&F V.XI

a book, Anne! You're a writer, right?

ANNE

Right. *(pause.)* Well, not really. It's a dissertation.

JEN

A dessert what?

SUSIE

A DISS ER TAY TION, Jen. *(rolls eyes at Anne.)* God! Some sort of language-y thingy, right?

ANNE

Right. Language as thing. Language glass. A mirror.

SUSIE

Oh. Huh. *(pause.)* We sang the cutest song. At music class. Right, Jen? "Old King Cole"... a jazzy version. Little Jimmy just loved it. He was clapping and giggling.

ANNE

(deadpan.) How funny.

JEN

Sooo funny! You should join the class, Anne. It's really so fun.

SUSIE

So fun! But, you know, ladies, we need some girl time.

ANNE

Isn't that what this is?

JEN

You're so funny, Anne.

SUSIE

(ignoring them.) I need my sista time. You know, men just don't get it. It's so hard. I'm soooooo busy.

JEN

Babies are soooo exhausting.

ANNE

Life is exhausting.

Jen and Susie both look at Anne, appalled.

What do you think?

Anne had become angry. Jess, too, although he expressed his anger through absence. And their little girl – her name, if you're interested, is Clare – tumbled and stretched. Up. Yes, Dear Reader, turns out that, like all babies, Jess and Anne's baby grew up. At the age of ten, Clare stopped looking like Jess. Anne knew because iPhoto suddenly began to identify Clare as Anne in "Faces."

Suddenly, Dear Reader, Anne remembered her shell. Every day she looked at her shell on the sink beside the soap. When Clare became a teenager, Anne had nothing, no experiences, to help her, and the shell grew larger. She placed the shell on a side table. Décor. Jess made crepes. Anne taught classes. Clare went to summer camp. And sometimes, when Anne least expected it, her heart swelled with love. An ocean heart she could hear in her seashell. And, like you, Dear Reader, she grimaced at this sentence. She wondered who created these goddamn heart metaphors. These clichés.

Then, suddenly, Jess was on a business trip and Clare went to college. Clare called Anne, and when Anne hung up the phone, she realized Clare was okay. Clare had come out of her shell. The language one, not the real one. A mirror shell, not a glass one. So, Anne took a bath. She let the phone ring without answering and placed one leg carefully back into the shell.

Jess came home from his trip. Clare came home for the holidays. Jess and Clare asked why Anne had put her leg in a shell. Anne shrugged. Then, she put the other leg into her shell. She used a wheelchair and thought of filing a lawsuit when she got passed over for promotion. She knew, though, that the justice system

had an inherent able-bodied norm. Clare returned to college. Anne wanted to use her body as protest, to embody the material exigencies of an absent body. Instead, she put her arms back into the shell and slid down into her old room.

Did she find what Alice found there?

No, she did not.

She found that the shell was much larger and more comfortable than when she was twenty-five. She was amazed at the amount of space. On one wall of the shell hung her winner's certificate from the third-grade spelling bee and one pair of comfortable brown shoes. On another wall, a painting hung above a small yellow divan. On a third wall, a bookshelf held all of her old books, no speck of dust. On the last wall stood a single bed with a single pillow.

Anne lay down on the bed and studied the painting above the divan: A woman stands on a beach looking out to sea as the sun sinks beautiful as lilacs. A man waves his arms at her from deep in the ocean. She cannot tell whether he is waving or drowning.

8

Maldita

Veronica Vela

Airplanes didn't fly into this town, which left Nadia with the option of getting just close enough to her destination to eject herself out of the main cabin. She took a glimpse out of her window, attempting to peer through the clouds, and caught sight of the familiar blanched water tower that overlooked the village. It was time for her to move. She unbuckled her seatbelt, tied her hair back, and clutched her suitcase to her chest. Placing her hand on the arm rest, she fingered the underside of it and located the soft plastic bulb, that when pushed, would send her on her way. Locking eyes with the moon-faced flight attendant standing in the aisle helped brace her nerves. With a cool head, she flattened the button with her finger, which promptly sent her sliding through a hatchway beneath her feet. Before she knew it, the flight attendant was out of sight.

Her exit wasn't as clean as she'd hoped it would be. Nadia tumbled and gripped her suitcase for dear life while wind ripped over her, making the soft skin around her triceps wave like mud flaps. She looked up, hoping to catch sight of the wide-bodied airliner. Instead of seeing a wandering hulk lumbering through sheets of ice and air, there was only a paltry flyspeck of dark color. Fluttering spaciouly in mid-air, Nadia could see clusters of buildings in the downtown area. She couldn't make out their walls, but she knew they were painted candy pink and etched with scenic murals of townspeople and palm trees. Soon, she could pick out the only mid-

rise building – one sheer black national-bank office that offered the town some cosmopolitan architecture. Flowering, cotton palm trees lined every road and neighborhood, and because of recurring droughts, some trees were barren and dusty, left with only a few corsages stubbornly hanging onto branches. She saw trees folded over like paper cutouts, evidence of other passengers like herself that had arrived in the town by the same terrible fall. All around the town, people had smashed into the plants, causing them to fold towards the rutted dirt. This town had no neighboring towns, nor did it reside within a state. It survived independently and quietly like a dead, homely planet.

Nadia managed to undo the clasp on her large, hard-shelled suitcase. The plan was to climb inside of it; cocooned in the protective case, she'd survive the landing. Because of the speed and the rush of the wind marring her coordination, the doors of her luggage refused to remain open. Seconds from the ground, she could only manage to lodge her head inside the plastic case. Wrought with fear, she froze, and her body kissed the ground at blistering speed.

When she could finally open her eyes, bitter, hard-faced women lingered all around her. They huddled nearby and eyed her contorted body like the fallen *maldita* they thought she was. The old-lady mystics carried bottles of herbs and oils that could thwart *el mal de ojo*, “the evil eye.” They were used to people falling out of the sky. The people of the town called them “straw men,” due to how lifeless and weary the bodies looked after they touched down. Some even thought of them as wretched omens that failed in flying because they were cursed, so god threw them back violently and swiftly to the ground. The full description was “straw men with chapped wings.” The straw men were former residents that escaped the town. Most townspeople were aware that the only reason they returned was due to unresolved business. They were unsure, however, as to how the straw men found their way back.

While Nadia's head rested against the splintered suitcase, the old ladies splashed their potions all over her, while cursing her for being bad luck. They spit and cursed, “*Maldita! Maldita!*” making sure passersby knew the fallen girl was damned. Cascading sheets of dry heat enveloped Nadia, and breathing felt like inhaling and exhaling sand. There was a fully decorated mariachi band crossing the street. The players, wearing thick, pitted ostrich-skin boots

despite the heat scorching them from all sides, casually glanced her way. Peering through the crowd, she read a sign that read, in Spanish, “We vow to kick creeps, thieves, and vultures off your doorstep with our merchandise.” She stood and made her way up the bluff to Quamasia Street.

A featureless cloud draped soundly over the corner of the road. The gloom of the house radiated atop the embattled hill on Quamasia. Before Nadia entered the fog surrounding the house, she noticed what looked like sizeable birds resting on the pipes of the house next door. They were barn owls, with large, white heads and heart-shaped faces watching her every move. There were twelve of them, leaning curiously together like perfectly poised groomsman, quietly observing her as she crossed the blackened sod that led up to the house. The neighboring house was belted in flames. Fire quickly wrapped around bushes and rolled through passages of wood and dirt near a rotted fence, and the birds continued to stare. Nadia realized that they had started the fire. As if to confirm the thought, all twelve owls promptly went eastbound to sit and dawdle on tousled branches. While the fire spread, people from the neighborhood climbed the walls of their houses and sat on the spines of their roofs to watch the flames burn wildly through the lot.

Nadia entered the chilled, dense cloud and became imprisoned in its brume. Each house on Quamasia Street bore a unique atmospheric component, related to the history of the house and its residents. The house directly in front of this one had a sunnier meteorological disposition. That house, drenched in warm sunlight and cool, wet breezes, was owned by a man named Vincent who had round, feminine features and an overall joyful demeanor. Because he was altogether a good person, the clouds that parted above his house revealed a spinning, jeweled sun that graciously tickled the flora surrounding his home. Next to Vincent lived Riya and Octavio, a couple who began their relationship dumb with ecstasy, but, over time, began a swift emotional descent down a dry well. Their lives were now spent sitting and having conversations with the walls instead of each other. They sat dumbstruck, like long-haired cave people, muttering to themselves how much life had changed them, while their house was engulfed by a raging sandstorm. A constant flurry of dust twirled around their property every second of every day. And so on with all of the houses on the block. There were

snowstorms, mudslides, earthquakes, and constant rain that took place every day with certain houses on Quamasia.

As Nadia stepped onto the marbled porch of her childhood home, she immediately felt a dark, tipping silence. All she wanted to do was sleep. The plane ride hadn't allowed for any rest, which left her in a slight stupor and grossly hacked under the eyes. She stood there, waiting in unnerving silence, staring at the black, metal gate fixed to the door. Reluctant to move forward with her plan, she felt ill at the mere sight of the black, curly gate.

The front door was surrounded by, and mostly covered in, thick mud; roots sprang out of the dirt like electrical wires, and she imagined the door as an upright grave. She could hear soft, wet whistling tones coming out from the glistening mud. Then, as dramatically as the fantasy appeared, a curved hand stood out from inside the dirt and taunted her with a muddy glove to enter the house. She felt the urge to flee, to be let loose on young pastures, like a wild, frothing mastodon setting foot on warm prairie grass for the first time. Ignoring her instincts, Nadia did as the curled hand asked and sniffed the would-be grave while hastily being swallowed up by the soil.

As she entered through the muddy portal, she could see a figure at the end of a wide, white hallway. There were what looked like pharmaceutical vials strewn all around the mysterious silhouette. Before Nadia could enter into the den of the house, she foundered knee-deep in an entrenched bog and heard the eerily familiar wet whistling sounds nagging at her every time she put one foot forward. The closer Nadia was to setting foot inside the house, the louder they became. The clamor of the now-constant sirens was near-deafening as she approached the floor of the den. The moment her foot touched the carpet, the sounds ceased.

Nadia was in full pursuit of her bounty. She was prepared for madness that would stalk her through every hushed corridor. She reminded herself that the entities in the house would attempt to distract her from her course. The house, although familiar, had changed since her childhood. The modest, three-bedroom home now stretched wider and longer, which gave it the appearance of a labyrinth with coiled walls. The den was filled with a pale heat. Around the fireplace were eight-inch prayer candles – paraffin candles housed in glass tubes, decorated with the images of assorted

saints. One portrayed a weepy-faced Lady of Guadalupe painted on it. Near the mantel there was a large painting of a light-skinned Christ and a photograph of an old, white-headed Pope John Paul II. Jesus had gold-streaked locks of hair with sprightly rays cast behind his head, which made him look like he was floating through uncharted parts of the universe. Flames rose from the top of Jesus's exposed heart, which was drawn in the middle of his chest.

The cloudy figure at the end of the hallway had disappeared, but in its place stood Narcisso, a *curandero*. Narcisso had stormy red-orange hair that hung on him like an impressive, wild mane, giving him the appearance of a large, but tender, Barbary lion. He wore his shirt with the first few buttons undone, exposing chest hair that looked like kinky, white string. Around his neck, he displayed an array of crucifixes – treasures, all dipped in gold and fastened on long, glittery chains.

Standing at the entrance of Nadia's childhood bedroom, Narcisso spoke.

“Did you bring your allowance?”

“Yes,” Nadia answered. She dug into her coat pocket and pulled out a frayed piece of square film.

“Let's see it then.”

The square piece of film was a Polaroid picture of Nadia with her mother and sister. In the picture, Nadia's mother sat on the floor with her legs crossed, dressed casually with a look of postpartum depression on her face and big, frowning sinews around her mouth. Her mother's hair was dark-bristled and cropped short, which, along with her long, white face, made her look pale and oddly handsome. Nadia was three years old, and her sister was seven; both of them hung on their mother's shoulders waiting for a flash of happiness. The picture captured the girls waiting with affection, complete with wide, stupid grins on their faces. Nadia's mother looked undernourished and underwhelmed about being a new, young mother.

Narcisso accepted the photograph under the condition that Nadia would never get it back. She could hear an operatic trill coming from another room. It was the sound of her mother's high and tremulous voice, which she hadn't heard in years. Nadia and her sister had named it “the devil voice” when they were children. Vowels and consonants tumbled out of her mother's throat, independent of actual words. The flailing, meaningless utterances jutted forward and sped faster like they were on heated rails.

Before she entered the bedroom, Narcisso reminded her, “Remember, girl, in this house, Hell breathes through doorways.”

“I don’t believe in Hell.” And, with that, Nadia entered the room.

The wall immediately overwhelmed her. The wallpaper, which Nadia remembered as being symbolically hopeful as a child, had pastel flowers strewn all over it. The flowers were small white calla lilies and larger scarlet trilliums, choked with tiny bright orchids and fresh healthy leaves. The wallpaper, as lovely as it was, was stamped onto a useless partition that when pushed with just enough force and at just the right angle, would collapse like poorly spun gossamer. The wallpaper went up soon after Nadia’s mother had been released from a clinical-white room, fixed with celestial-blue lighting. For three weeks, her mother stayed in a room and sat atop a rollaway bed in an electric-blue power suit, baring powerful, pale legs, while her eyes, as big as portholes, shed thick, silvery light.

Nadia became entranced by the sight of the wafer-thin wall. She felt inundated by the ghosts of her mother’s bouts – ghosts that were left behind to wallow in the fibers of the brown, shaggy carpet. Images of three people suddenly appeared on the wall. They were absent of color and flickered across the flower wallpaper like pictures discharged from a film projector. The images conjured were of her mother, Narcisso and herself on her old twin bed. Although the images were physically right in front of her and fully realized, the bodies of all three were utterly transparent. Nadia knew immediately what she was seeing: a morning when Narcisso the *curandero* and her mother recruited her to speak in tongues. Nadia’s mother was a devout practitioner, and she always wanted Nadia to do it. Reluctantly, a young Nadia obliged her mother and agreed to have her tongue jockeyed by god. With a bible stuffed in his armpit, a prayer curled out of Narcisso’s mouth. Minutes passed, and nothing happened. “You need to focus harder,” her mother said. *On what?* Nadia remembered thinking. Nadia watched the bewitching, transparent scene unfold and remembered that even at such a young age, she was unable to feign the action. The young Nadia felt like she missed a bright opportunity to connect with her mother. There was part of her that wanted to kneel by her mother’s side and play with the hem of her skirt. *Give me another shot*, Nadia had thought. *I can do it this time. I’ll fake it if I have to.* By not participating in the ordeal, she had embarrassed her mother.

If only she had faked it, her life would have magically intersected with her mother's. She desperately wanted to have her mother's cool, hairless arms embracing her. *Let me have another go and I'll make sparks this time. I'll make comets shoot from my mouth.* If she had had just an extra few moments, Nadia would have bowled them over with spiritual lust. But it was over. The rare opportunity for her to connect slid swiftly down a wet slope.

As Nadia watched, the kink in her chest grew stronger, tighter; the dead place inside of her re-awakened – something that had been dormant since her exodus from the town. The seemingly quiet air churned with green smoke, and the screams that came from the other room turned into faint, raspy purrs. Nadia sensed her mother's disapproving head and felt weak. The dead place, the fear, was tar-filled and pecking at her conscience. The flower wall seemed canted and blurred. Nadia toppled over the side of her droopy twin bed and vomited on the comforter, erasing the transparent vision from the wall. She felt like a beached animal, stuck on the floor of the room, and felt as though she had awoken face down in a sand trap. Lying on her side with a leg outstretched, she felt like the entire room had capsized. Nadia looked up at the skylight in her old room. She knew that there was an intense heat outside, but through the small, rectangular window, the sky looked as though it was filled with freezing, wintry, blue light. She reminded herself why she had taken her breathtaking escape in the first place. In that brief moment of composure, Nadia stood up and walked out into the kitchen.

There stood two aging, yet mighty, guardians howling at each other while twisting nests of snakes wrapped around their feet. Evita and Olga were the original owners of the house, but now took up residence as spiritual cleaning ladies that fought hard to purify the melancholy etched in the foundation. Olga had once been a severe and unyielding fist. She bore seven children. Olga was a large woman – tall and crass with a body that was reminiscent of Big Bird's. The bottom half of her looked like a drum dressed in a bowl-shaped shell. Her name suited her big body well. It was a short name, but big-sounding, almost weighty. *OLGA*. The sound of her name was waterlogged. Like waders stuck in mud and heavy with fish. Her body was pear-shaped and unbearably crouched at the neck. She stood in the kitchen, this huge bird woman blissfully hacking away at a grey cow tongue.

Evita, on the other hand, was pale and wispy, with white hairs slicked back on her narrow head – soft, fine-spun plumes that rested side-swept close to her ears and exposed bald patches at the crown, revealing a tender pink scalp. Over her floral-tipped gauzy nightdress, she wore a Mayan headdress and neck charms. Both guardians had their own aching distressed histories, but put them aside to relieve the misery that overtook the house like weeping vines around its walls. They were dedicated to first finding Nadia's mother, who for years had been hiding somewhere inside the house, and once she was found, they would cure the malady.

Both women turned to Nadia when they realized she was watching them. They spoke to Nadia in Spanish.

“We can help you find your way to her. We can't do it ourselves.” Olga lifted up the bottom of her skirt and revealed an inflamed leg, afflicted with elephantitis. “There's no way we can run around looking for her on our own. This house has grown, and the rooms are too far and wide. There's only so much two deaf old ladies can do.”

“I'm not here for her,” Nadia said with her head angrily hooked forward.

Evita spoke: “You dropped from the sky, risked your life to come back to Quamasia, and for what? If not for your mother, for what then?”

Since entering the house, Nadia had developed healthy, grim folds around her mouth that illuminated her. “I'm not here to help her. There's something I want. Something I wouldn't be able to live without.”

Evita replied patiently, “We can help you find it. Whatever you need, we can help.” Olga and Evita stared directly at Nadia.

“You sacrifice virgins and roosters. You have conversations with the deceased. You perform black magic. Witchcraft.” Nadia spoke with a clipped demeanor.

Olga stood with bison power in her balled-up fists, and Evita stood there, dumbfounded, with her dandelion head. “We don't seek intervention from Satan.” They believed their milder form of witchcraft was part of traditional Mexican folk notions. While it had nothing to do with reason, it also had nothing to do with black magic. It was spiritual mysticism that was integral to the wiring of their families. “We know a lot about you, Nadia. We know how the relationship with your mother began underneath a cloud. We know

about the time you were sick and how desperately you wanted your mother to stay in bed with you.”

It was true. Nadia had been ill and one night her mother crawled into bed with her. Even though her mother had never done anything like that before, Nadia knew it was her when she reached over and fingered the latent curvature of her mother’s hips. She could also recognize her mother’s frayed nightgown and hairless arms. Instead of sleeping that night, Nadia daydreamed while her mother gingerly caressed the knobs of her spine. Most times, Nadia couldn’t wait for the woman to leave the room. But suddenly, that night, everything changed. Nadia thought of her mother in watercolors – cozy pastels that made her effortless. Her mother was, for a night, pale pink and yellow, watermarked and altogether breathtaking. She was no longer an overbearing witch with boldness sputtering out of control. The woman lying next to Nadia was a rose-colored saint. She was a pencil sketch coated in a gold wash that made everything look like a bonfire.

“We know how giddy you were when she acted so maternal towards you. You thought if you moved, she would leave and suddenly the brightness of that night would dim. We know about the dream you had about her while she coddled you.”

Olga and Evita knew everything. It was true. In Nadia’s dream, they sailed along a river and ate catfish out of a glove. Layers of bay mud stretched across beltways of estuaries. Everything was breezy, and the coolness of her mother’s display was so deeply gratifying that Nadia didn’t realize how fleeting it was.

Evita chimed in, “You felt like a blushing, wet dog – pitiful but satisfied. You wrote that in your journal later on. Do you remember that? You thought, *don’t leave, mother*. You thought if she left, she would never return. You wrote it all down right here in this diary.” Evita held up the lavender ringed binder that held everything Nadia had ever written since she was eight years old.

“How did you find that,” Nadia asked. “I thought I took that with me when I left.”

“No. You left a lot of things here,” Olga said.

“You thought your mother would be usurped, taken into the mist of a foggy morning and swept into the humidity’s biting air,” Evita added.

Nadia spoke. “Yes. I thought she would be blown down stairs of

a drafty cellar and wedged, corked, deep within the body of the sun. And the sun would sit, not winking or spinning, sustaining life on Earth, like a mother horned owl. I thought she'd be gobbled down by the heat and forever out of my grasp. I thought all of that, and I was right for thinking it."

"Remember that feeling you had, Nadia, when you felt your mother's heart beating right underneath her ribs. Remember how dreamily you wandered outside your bedroom the next morning into the kitchen. *The room was streaked ...*"

"*With auric bars of sunlight*, yes. I wrote it. I remember," Nadia bit back. "Don't pretend to know everything when all you did was read my journal."

"We've never opened your journal. We just know," Olga said.

"It doesn't mean anything anymore. She was taken. Look at her now, frolicking around the house, barking between rooms, just so we can go looking for her. Well, I'm not looking for her anymore. I want what I came here for, that's all."

"You came for more than just that picture," Evita said.

"How do you know about that? If you're not witches and you don't practice black magic, how did you know about the picture?"

"We know because your mother knows, and the wailing that you hear beyond this room and the next are not mere sounds. Her sounds aren't just mushy piles of words. She's been telling the story of your beloved photograph for years now. She tells the entire house about this item you're so fond of – the material thing that, for you, waits in some princely setting and basks in a sun-drenched glow. You care more about this than –"

"You don't know anything. You don't know her. She had her shot. Everything was scraped red and laced with black-licked swatches. The tantrums, the tedium, all rooted in pure delirium. We tended to her maniacal needs and her heinous roars. She was always so doped up and swallowed whole by chemicals. Her body was raided by medication and her mind dragged across spiked rails. She scared us, don't you see? She'd be there with her big, oversized glasses, painting her face with lipstick and terrifying us with that awful, comatose look she'd get when the dosage was too high. Her eyes bulged and glassed over, and the medication slackened her jaw in the most frightening way. Still, we were there and we saddled up to take it in the chest. I would have done anything for her. If anyone had hurt her, I would have bitten back like a loyal, protective dog.

But that's over now."

"There's something small we'd like to do for you." Evita walked over to the counter and grabbed a carton.

"What is it?" Nadia asked.

"We want to open you up. See what's inside that mind of yours and then hold it up to you." Olga took out a white egg from the carton.

"You're not fattening me up with mysticism. I don't believe in *curanderismo* or anything like that."

"We don't need you to believe anything. We just want to see what you have inside, that's all."

Evita and Olga didn't have the power to be senior shape-shifters yet. They were able to transform themselves into small creatures like owls or cats, but they couldn't transform themselves into other human beings yet. Along with that, their specialties were in enthusiastic spiritual cleansings. They were energetic in warding off noxious and harmful emotional afflictions. In the tradition of Mexican folk healers, they commonly used raw eggs or lemons to massage over the distressed victim. If they used an egg, they would rub it all over the body while laboriously praying, concentrating heavily on the head. After the massage, the egg was cracked into a glass of water and left underneath the person's bed overnight. It was left to absorb the residual badness as the person slept.

Nadia obliged. "Go on with your Mexican sorcery. Just this once."

"You know, Nadia," Evita spoke while she, taking turns with Olga, rubbed the raw egg over Nadia's arms and back, "what you experienced was nothing compared to the blood-soaked earth and the ravages that have taken place all over the world. What you went through in this house was a speck of human folly, a domestic tragedy that would have eventually disappeared. But now..."

"But now what?" Nadia asked.

"But," Evita continued, "you've taken it with you outside of this town, and you walk around with a queer stink about you. It's now tied deep down into your cells."

Kneeling on her inflamed leg, Olga grunted. "We're almost finished, girl."

There was an orgy of sounds oscillating from one room to another as the egg ritual took place.

With the help of Evita's shoulder, Olga lifted herself off the

floor, grabbed a glass, and filled it with water. She set it down on the cutting block while Evita cracked the egg on the counter. As soon as the white of the egg touched the top of the water, a great shawl of flame hurdled into the kitchen from inside the oven fan and wavered near the ceiling for only a few seconds. After the fire dissipated, Nadia, Olga, and Evita looked back at the cutting block and watched as light filled the glass and illuminated the egg.

“What’s going on?” Nadia asked.

“Just watch. This is a rare treat for us, too. The last time something like this happened was before you were born.” Evita’s glance remained fixed on the glass and wide smiles spread across her and Olga’s faces.

A great mist filled the glass, and within it, a wiry body could be made out. The thin limbs flailed, and the small person blissfully tottered around a white, unbound playing field. When it reached the edge of the field, the light inside the glass came down and created a moment of thinning darkness. When the lights came on again the wiry figure was gone, and in its place was Nadia’s mother. She wore her auburn hair high on her head, which suited her long, white face and oversized glasses. The mist cleared some more, and Nadia could see her mother resting on a pier. Instantly, she knew it was a vacation she and her family spent at the beach. Her mother sat there, remaining off to the side, chafed and sunburned. She shriveled up underneath a baseball cap and huddled for shade. Her fair skin had red, mottled patches that made her neck and legs look scalded. Nadia’s mother moaned incessantly on the surf-softened planks, her head swooning from the ocean air. Nadia looked away from the glass.

“What were you expecting?” asked Olga.

“Not this,” Nadia said.

“You expected to see her as a white-skinned brawler, right? Savagely waving her tomahawk while ransacking the house – decimating everything in her path,” Evita said.

“Something like that, yes.”

When Nadia looked back at the glass, she saw herself at eight years old, obsessively caressing her mother’s shoulder, trying to get her to talk. The eight-year-old Nadia cupped her mother’s chin and pulled her face close to hers.

“I don’t want this. I don’t want to see this anymore,” Nadia said.

“What do you want?” Evita asked.

“I want to be with my sister in the gold-colored car that we took on a joyride when we were children. My sister drove us with the windows rolled down. We were let out of our pens that day, marking the neighborhood with hijacked wheels.”

“You wanted to escape the house again, is that it?” Olga moaned.

“Yes. We did it right and let our tongues hang loose out of our mouths, feeling like we’d gotten away with something. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.” Evita said.

Nadia recalled aloud her own rendering of the event from her diary, written years after the fact: *“We were two baby savages licking the traces of freedom that were all around us. It was childish, but entirely compelling. We had made our way out of the house, out from underneath our mother’s suicide threats. This breathtaking escape was brief, but well worth what we endured as punishment. We drove in bright daylight, stirring the bucket without any remorse for our actions. Golden sunlight washed over the little car that itself was nearly as bright. We drove through sheets of sunlight that traced the gravel around Quamasia, fantastically ignorant of the repercussions.”*

“But you eventually had to return to the house,” Olga reminded her.

“That doesn’t matter. The joy of the car ride is what matters. The anger that made our mother look bug-eyed and fish-lipped was irrelevant.”

“Exactly,” Evita said.

“What are you trying to prove?” Nadia asked.

Olga explained, “Always escaping, always avoiding.”

“Your mystical hoopla never solved anything. What? You think rolling up trinkets inside of a cow tongue is going to heal this place? You think garlic cloves underneath your bed and spraying the house with holy water is going to help? Your ‘Gypsy and the Wind’ notions, your parchment moon and poetic silvery swarms have done absolutely nothing to rid those horrific sounds coming from my mother’s blasted throat. If you’re so great at gripping unattainable stars with your magic, how come you haven’t found her in this forsaken mess?”

“At least we try to ease her might. You, you just run away,” Olga continued.

“I left because I would have killed her. I was a teenaged, pimple-faced cave person that wanted to put her out of her misery. Put us out of our misery! I imagined myself with adrenaline-fueled strength, breaking the skinny bridge of her bulbous red-tipped nose, or kicking her head so hard it would shatter like an exploding bust of cold, brittle marble. In my wildest fantasies, I wanted to send her to *La Petaca*, the witches’ district, where they’d leave her tied to a metal fence like a twisted goat, while the devil prodded her with his horns.”

Olga looked tight-lipped and glared at Nadia. Her arms looked like thick stalks jutting out of her tiny sleeves. “Get out,” she said.

“Before you go, Nadia,” Evita said, “we never answered your question. We have the power of magic, and we devote our lives to healing her, but she doesn’t want us to find her. She makes it difficult with all of her careening in and out of rooms, but, stubbornly, we try.” Evita finished wrapping the grey muscle in starchy white paper and placed it in the freezer. “We’ll never stop trying.”

Nadia traveled through blank corridors and closely followed the sounds of her mother’s voice. At times, her mother would stop shrieking, making Nadia take greater risks with the paths she chose. She turned her head into a room that was otherwise empty except for a wooden desk. In the middle of the room, she found a man with his back facing her. From behind, he almost looked like a little boy. When he turned around, the front of him was droopy. His midsection looked pudgy and misshapen. His face was covered in a long, reddish beard. The room was warm, and he stood there in the moist heat, red-faced and dripping wet. On the desk was a series of paintings of Elijah, from the Bible, taken on a whirlwind and racing to Heaven in a fiery carriage; Elijah in the wilderness; and Elijah with his blessed juniper tree.

“You know,” the red-faced man said, “there are sidewalks in Heaven.”

Nadia remained still.

“Yes, there are sidewalks in Heaven,” he echoed, “but somehow, the longer I stay here, the idea of them seems to be slipping away – sliding out of scene.”

Nadia kept quiet. Without another word, the bearded man

calmly walked to his desk and kicked the wall. Nadia was scared and took several steps backwards. With his pointy foot, the small man banged the wall over and over again until, finally, a round panel opened up, revealing a rock-ribbed tunnel. With his ruddy beard drenched with sweat, the man spoke again, "Have you ever seen how lovely trees look in winter?" Nadia remained wide-eyed and curious about the fresh hole in the wall. "I especially like the way the boles look like they've been jammed into the ground by god. No, no, not god anymore – giants," he said. The man's frantic stare made Nadia worry about traveling through the passageway that would lead her deeper into the house. Looking cock-eyed in her direction, he pointed to the wall and said, "Don't worry. It's like sledding down a winding, dusty road. You'll be just fine."

8

Sontag, Osiris

Adam Klein

In almost every review of her work, Susan Sontag is described—often from an early photograph or piece of film, and sometimes from life—floating into functions, aware of the daunting, sometimes ungenerous esteem in which she was held. A nagging aspect of her legacy is the tendency of critics to draw her as a priggish moralist, or simply to draw her; her critical and political work is nearly overshadowed by a relentless invocation of her own appearance, the by now clichéd “white swoosh” of forelock. If she at one time seemed hip, able to capitalize on that glamour, she was never able to stay hip, or to lighten up enough to remain unassailably cool. Daphne Merkin conjures Sontag’s startling presence in a *New York Times* book review:

From the start, Sontag was different from Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt and the other bluestockings who preceded her, in part because of the oracular, aphoristic quality of her prose, and in part because of her ability to strike a camera-friendly pose. It didn’t hurt that she was darkly beautiful, with a sensuous mouth, a thick helmet of hair and a direct, wide-set gaze. Or that well before the Age of Prada she outfitted herself in chicly underdesigned clothes and shades of black. (Elizabeth Hardwick, in her

introduction to “A Susan Sontag Reader,” suggests that Sontag “is herself a sort of pictorial object, as the many arresting photographs of her show.”¹

Later, Daryll Pickney similarly recounts her bold presence in a review of her early journals written for *The New Yorker*:

She was beautiful and hip, a princess of high bohemia, intimidating, free, and, incandescently, always *on*....I don't remember when the signature white streak began to appear in her lustrous, abundant hair, but I think of her as someone who went out dressed in her fame, like a great scarf thrown over the shoulder at the last moment. And I must admit that, when we became friends, I was far too pleased to be seen with her.²

There's something to be said about the irresistibility of describing Sontag—the power she had as a physical person, as Pickney suggests, someone who wore her admiration, and who in the most casual gesture, defined herself. It's this physicality—the body and its possibility of incandescence, the body as the defining moment, the source of knowledge, the ultimate work—that holds Sontag's critical practice and political activism together, and while her legacy seems divided between that of a brilliant mind but an intemperate, foolhardy activist, or a that of a great activist with a strange penchant for little-known European artists, there is always the body of Sontag—the physicality of her—that finds itself invoked in nearly every review, whether admiring or dismissive. There's a way in which the body asserts itself so formidably in Sontag's work that even after her death, Sontag's legacy seems willed by her, something still very much in her hands. After her death, it seems impossible to know how to contain her.

Interestingly, with the release of her journals in three volumes, of which *Reborn: Early Diaries 1947-1964* and *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1964-1980* have now been published, images of her body have and will continue to force her body to resurface for our scrutiny. In at least two reviews of *Reborn*, Sontag's notes-to-self are nothing but earthy: “Don't gossip, don't brag, don't complain, bathe regularly, write more, eat less.” As with Warhol's tabulations of cab fares, we will know a great deal about Sontag by

the time all the diaries are released. And like Warhol, our sense of this artist's brilliance will always be dogged by a chink in character, by Sontag's quirky desire to be both a popular artist and to offer a critique of populism.

In the recently released memoir by Sigrid Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, readers are once and for all disabused of any illusion that Sontag was not active in the construction of her most defining characteristic: that white swoosh that seemed a birthmark of austere genius. Nunez writes about their first meeting: "Her skin was sallow, and her hair—it would always bewilder me that so many people thought she bleached the white streak in her hair when it should have been obvious the streak was the only part that was its true color. (A hairdresser suggested that leaving one section undyed would look less artificial)."³ Obviously schooled in the Decadents, Sontag can be imagined quickly embracing the idea of artifice as being somehow more easily perceived as natural. At that time, those binaries—the natural and artificial—were less contested.

Before *Reborn* was released, David Rieff, Sontag's son and the editor of her diaries, wrote a moving, traumatized account of her death by leukemia. Rieff's *Swimming in a Sea of Death* is a strange book. It's hard to tell whom he attempts to humanize—himself or his mother (he manages, surprisingly, to do both)—but he reveals little of Sontag's "personality" or his own for that matter, providing instead a portrait of silences, uncomfortable topics that hang in the air between mother and son (and probably more often than not the living and the dying) that were rarely broached, but might have been (this nags at Rieff throughout the account, and appears to be the impetus behind it). The memoir is so repetitive, so suggestively clumsy, that one wonders if it will ever begin to approach its subject. It does magnificently, but really only at the point of Sontag's protracted, agonized death, when she is weakened, out of fight, and suddenly unable to get what she needs—more time, more life—from friends and family, doctors, or by the most invasive medical treatments available. It is only after the dire chemotherapy and obliteration of Sontag's immune system that Rieff seems able to approach his mother's bedside and look upon her, a victim of her own wishful thinking, her tenacious grasp on life (the other side of life—the unthinkable—was "extinction," "nothingness," in Sontag's words). This commitment to surviving the impossible odds she

faced with leukemia was one of the crueler benefits of Sontag's earlier experience with having beaten breast cancer—especially at a time when cancer was stigmatized and believed incurable. Survival endowed her with what might be considered a hard-won sense of exceptionalism. Rieff states, “She reveled in *being*; it was as straightforward as that. No one I have ever known loved life so unambivalently.”⁴

It may be that any real evaluation of Sontag's legacy as both a critic and activist should emerge from this insistence upon *being*. Perhaps, we won't glean more “objectivity” about her work by forcibly paring away her iconic status from her texts (if that were possible), and perhaps there is no greater nobility to her critical and activist position than the position she took on her deathbed, sublimating all comfort and reason for the narrow chance at survival. I would posit that any understanding of Sontag's uniquely American contribution to the role of “public intellectual” arrives from her embattled corporeal ontology—her criticism and her activism are determinedly concerned with moral action; she is not hindered by the myriad questions of agency, but rather, focused on a practicable discernment of moral action: *How might this metaphoric understanding of the problem make things better or worse? Can we afford to be flip in these times? Can we ever dispense with relativism? Is moral judgment always contingent, or might the moral have to exist outside the contingent?* This is where Sontag is determinedly *not cool*, and where her American pragmatism can make her appear less rigorous or less conceptual than the international theorists whose work she often admired, and who more willingly embraced decentered and multiple concepts of agency: feminist, post-ontological and networked theories of the “self.” Sontag, on questions of biopolitics and the cyborg body, would inevitably disappoint.⁵ Her presumption of an ethics that could trump historical relativism—let alone the buzzing drone of a permanent online present—is implied: a moral imperative should be an artist's first commitment, not a secondary concern. While toward the end of her life many disciplines and theories of art were adopting interpenetrating dialogues and for the most part promoting an entirely post-humanist theoretical approach, Sontag seemed to be getting simpler, more populist, and ever more political in her approach. She is remembered for many things, but

perhaps will never be forgotten for her brief essay in the *The New Yorker* written two days after September 11, 2001. What she wrote is still—this many years later, through two wars (if we accept the new moniker “Af-Pak” to mean a single war waged in two nations)—considered provocative. Her words stung not only because of their timing—so close to the event—but because they ask Americans to do what most are uncomfortable doing: admit that our foreign policy of the past 50 years has been a failure. Sontag was also calling on Americans not to allow the future course of events to be controlled by televised, sentimental punditry—common sense, in other words. In either case, after the George W. Bush years, her vigorous attempt to slow the train of warmongering seems eerily prescient now:

The disconnect between last Tuesday’s monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a “cowardly” attack on “civilization” or “liberty” or “humanity” or “the free world” but an attack on the world’s self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word “cowardly” is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday’s slaughter, they were not cowards.⁶

This isn’t great writing. Some would still see this as “blaming the victim.” But it is not mincing words, nor obfuscating its intentions. It is a simple call for Americans to take an honest inventory of their role in the world, and not to allow the yet-to-be constructed metaphor, “war on terror” to drive us lockstep over the precipice. Still, over the precipice we dropped. It will be other theorists who will determine whether drone strikes are cowardly, or at least as asymmetrical as the methods of warfare we find so amoral in our foes.

I mention this—Sontag’s brief, angry critique of America—to return to the very qualities I think define her as an American artist and intellectual: pragmatism in the face of devastation, blunt considerations, even bullying—but here, and always in Sontag, the forcefulness of her rhetoric stands in defiance against the easiest assumptions, the rapid loss of individual thinking that can occur in any crisis. The criticism this 9/11 commentary unleashed—and continues to unleash—is also distinctly American in its underlying assumption: the notion that a theorist is not a politician and therefore has no place in the making of practical things, useful statements. The trouble with Sontag is that she was a bit of what everyone loves separately, but not together: a literary star—glamorous, immediately recognizable; a real thinker (as opposed to a polymath)⁷; a generous critic; an activist. She was also a filmmaker and novelist. In America, these identities don’t sit well together. In fact, they are often seen as incompatible. Partially, this is because art is rarely seen as connected to moral or ethical discourse, and partly because discourse is rarely seen as connected to actual practice (our democracy is marked, almost always, by a whittling away of pesky ideals to arrive at pragmatic ends—so theory, morality, ethics have become, like the fine arts, inessential, marginal practices—inept, bloodless—which is why it surprises us when they are potent, bloody).

And yet, Sontag’s most popular writings are not about some little-known masterpiece of film or literature, but photography and disease. These books, *On Photography* (1977), *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988), really did reach people and influence thinking. That photographs were not recorded truth and that disease was not a manifestation of stress or, in the case of AIDS, God’s wrath, were radical thoughts in their time. Ultimately, Sontag was best known for her work on quotidian subjects—her critical acts were intended as works of intervention, reform. Both subjects—photography and disease—directly impact how we perceive and experience the world. They circumscribe, intensify, distort, and reconfigure our relationship to the human body. Photography and disease test our ethics; reframe our relationship to nature, our opposition or ambivalence toward it. They also quicken or deaden our response to our own history and to the observed world. They extend what we conceive of us as our history: photography allows us to lay claim to our past, and therefore our present experience;

and disease, of course, intervenes in that claim.

How we construct metaphors was central to Sontag; as well as how metaphors can stigmatize, become vehicles for our own sense of dread, our fear of mortal processes out of our control. In her most influential books, she grapples with the mediation of technology in how we observe and attempt to reconcile the limits of the body. She addresses the rapaciousness stoked by the photograph—rapaciousness for experience without presence, the process of personalizing and consuming images as one's store of lived experience.

She drew a clear distinction between *lived* experience and information—a distinction not common to many contemporary theorists. In a 1974 interview with Geoffrey Movius,⁸ she clarifies why photography compelled her as a subject:

...because virtually all the important aesthetic, moral and political problems—the question of “modernity” itself and of modernist “taste”—are played out in photography's relatively brief history. William K. Ivins has called the camera the most important invention since the printing press. For the evolution of sensibility, the invention of the camera is perhaps even more important.

In the same interview she provides an account of how photography has changed our relation to the world, as well as our comprehension of history:

By giving us an immense amount of experience that “normally” is not our experience. And by making a selection of experience which is very tendentious, ideological. While there appears to be nothing photography can't devour, whatever can't be photographed becomes less important. Not only do we know the world of art, the history of art, primarily through photographs, we know them in a way that no one could have known them before. Photographs convert works of art into items of information. They do this by making parts and wholes equivalent. The camera elevates the fragment to a privileged position. In this way, photography annihilates our sense of scale. It also does queer things to our sense of time. To be able to see oneself and one's parents as children is an experience unique to our time. The camera has brought people a new,

and essentially pathetic, relation to themselves, to their physical appearance, to aging, to their own mortality. It is a kind of pathos that never existed before.

From the earliest point in her career, it was clear that Sontag's primary concern was in attacking the methods whereby we appreciate or dismiss the experience of art based upon how well we identify with it, how easily it's assimilated. This accounts for the "militant"⁹ position Sontag assumes in her early essay: "Against Interpretation" (1964).¹⁰ This essay establishes Sontag's opposition to the personalization of art, to the appreciation of art as a telegraph with an encoded message. Part essay and part manifesto, "Against Interpretation" is a defense of art against its would-be clarifiers, its vivisectionists:

Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed.

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.

Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.

The aim of commentary on art should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.

Rarely has anyone attacked Sontag's denunciation of what today we would call the "democratization" of art—the fact that the photograph can be taken by anyone, held in the hand, captured by a phone, never printed and yet disseminated. There is a kind of unimaginable immediacy in the passing of images that doesn't comport with Sontag's early writing. Today the photograph sits

squarely in the arsenal of identity, created with the instantaneity of thought, uploaded to personal profiles, an indication of an individual's tastes and obsessions, a method of creating and projecting the "self." The "self" is merely an editor—not of experience—but of the *taste for images*. And Sontag, writing primarily in the late '60s and '70s during a period of energized cultural production and radicalized aesthetics, as an American preoccupied with what it meant to be an American, found herself at war with what she diplomatically called "philistinism." In fact, she was a partisan in the ideological battle against American, media-constructed and -defined "democracy." There was great reason to doubt technological innovation then as there is now, but it's no longer hip to express that distrust. Critique of media is only acceptable if one is a step ahead of it; otherwise, it risks becoming a relic akin to Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* or Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. Technologies—once exterior and "created"—are now interior and inchoate as consciousness itself. The camera, as Sontag notes, was the apparatus by which "self" and "other" became perpetually distinguished. The power of the image, Sontag wrote, was in how efficiently it could be consumed and assimilated. But since the publication of *On Photography* that assimilation has become total. Today, a more appropriate metaphor for the camera would be the self—as Warhol once cryptically suggested.

Sontag was predictably reviled for her reductive assumptions about the function of the photograph and the public's reception of the medium. Her concerns, throughout her career, were almost entirely about figurative photographs, and not photographic processes. And yet almost none of her adversaries have associated her critical project with her politics (a specifically human concern)—what she prefers to call her "moral" vantage. She was fiercely opposed to the association of technology with consciousness, with moral rectitude. Technology, Sontag reminds us, is never neutral or without agenda. The camera is not a witness, but a creator of realities. It has moral rectitude in the hands of those who recognize its power; it can be quite dangerous in unconcerned hands.

For Sontag, few people understood the responsibility that had to be employed in the use of such instruments. Her "elitism" was a stand against coercion, a championing of artistry over amateurism, ultimately a warning against the subjectivity abetted by technology:

Many people don't believe that one can give an account of the world, of society, but only the self—"how I saw it." They assume that what writers do is testify, if not confess, and a work is about how you see the world and put yourself on the line. Fiction is supposed to be "true." Like photographs.¹¹

Sontag—like John Berger—exemplifies the effort to challenge what mystifies us about art. But Sontag does this through a repudiation of analytic readings (by this I mean the assumption that a text must be "unpacked"), of rummaging depths, of creating anterior texts, in favor of pursuing the secrets of surfaces, the inherently persuasive and often dangerous power of forms. As a critic during the structuralist and post-structuralist periods, Sontag took the difficult position of assuming that moral consideration was essential to the creation and critical evaluation of art. Sontag's ethics derive from her awareness of being an American, the specific negotiations and considerations required of being from and living in a world superpower. That was a demand she tried to foist on Americans after 9/11, but also a responsibility she carried throughout her life. Sontag's essays never mythologize America, address it as a construct, an ideal, or an ideal gone wrong. It is always a political power—a hegemonic force, an act of prodigious self-assurance and belief—armed to the teeth.

There were other origins, besides her sense of being an American, of Sontag's pragmatism. The gravity of the Holocaust is inscribed in her critical sensibility, as is her experience with cancer. To put these two experiences together seems arbitrary—too closely linking the personal and historical for an artist who eschewed sentiment and carefully evaluated the scale of events—but Sontag was compelled to examine the impersonal impacts of both, or rather, the depersonalizing aspect of war and disease.

* * *

In her 1965 essay, *On Style*,¹² Sontag lays out the foundations by which she will confidently assume an historical and moral reading of works of art. According to Sontag, it is art that provokes the sensibilities needed for moral consideration and choice:

It is sensibility that nourishes our capacity for moral choice, and prompts our readiness to act, assuming that we do choose, and are not just blindly and unreflectively obeying. Art performs this “moral” task because the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life.

...Morality, unlike art, is ultimately justified by its utility: that it makes, or is supposed to make, life more humane and livable for us all. But consciousness—what used to be called, rather tendentiously, the faculty of contemplation—can be, and is, wider and more various than action. It has its nourishment, art and speculative thought, activities which can be described either as self-justifying or in no need of justification. What a work of art does is to make us see or comprehend something singular, not to judge or generalize. This act of comprehension accompanied by voluptuousness is the only valid end, and sole sufficient justification, of a work of art.

What is wanted by such a vantage point is that it do justice to the twin aspects of art: as object and as function, as artifice and as living form of consciousness, as the overcoming or supplementing of reality and as the making explicit of forms of encountering reality, as autonomous individual creation and as dependent historical phenomena.

Though Sontag credits Ortega y Gasset in partially developing her argument, it is Edward Said who, in his essay *Labyrinth of Incarnation*,¹³ best identifies Sontag’s philosophical maneuver. Said associates Sontag with Merleau-Ponty, and almost all of Said’s summaries of Merleau-Ponty’s thought are essential supplements to any reading of Sontag. Said writes:

Truth, [Merleau-Ponty] concludes, is based on what is real—and that is our perception of the world: perception becomes “not presumed true,” but may be “defined as access to truth.”

“...human reality can best be understood in terms of behavior (action given form) which is neither a thing nor

an idea, neither entirely mental nor entirely physical.

And quoting Merleau-Ponty:

The experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the task of knowledge and action.

Given Sontag's early assertions that art is directly connected to moral action, it is surprising to find that her outspoken political views have yet to be seen as an extension of her aesthetic approach. Moreover, considering Sontag's writings on cancer and AIDS, torture, the war zones of Hanoi and Sarajevo, on fascism, totalitarianism, and on genocide, it is surprising that no one has yet attempted to observe (without judgment) her "activist" positions with the nuanced stance she advocated for our engagement with works of art and literature. And yet Sontag's highest ideal as a critic was certainly to promote consideration, to inspire the careful acknowledgement of scale, and to draw attention specifically to the impositions of the metaphor and the photograph, two of the most powerful means by which experience is now defined as true, as given or having presence.

* * *

Consider her highly regarded essay on Leni Riefenstahl published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1975.¹⁴ The essay, entitled "Fascinating Fascism," begins with a review of Riefenstahl's photographs documenting the Nuba tribe of Sudan. Sontag's critique begins with a scrupulous correction of the information provided in *The Last of the Nuba's* introduction and dust jacket. The "self-vindicating" and "rehabilitating" biographical notes on (and possibly by) Riefenstahl are full of what Sontag calls "disquieting lies."

But Sontag has her sights on something other than merely clarifying Riefenstahl's record, taking to task the renowned Nazi filmmaker (*Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*) for her collaboration

with the Nazis, and the role her films had in not only recording Nazi events, but staging them, helping to provide and distill and disseminate that particular vision of power:

What is interesting about the relation between politics and art under National Socialism is not that art was subordinated to political needs, for this is true of dictatorships both of the right and of the left, but that politics appropriated the rhetoric of art—art in its late romantic phase.

Sontag—in the prescient, inimitable way she had of selecting subjects and articulating points about them that would later be seen as definitive—identified what we continue to refer to as the fascist aesthetic: notably, work that depicts or glorifies repressed sexuality, transforming that repression into a supposed spiritual force put into the service of the community.

It is not only Sontag's ability to offer pertinent analyses of highly specific aesthetics (she is also well known for bringing a gay aesthetic into the wider public domain with her famous essay of 1964, "Notes On Camp"¹⁵) that is worthy of reconsideration. Her profound ability to parse what aesthetics imply—what values they engage, what potential dangers they impose, what misconceptions they engender—exemplifies Sontag's greatest gifts as a moral philosopher and critic.

"Fascinating Fascism" argues a very important point, and one that may help dispel, or at least clarify, Sontag's elitism, her commitment to canonical high culture. Her position, in this regard, was really a refutation of *faddism*, of the idea of history as a continual supplanting of previous values, the idea that greater justice and inclusiveness is available only through the burying or augmenting of the past, or by shaming the past. This, it seems, had become a function of criticism, an agenda, and Sontag renounced it.

Sontag discerns how Riefenstahl's portraits of the last remaining Nuba in Sudan are in fact characteristic of the aesthetics of the Reich. Riefenstahl's hopelessly ennobling portraits of these proud natives are a reiteration of the fascist aesthetic in which self-control and submission are the signs of a pure, unifying, communal dignity. Sontag offers an incisive evaluation:

Riefenstahl claims to have arrived “just in time,” for in the few years since these photographs were taken the glorious Nuba have been corrupted by money, jobs, clothes. (And probably war—which Riefenstahl never mentions, since what she cares about is myth not history.)

More important to Sontag than Riefenstahl’s consistent and enduring Nazi aesthetic is the way in which a fascist aesthetic continues to assert itself in new forms and “under new banners”:

The ideal of life as art; the cult of beauty; the fetishism of courage; the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders).

The list catalogs what Sontag would—for the entirety of her writing career—position herself against.

But the most important, and perhaps least discussed, of Sontag’s “salutary lessons” in her lengthy critique of Riefenstahl’s book is not directed at Riefenstahl at all. Rather, it’s directed at those who prefer to see Riefenstahl’s work through a purely formalist lens. It is the cynical arbiters of culture for whom Sontag saves her harshest criticism. For those wishing to consider Riefenstahl’s images solely on the basis of their compositional beauty—their idealized stasis—divorced from the history of propaganda, Sontag warns:

Without a historical perspective, such connoisseurship prepares the way for a curiously absentminded acceptance of propaganda for all sorts of destructive feelings—feelings whose implications people are refusing to take seriously.

Sontag then makes a profound distinction—and ultimately defines the responsible spectatorship essential to her methodology and moral vision:

The hard truth is that what may be acceptable in elite culture may not be acceptable in mass culture, that tastes which pose only innocuous ethical issues as the property of a minority become corrupting when they become more established. Taste is context, and the context has changed.

Sontag asks that those concerned with culture rise to the ethical demands of the age, that those imbued with the power of discernment deploy it. Sontag tasks the intellectual with caution, with considering the impact of their aesthetic indulgences, their quips and easy aphorisms, their infatuation with what she calls “facile transposition and the making of cheap equivalences.”¹⁶ Sontag recognizes that a certain balance must be achieved and vigilance maintained in order to avoid simplistic moral dicta. Art must have a rigor besides being “right.” In her 1963 essay “Camus’ Notebooks,”¹⁷ Sontag writes, “A writer who acts as a public conscience needs extraordinary nerve and fine instincts, like a boxer. After a time, these instincts necessarily falter. He also needs to be emotionally tough.” In writing on Camus, Sontag outlines the pitfalls awaiting any artist’s undertaking of exemplary political sympathies:

Neither art nor thought of the highest quality is to be found in Camus. What accounts for the extraordinary appeal of his work is beauty of another order, moral beauty, a quality unsought by most 20th century writers. Other writers have been more engaged, more moralistic. But none have appeared more beautiful, more convincing in their profession of moral interest. Unfortunately, moral beauty in art—like physical beauty in a person—is extremely perishable. It is nowhere so durable as artistic or intellectual beauty. Moral beauty has the tendency to decay very rapidly into sententiousness or untimeliness.

Sontag points out Camus’s inability to take a position on the French occupation of Algeria, and writes tartly: “Moral and political judgment do not always so happily coincide.” And, in a great leap—and almost as autosuggestion—Sontag observes: “Camus’ life and work are not so much about morality as they are about the pathos of moral positions.”

* * *

It is this awareness of the pathos of moral positions that enables Sontag to avoid the prescriptive dogma of what writers must or must not do—what their modes of engagement should or should

not be. Her embrace of artistic approaches is expansive, and when judgmental, she is cautiously and justifiably so. The justification is always clarified, never a “going after,” and never without a careful assessment of an artist’s choices: what they chose to demonstrate or produce, and what they chose to withhold or omit.

In her lengthy 1982 essay on Roland Barthes, “Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes,”¹⁸ she concentrates her appreciation on Barthes’s “ethical character.” In a long, illuminating contrast of Barthes’s and Sartre’s work, Sontag elaborates the poles at which two of the century’s most important writers found themselves. Of Sartre, Sontag writes:

Riven by his love of literature (the love recounted in his one perfect book, *The Words*) and an evangelical contempt for literature, one of the country’s great *litterateurs* spent the last years of his life insulting literature and himself with that indigent idea, “the neurosis of literature.” His defense of the writer’s project is no more convincing. Accused of thereby reducing literature (to politics), Sartre protested that it would be more correct to accuse him of overestimating it. “If literature isn’t everything, it’s not worth a single hour of someone’s trouble,” he declared in an interview in 1960. “That’s what I mean by ‘commitment.’” But Sartre’s inflation of literature into “everything” is another brand of depreciation.

Barthes, too, might be charged with overestimating literature—with treating literature as “everything”—but at least he made a good case for doing so. For Barthes understood (as Sartre did not) that literature is first of all, last of all, language....Barthes preferred to avoid confrontation, to evade polarization. He defines the writer as “the watcher who stands at the crossroads of all other discourses”—the opposite of an activist or a purveyor of doctrine.

Barthes’s utopia of literature has an ethical character almost the opposite of Sartre’s....For Barthes, it is not the commitment that writing makes to something outside of itself (to a social or moral goal) that makes literature an instrument of opposition and subversion but a certain practice of writing itself: excessive, playful, intricate, subtle, sensuous—language which can never be that of power.

Barthes's praise of writing as a gratuitous, free activity is, in one sense, a political view. He conceives literature as a perpetual renewal of the right of individual assertion; and all rights are, finally, political. Still Barthes has an evasive relation to politics, and he is one of the great modern refusers of history. Barthes started publishing and mattering in the aftermath of World War II, which, astonishingly, he never mentions; indeed, in all his writing he never, as far as I recall, mentions the word "war." Barthes, who was not tormented by the catastrophes of modernity or tempted by its revolutionary illusions, had a post-tragic sensibility. He refers to the present literary era as "a moment of gentle apocalypse." Happy indeed the writer who can utter such a phrase.

Sontag could not. There are no gentle apocalypses in Sontag.

* * *

It is perhaps presumptuous and simplifying to suggest that cancer, which Sontag had twice and ultimately succumbed to, may have heightened her sense of mortality, of the relationship of the body to the making and enjoying of art—and moreover, to the urgent, or what she called "serious" functions and implications of art. Certainly, *Illness as Metaphor* is not a book of theory, however well researched. It does not hold its subject at a distance, but reduces distance, pares away the popular beliefs that disease is retribution, a manifestation of God's disapproval, the consequence of a lack of self-care, and a sign of weakness. Sontag's aesthetic and moral positions did not generate from her experience of cancer; her sensibilities were established earlier than her diagnosis. But mortal illness is a frame, a condition in which one might move against platitudes, against sympathy, against "objective" wisdom and subjective subterfuge.

In many ways, Sontag undermined elitism by writing books that had such immediate and wide reception, that were so influential in changing, or at least challenging, people's deeply held beliefs. Eliot Weinberger, in a 2007 review of Sontag's posthumously compiled, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*,¹⁹ does cite *Illness as Metaphor* as having "made a genuine difference in the world." Weinberger uses his review to evaluate Sontag's career and output; it may have been the first example of a critical assessment

of Sontag's legacy. But Weinberger insists upon seeing Sontag's criticism of the U.S. and Israeli occupations—her writing on these subjects is often hasty, often “slight” as he describes it—as generating from Sontag's celebrity rather than her critical positions. And his criticism of Sontag's use of the word “serious,” (and by suggestion, her seriousness) suggests that he has not paid attention to the continuity of the thoughts and concerns expressed throughout her writings on aesthetics.

For the preface to the 1996 republication of *Against Interpretation*, Sontag wrote “Thirty Years Later...,” an account of her own feelings on the 30th anniversary of the book's publication. Neither oblivious to nor dismissive of the praise and criticism she'd received during her stormy and very public career, Sontag acknowledges the cultural shifts that occurred over the span of her writing, and subjects her own work to the lens of history:

When I denounced...certain kinds of facile moralism, it was in the name of a more alert, less complacent seriousness. What I didn't understand (I was surely not the right person to understand this) was that seriousness itself was in the early stages of losing credibility in the culture at large, and that some of the more transgressive art I was enjoying would reinforce frivolous, merely consumerist transgressions. Thirty years later, the undermining of standards of seriousness is almost complete, with the ascendancy of a culture whose most intelligible, persuasive values are drawn from the entertainment industries. Now the very idea of the serious (and of the honorable) seems quaint, “unrealistic,” to most people, and when allowed—as an arbitrary decision of temperament—probably unhealthy, too.

I suppose it's not wrong that *Against Interpretation* is read now, or reread, as a pioneering document from a bygone age. But that is not how I read it, or...wish it to be read....The judgments of taste expressed in these essays may have prevailed. The values underlying those judgments did not.

It is worth revisiting those values, not merely to provide a more comprehensive idea of what Sontag's work accomplished—and what it aspired to—but to remind us of what is urgent. Eliot

Weinberger somewhat dolorously says of Sontag: “Arguably the most important literary figure or force of the last forty years, she may ultimately belong more to literary history than to literature.” But of course, Sontag’s appeal was to history, to the frame by which any artistic endeavor could find its moral relevance and application. She may have wished the act of writing to be free of such gravity, but her conscience, and her subject—which was always, ultimately, the treatment of the body—would not allow such indulgences.

Notes

1. Daphne Merkin, “The Dark Lady of the Intellectuals,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 29, 2000.
2. Daryll Pickney, “The Book of Lists: Susan Sontag’s Early Journals,” *The New Yorker*, December 22, 2008.
3. Sigrid Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, Atlas & Co., New York, 2011.
4. David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.
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6. Susan Sontag, “Talk of the Town,” *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001.
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8

A Knotted Beach Chair

Charles Lowe

I'm meeting a crossroads. It's a speech contest. Each Business Speech Major has to choose a topic: Love, does it have a place at college; technology, a good thing or not, and is there such a thing as a simple life? That shouldn't be a problem, but here I've been up several nights studying a piece of nightlight cutting into the post of a bunk bed. Well, if I don't have a choice, at least I have a beginning. Here it is; *I must have been five and am lying on a roll-out chair and reading a comic book. I can't remember the book but am coloring in a face with an orange crayola. Grandpa's on a chair that's strung with a knotty bamboo. Grandpa hates the news and is using the Science & Technology page to block the sunlight from entering his almond-shaped eyes. He's snoring loudly, enough to make up a small wind storm.* But after that, I'm stuck, and that won't do, so I try to see if the talk can be made to last, let's say two minutes and be done with it, but even while pausing, I can squeeze out no more than 20 seconds tops.

Having picked up a passing grade in Speech 1, 2, and 3 (that teacher doesn't have interesting topics either), I understand every speech has a point, so what's the point of lying on a knotty bamboo chair each afternoon and evening? Okay I know: it can show a simple life or a life perhaps without technology, but every time I believe I've located a way out, a new detail jumps out, lousing up the

whole arrangement. Dad makes that point: “You just don’t know how to focus, honey. Every time you start something, you get lost in a bottle, possibly of French wine, and pretty soon the whole delivery is lost.” For dad, everything’s about wine. He sells wines in a shop with back steps trailing off into the Hai River and likes to make the point that he is never off his feet. Okay, back to grandpa.

My grandpa uses his days up asleep on a tightly strung beach chair, *pause*. I remember fondly watching him, *pause; nothing more*.

After that, some other lines jump into the picture and confuse the main point. There’s the knotty bamboo. It’s pushed up against a scholar tree. The scholar has wide canopied leaves with white blossoms that stick to grandpa’s belly which is peeking out some buttons: his arms two thick logs and him wheezing like he’s scratching against the broad and flat leaves of a scholar. He snores. I prefer his deep throated breathing. It becomes a game. I have other games; for instance, watching his backside slide into the knotted bamboo anchoring the chair. Sometimes, I watch the cushion. It is round with a bulge that sticks into the upper trunk of the scholar. During the dust storm season in early March, the sharp bark and Grandpa’s belly become compassed with red cinder, and I traipse out onto a matted rectangle behind our apartment house which the neighborhood takes as a garbage dump that was used by the Japanese as a killing field. I try to take in the field just as grandpa describes it, a few lowlifes and busy bodies lined up by the Japanese and buried in shallow ditches that become papered over with thin plaits of swamp grass.

Okay, the Japanese are parading a few lowlifes and busy bodies; my neighborhood is full of them, and the residents bury the dead bodies beneath the thick stained grass because they are forced to or out of politeness. But does any of that matter? So I put off the end, hoping that my mind will be a sponge and suck up a line that the judges can take without thinking. I will be done with the mess then, and even when the guards unlock the back stairwell and we tumble into the auditorium, all of us scrambling through a tight way: I still have hope. All of us girls stuck together in the back two rows. The judges are on cushioned chairs up front, the Dean stacking sesame seeds on the left corner of a foldout table until he’s ready to go.

The other judge, an older student (I don’t have his name), has

his notebook out and is wearing thin framed glasses with equally thin lens. Ai-Li whispers he's the Dean's favorite. Ai-Li is my roommate. We girls sleep on four bunks, luggage jammed up against the posts, combs and cell phone chargers all over a moldy floor, pure chaos.

Ai-Li has a throaty laugh; she's our clever girl. But I'm not so lucky. I draw 15, four slots below Ai-Li and five below Wu-Ling who lives inside a sheet of glass and watches *Downton Abbey* nighttimes, picking up a British accent -- the envy of each Business English Major. Ai-Li jokes the accent tastes like lime, our talking bird is jealous. Wu-Ling's the only real competition. The rest of us are nobodies, though at first I'm thinking I may be wrong. The first guy's got on an ironed t-shirt (his mother must have done that) with orange fringes and follows all the pointers that our teacher has stuck in with the flat end of a pencil. *Smile* even if the room grows damp, and the auditorium stinks of rotting blossoms. *Breathe evenly. Don't bother with emotion*, okay, you're a perfect one of us. Don't look down at the computer table. *It holds nothing for you*. Step to the microphone. The room is quiet enough. *I can hear my grandpa's snoring and the laundry shaking on the line below our apartment*. The kid starts talking about moving to New Zealand. *People eat meat there every day, sometimes twice. There's no racism*. That's an interesting point, and I vow, when I get back to our bunk to find the island on a map.

But I'm alone for now. The judge has his thin frames on the tip of his nose and is shuffling paper. Some girl yanks at her shoelaces. Several boys needle each other; two fall off their metal foldout chairs, starting off the Dean to give our teacher an angry look. Wu-Ling, our dreamy girl, is of course off in her fog, but the Dean makes the kid cross over the open palm of a stage dummy covering the middle step of some shaky stairs before the Dean lets go of his truth, "Life rests in worries. Death lurks in idleness," smiling to let us know that he has unwound a knotty question.

We all let out a breath, glad we're not the one facing the Dean. The kid tugs at the edges of his T-shirt and offers, "In New Zealand?"

Good comeback, all of us think, but the Dean is back to his sesame shells. He's fixed on them, stacking them neatly on a foldout table while the student judge's balancing his thin framed glasses on the tip of his slender nose. That's when I return to my grandpa.

He's busy snoring on a torn and bunched up pillow. I am reading a comic book on a cloth beach chair hovering close to the ground. The chair's been left out overnight, and Mom has to put down a towel to keep the moldiness from sticking to my back. I remember being fixed on a comic when my grandpa tumbles to hit the ground. The sound of Grandpa's tree trunk arms makes a large thump, causing the knotted bamboo anchoring his beach chair to shake vigorously.

I hear still the sound of a knotty beach chair shaking vigorously and am sure I have found an answer; *death lurks between the folds of the Technology & Science page of The Tianjin Daily that Grandpa places over his nose and mouth every early afternoon until dinner.* But that answer leaves out an awful lot; for example, as soon as the Japanese leave, Grandpa sticks the tightly strung beach chair against the backside of a scholar; then, uses a little *guanxi* (his elder sister knows a boss) to find a job at the university. *Perfect*, he becomes a Dean so locks himself in his office, making certain to see as few visitors as possible. Mom tells with a throaty laugh how he has a secretary tell any visitor (except his boss and a few Committee big shots) that he's out, and about 2, after breaking for a steamed oblong bun stuffed with pork and garlic, returns to the knotted up chair where he closes his eyes and lets the wind sway him until suppertime.

That's his routine--mom spits out. Mom wishes to have nothing to do with Grandpa. She doesn't breathe that into words. She has dad for that, but after Grandma dies, (does dad grow bitter having to pay to burn that old ghost): what are we to do? We hide Grandpa in a room not much larger than a closet, not that any of that matters.

Grandpa spends his days and some evenings (when it's warm enough) on a knotted beach chair. Mom explains the strategy. Grandpa's not much of a success, but the tallest blade is the first to be cut, and Grandpa's definitely not the tallest blade, so when the troubles start and all the other teachers and officers at the college become revisionist troublemakers emitting the odor of stinky chrysanthemums, my grandpa's left alone. Very few are aware that he works on campus, so if idleness catches up finally, it certainly takes its time, allowing him to survive the terrible times; then, sell housing which in theory isn't completely his own (the District has leased to him the apartment) before retiring to a knotted beach

chair until falling into some tangled stems fed by the bones of some nobodies, not that these accidents have a chance to save me.

Anybody can tell you that. The next few contestants don't help much either. One girl tries combining topics, explaining: *before the financial crisis, I met with friends. Now my life is simple. I have an iPod and don't need to talk to nobody.* The Dean tilts his face forward, sucks on more sesame seeds and nods his head in agreement. With what, I try piecing together, figuring if there's a point, I can thread in that point and maybe come out with a respectable score. That's all I want. Ai-Li teases me on that very point. All the other girls are climbers. Some want jobs with a big export firm. Others wish to meet a foreigner, get a green card and end up in New Zealand or Hoboken. Even Wu-Ling is a climber; maybe most of all. I'm not talking about the accent that she's grown to deal with foreign buyers visiting her dad's trade company or the hourglass hips or the sheet of glass that she uses to keep in her thoughts. All of us girls can't imagine taking a four hour plane ride alone; then to be away from our mom for four years with only a tightly woven sheet to keep off the desert flies that flood every city, so Wu-Ling's mom believes.

"Daixuan-mei will never have that fate," Ai-Li, our little talking bird, adds.

True enough, I will never leave; well maybe, I'll be in a different apartment but close enough for me to make my favorite, tomatoes and eggs over fried rice, and on Saturdays, gossip with mom and with some cousins over sticky buns with a sweet bean inside. Not that any of that matters; my number's soon to be up, and I have to discover more than that grandpa prefers using the Science & Technology page for sun block. The next speaker I don't recognize, while Wu-Ling seems lost in her thoughts. "It's a new girl," Ai-Li adds with a throaty laugh, though later I find the girl isn't new but has recently switched majors.

Our new speaker is short--to let you know how short, a few centimeters smaller than I am. I reach above my grandpa's belt buckle and remain small enough to put my head against his belly. This girl though has as little chance as the others. She doesn't speak into the podium (our teacher has warned us about that), and she's dressed well enough, her checkered skirt pleated, but her voice has a shriek, and she likes to leap off the wooden slabs of the stage whenever wishing to make a point; for example, when her boyfriend

leaves her, explaining that her voice sounds harsh like a man's.

At first, I hate my voice, so I go back to him, begging him to take me back, pounding on the door of his room until my knuckles go red from bleeding.

The girl holds out her knuckles. The student judge moves about his thin framed glasses and squints as though figuring whether the visual evidence adds to the quality of the speech. The girl smiles showing a piece of bok choy leaf between her teeth; *he takes me back but he starts talking about my belly and my backside, she giggles. He leaves me.*

For a while, I am broken up. I start asking myself who myself am, am I a girl with a wrong sized belly and with a voice like a male bird, so I'm quiet and study hard. My life's simple, but one day, I have stinky tofu and am talking to a woman who's selling the tofu and feel dead inside but wake up and start singing for some mysterious reason the mushroom song about a girl who gets mushrooms, well you all know the song, and I feel better and start to sing more and study less, so I get myself a boyfriend; then, I say his belly has a funny shape and talk about his nose, it's flat like a tree stomp, kind of, so he adores me, very much. I leave the new one high and dry and feel a lot better and learn the meaning of a simple life, which I have told you.

We girls study the carpet tearing up at our feet. Wu-Ling smiles politely, maybe she's not listening. Ai-Li clears her throat. The Dean starts acting lively. He's playing with a sesame shell on the foldout and doesn't bother with a question. The kid with the thin lens marks down his score: 2 for content, 1 for pronunciation, 1 for overall impression. The highest score is 10, I note, having casually moved from the back row, my head about touching the student judge's rounded shoulders. Ai-Li puts her lips next to my ears that are sloped the same as my grandpa's: "Boyfriends are never."

I smile cutely, not that I get the point; I don't but Ai-Li must know, being the only girl in the dorm with a boyfriend. Ai-Li takes me one afternoon to watch him play football. She explains the boy's an idiot, but she likes the shape of his butt. Ai-Li can be very direct. That's her game, and once after studying her boyfriend, he's a fullback: Ai-Li drags me to a drugstore where she has me mull thoroughly some boxes of condoms to find which gives the snuggest fit. Ai-Li brings over the sales clerk, an old lady who perhaps wishes

at that moment to be resting on a tightly strung chair above a couple of heroic Chinese but instead was being asked which “condom in the sales clerk’s general experience provides a suitable fit: considering that the size of a typical Chinese penis was overestimated by the typical foreign multinational.”

Ai-Li bends over and says to the clerk who’s adorned in a nicely checkered blouse: “Everyone knows foreigners produce the best.”

The clerk’s cheeks and chin turn a nice chrysanthemum red. I also look down at the glass case. It shows Ai-Li grinning broadly: her blotchy skin dissolving in a green pack of chewing gum. Then, I feel my breath clouding up the glass case and remember that still I have nothing more to say than *I have once been very young and read a comic book while listening to my grandpa wheeze and snore on a pillowed beach chair*. I can’t fathom the Dean of the Business English School being pleased with that picture and become fixed on Wu-Ling; as usual, she has a glass sheet around her head, the glass sticking into my own fingers and open palm. I remember right before the start of the grave-sweeping holiday, a little less than a week before the contest, Wu-Ling gives us girls stories. That’s not unusual. Plenty of us girls give out stories, Ai-Li’s have pockets full of deep throaty laughter and cute winks, but Wu-Ling lets go of hers with an unsteady breath that Lady Mary would use if Lady Mary could speak Chinese (this is how we all hear her subtitles). Urümqi where her family works is packed with Han Chinese like us.

Grandfather has made me his favorite and decides to take me (who won’t take our girl with very pale skin and vanishing hips) out. Some minorities are living in the desert surrounding our city. Grandfather says their women have knotted up scarves over their faces. The scarves are made of a thin cloth that the powerful wind does not shred into thin pieces. At the time, I am not much higher than Daixuan-mei is (Wu-Ling says with a cute smile) and could barely get my head above the dash. At first the road is paved with uneven sprinklings of gravel, but when we leave the Han area, it becomes covered with red grainy sand, which catches the windshield so that the two of us are blind. Grandpa brakes and opens up the driver’s side window. A car is on the side of the road. It is about the same as grandpa’s compact, down to the body, except the other is turned on its side. Its wheels spin like an insect without wings. I study the shattered glass on the driver’s side and

find a knotted-up scarf. Brown and white stripes cover its slender fabric. A woman's lips peak through a torn middle and leak what looks to be a breath. Grandfather turns the key several times. A red chunk of sand coats our windshield. The two of us are blind again. I never ask what happens to the woman or the knotted scarf. I know that my grandfather will never answer. All of us girls are quiet, absorbing Wu-Ling's story like little sponges: her accent coating our skin and filling our breath. It is past the dorm curfew. I shut off the lights; that's my job. Then, Ai-Li taps my elbow and asks if I want to go. "Where?" ready to follow her to New Zealand or Urümqi.

"Away," she laughs, "my guy's got a buddy."

I smile cutely and say, "I know," and this time I really do, the buddy having chunky arms and an invisible neck, just my type: his family with an auto business taking up two lots bordering the killing field, where his family is firmly planted. But I surprise myself and answer that I want to spend the four-day weekend preparing for a speech contest. Ai-Li shrugs. The other girls also leave, stripping their mattresses: the four-day holiday giving an excuse for a laundry run. The dormitory empties, and I close my eyes, letting my lips loose to suck at the only paragraph that I've been able to put together. The lines blur as a result of my unfortunate habit and look like several small streams instead of the parts to a single river. Wu-Ling pushes at our door, a bottom hinge broken; it's one in the morning. All of us have left, so I am finally able to study her eyes. They have lines blurring like the picture of my grandfather (or hers) spread out on the middle line of a notebook with a red line bordering a left column.

"Wu-Ling-mei," I mumble underneath my breath.

Wu-Ling looks up. We girls call each other little sister all the time, but no one's considered sticking Wu-Ling with the tag. Wu-Ling returns to the edge of her lower bunk and starts ordering her books and papers for the next day's study.

"It's that you look tired," I decide to explain.

Wu-Ling nods, "I miss home, Daixuan-mei," and relaxes her palms against a wooden post holding her and Ai-Li's beds together.

Wu-Ling draws out a photo of her father, mom, and grandpa from a side pocket of a book bag: her parents, even her grandpa

share the same slender hips and pencil thin eyebrows and I say thinking of my own family, "Yours is beautiful."

We become quiet. Wu-Ling goes outside to the shower facilities, and even though I've already showered and brushed my teeth, I take a break from my speech on a knotted beach chair to go after my roommate. The road between the dorm and the washing facility has bulletin boards on both sides, and I make certain to stay near the middle so the staples don't stick me. Wu-Ling bends down and covers her face with brownish water before flooding her face with suds; Wu-Ling squints as if she's looking too close at the sun, and reaches for a bow knotting her hair in place.

I'm shocked to see my roommate's wavy black hair tumble over a pair of slender shoulders. Wu-Ling shakes her hair and picks up her tube of toothpaste along with a plastic handled hairbrush. I palm a hairpin while picking out a strand that may have blocked the drain. When I get back, I expect to hear all of us including me chirping away. But the room is quiet, the flies and night crawlers leaking through the one torn screen. Wu-Ling takes a cotton cover fringed with an intricate mesh and puts the sheet over her flat nose. And I study my roommate's almond-shaped eyes and clear sheeted forehead except for a pencil-thin birthmark; then, shut off the lights and listen to my roommate's uneven breath. A few boys are talking outside, so I grow frightened and close my eyes when I feel a tapping on my shoulder.

Wu-Ling is standing on a lower bed, her undershirt draping down to the knees. I reach over to tap her bare calves; then, follow her to her lower bunk, and Wu-Ling covers me with the sheet that her mother gave her to fight off the flies that swarm through the dust lighting up Urümqi at night until market time.

Wu-Ling puts her head against my chest. I close my eyes again, though this time, I find myself against my grandpa's belly stuck with the flattened petals of a scholar. I feel then her nails break off in my wrist, and when I awake, expect to see a line of blood strung down the side of my arm, but there are no breaks, and that's my excuse for disappearing before dawn for a walk across the campus to the washroom where I stay for an hour and after that, sleep with the other bookworms in the basement of the library before, in the early morning (never looking at Wu-Ling), follow a piece of nightlight cutting into the post between her and Ai-Li's bed.

But I'm also excited, a part of me coated with a layer of her pencil-thin breath. Then, over fried eggs and tomatoes, my shoulder sore from sleeping on a desk flooded with a damp draft, floating through the basement of the library: I give a speech to my parents; *do you remember how I used to sleep on a sheet covered with the sweat of the leaves grown out of heroes. Now, I've met a friend who shared with me a sheet thin enough to be a piece of glass: simple, huh?*

But their reaction won't be simple. Mom won't say a word. Her forehead would be a white sheet, and she would go into her separate bottle which would be well scrubbed; mom's very good with the cloth, but dad would look like he was sucking down a stack of sesame until coming to the part about comrade pig and stop talking to me for good. Then, I start considering that maybe he's right. Wu-Ling's a comrade pig, a girl preferring love with another girlfriend, so I have to make the speech about not wanting to complicate our lives. Then, there's the what-if game. What if Wu-Ling wants me to explain whether it's the slope of her belly, the contour of her hips--even the taste of her voice? I would have to leave, of course locking myself in my parents' apartment. What if Wu-Ling crosses then the common field patching over some nobodies, pausing to put her delicate palm against a well knotted beach chair before letting loose a voice (like a sparrow's perhaps) that, I'm surprised, can survive her diligent study of a British TV hit. And what if she starts pounding on a door that my family has purchased custom-made from a recently opened mall, until my father or maybe my mom chooses to undo a lock. And what if I end up facing Wu-Ling alone, her fist marked with short red lines stretching up the side of her hand?

I decide (to be honest, the decision's simple) never to speak with my friend again, and I haven't let a word in her direction until this speech contest when I will have to stand in front of her and speak on a subject that I haven't chosen. I try to picture Wu-Ling. Most likely, Wu-Ling won't show much. She'll keep the glass over her, while practicing her *Downton Abbey* accent, and may not see me even. At that, I feel a stab in the side of my belly creeping up into my chest and into my throat and nasal cavities, which doesn't matter; my number's up. I don't know what road to take but start up the wooden stairs that have been stuck as an afterthought to the

E&F V.XI

wooden stage and walk over the foot of a dummy before standing in front of the Dean who has by now spit out enough empty shells to put together a pyramid. Then, I start in about the comic book and about a well knotted beach chair above the leaves nourished by waves of ancestors buried beneath the ground, figuring that once I start, my story will take care of itself.

8

Markson's Pier

David Ewald and Stuart Ross

Writer is not David Markson.

Writer is only emulating—not plagiarizing—David Markson.

Ries steals too much from Beethoven. All steal, but Ries by handfuls.

Writer had never heard of David Markson until the summer of 2002 when he (Writer) traveled to New York to attend a conference.

Writer had a stopover in Pittsburgh that summer.

Pittsburgh.

As an exercise, Pissarro and Cezanne often worked together,

independently, on the same subject.

Say it's not a Duchamp. Turn it over and it is.

Writer once again finds himself in an airplane. 20,000 feet and descending.

Charles Dopplet, inventor of the dopp kit.

The plane is an Embraer E-190. Today it is carrying 66 passengers and four crew members.

Writer is amazed that with all that is going on outside, the plane remains in the air.

Writer is not of his time, but how is that possible?

Hemingway's father committed suicide with a Civil War pistol.

I am of the 18th century, said Renoir.

In the 1870s.

"Flight attendants: prepare for landing."

The Chicago Public Library is my alma mater.
Thought Mamet.

The second part of *Don Quixote* would likely not have been written had a false sequel not appeared first.

Successfully sued for plagiarism, George Harrison was.

The number of passengers on Colgan Air Flight 3407 who thought, before the plane crashed on the night of February 12, 2009, they were smart to not fly on the following day, Friday the 13th.

David Markson's odd criticism of Bob Dylan in *The Last Novel*.

This interminable novel.

Wrote a critic named Michiko Kakutani of Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*.

In 1892, while still a preteen, Helen Keller stood accused of plagiarism. Acquitted by one vote, she remained paranoid for the rest of her life.

Although characters watch TV in *The Cosby Show*, the actual screen is not revealed until season five—and then to show only the characters themselves.

Sante Fe, New Mexico, Wallace Stegner died in.

Writer purchased four copies of *The Last Novel*: two at the Strand Bookstore, \$4.95 new, one off of Amazon.com, \$1.24 used, and one at City Lights Books, \$12.95 new.

All of them lost. Or given to friends.

The good is to know not to know how much one is knowing.
Said Stefan Wolpe.

There's no need to return it, being what Kafka told friends after
lending them a book.

"I was like a mother to you."
"What sort of mother were you, who killed our mothers?"

At times I felt like a thief because I heard words, lines, saw people
and places—and used it all in my writing.
Said William Carlos Williams.

The anti-Christ died. Oh, what wonderful news!

How few of a story's details can one tell and still tell a story?
Asked Jennifer Howard in her review of *Vanishing Point*.

15,000 feet.

Michael Crichton died the day of Barack Obama's election.

The only important works today are works which can no longer be
regarded as works.
Thought Adorno.
In 1949.

The impact on English literature had Chaucer died in the Black

E&F V.XI

Death rather than surviving it as a boy.

Helmut Newton once rented an apartment in London after being told Black Death victims were buried in the backyard.

How many passengers on Florida Air Flight 90 had seen *Airplane!* before the afternoon of January 13, 1982?

With regard to creation: the notion of an object, slipping away, that seems missing.

Mahler's suggestion to a group of Schoenberg's students that the study of Dostoyevsky is more important than the study of counterpoint.

Writer complaining of remakes, when one of his favorite songs, Double You's "Please Don't Go," is just that.

The G.I. Joe action figures he played with as a boy—remakes from the original 1964 figures.

March 1, 2010, Howard Barry Hannah died on.

Writer wishes he had never heard of David Markson.

To live is to defend a form, thought Holderlin.

Wordsworth owned fewer than three hundred books.

Mary Waters had a great deal of faith in her son's education.

The Mysteries of David Markson.

Anton Diabelli's name might have been lost to history if not for Beethoven's set of variations based on a Diabelli theme.

Appleton, Wisconsin, Harry Houdini was born in.

Count Ferdinand Ernst Gabriel von Waldstein.

Why not: Harry Houdini was born in Budapest, Hungary.

Triumphant...plangent verbal music...altogether wonderful.
Wrote Michael Dirda in *The Washington Post Book World*.

The last time anyone opened a book by Roger Peyrefitte.

Seneca wrote his plays to be read rather than performed.

George Roger Waters! It's time to go to school!

Poe was adopted.
And later disinherited.

"After 39 years, this is all I've done."

E&F V.XI

The haunting final scene of *The Land That Time Forgot* in which the protagonist, having survived the end of the dinosaurs, treks across the barren icy land, the music swelling, the camera panning, his female companion at his side.

Jonathan Franzen, blindfolded, composing passages of *The Corrections*.

Joyces write. Readers read.

Talent borrows, genius steals.

“Yes, I believe you.”

The Land That Time Forgot as condemnation of the early twentieth century German war machine.

Hamartia.

Adjusted for inflation (2009 U.S.), the sum total Edgar Rice Burroughs earned for his first published story, serialized in 1912, was \$8,779.47.

Writer’s first paid sale earned him \$5 in 2008.

Could the method of Socrates’s execution—ordering him to drink hemlock—be carried out at all successfully, with anyone, in the 21st century?

No way am I going to drink that.

New York Hospital, Manhattan, 1:21 A.M. May 16, 1990.

“Drop the curtain, Collins. I can’t go any further.”

The similarities in the personality of Christine Chubbuck and Christopher McCandless, tragic deaths eighteen years apart. An overbearing concern for the world’s problems, an intense urge to step in and make things right. The inability to get people to just listen.

The most photographed bus in America.

I even think of Old Dean Moriarty, the father we never found.

Penny dreadfuls.

Diamond v. Chakrabarty.

Homosexuals are the only true radicals, thought David Hurles.

Emanuel Schikaneder, born Johann Joseph Schickeneder.

Edgar Rice Burroughs had the means to escape Chicago during the flu epidemic of 1891.

Schoenberg. Rachmaninov. Stravinsky. Mann. Brecht. Huxley. Isherwood. Alma Mahler-Werfel.

E&F V.XI

All lived in Los Angeles in the late 1930s.

You are not Kafka.

John Coltrane released *Giant Steps* nine years before Neil Armstrong's moonwalk.

Encino, California. March 19, 1950.

Arias.

The last animated feature film Walt Disney had a hand in was *The Jungle Book*, the theatrical release of which he did not live to see.

Wondering if Andrea Yates ever saw *Medea*.
Shaquan Duley as well.

Accused of plagiarism, Jerry Kosinski asphyxiated himself with a plastic bag.

The Menendez Brothers: *The Amityville Horror*.

Walter Elias Disney.

A little book.

Being one of the original definitions of the word *libel*.

Baltimore-Washington-Poe International Airport.

Cold One.

Abraxas Aaran.

What song is playing on the cockpit voice recorder in the final half hour of American Eagle Flight 4184?

The last time someone read *Maggie: A Girl on the Streets*, and talked to someone else about it who also just read it. Passionately, over house wine, in late summer. And then kisses, imported cigarettes, midnight dinner, pot, before meeting some friends, before back to the apartment.

Newport News-Williamsburg-Styron International Airport.

Charlie Victor Romeo.

The Eight Stooges.

October 30, 1987, Joseph Campbell died on.

Despite many preferring to believe he died on Halloween.

The unlikelihood that Anne Sexton thought of Christine Chubbuck in the final moments before succumbing to carbon monoxide poisoning on October 4, 1974, two and a half months after Chubbuck's own suicide.

East Village, New York City. 2:39 A.M. April 5, 1997.

E&F V.XI

Felix Salten once boxed Karl Kraus's ears.

Writer remembers a passbook, a Tootsie Roll bank, a dozen Morgan dollars.

Culpeper's *Herbal*.

Gustav Freytag.

Quando men' vo soletta.

Anthropologie.

da Vinci was a vegetarian.

Auden's two ambitions: to get a word in the OED and a chapter in the history of English prosody.

One never steps into the same Auden twice.
Markson says somewhere.

Pythagoras's existence is traceable almost solely as quotations in the writings of his successors.

Reynolds.

Alban Berg owned a Ford Cabriolet.

Of August Sanders's five requirements to be met in order to capture world history, one was the inclusion of a date.

Never tell a Marine you are gay. Tell him you are a cocksucker.
Instructs Bobby Garcia.

The love of ass in *Springer's Progress*.

Gesamtkunstwerk.

Pete Tchaikovsky.

It means I never have to work again.

Being Don McLean's response to the question "What does 'American Pie' mean?"

Yeats was tone deaf.

Tommy, the Unsentimental.

Vermeer's "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary," large and uncharacteristic, may well have been commissioned.

Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder.

The confusion of the names Oscar Wao and Oscar Wilde in

E&F V.XI

conversation.

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* in some ways like Vermeer's "Martha and Mary"?

Writer will clean anything to not write.

Emil.

Michael Jackson once took his children to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles.

The show must go on, someone was the first to say.

Blanket.

A Gunsmoke game cartridge, a Garbage Pail Kids poster, a T&C Surf Design t-shirt.

Procter and Gamble's Herbal Essences.

Quid Pro Quo.

Pottery Barn.

Stanley Kubrick's love of Nicole Kidman's ass in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

The number of people on the Titanic who had as part of their last meal iceberg lettuce.

Judith Barsi and Adrienne Frantz were born a day apart. Only the latter actress reached adulthood.

Oslo-Ibsen International Airport.

The frightening assumption that the last sound Deborah Gail Stone heard, besides her own screams, was an American folk ballad sung by puppets.

Reno-Tahoe-Van Tillburg Clark International Airport.

Ronald Lauder used his Bar Mitzvah money to buy his first Schiele drawing.

Harpenden, Hertfordshire, England. Hour unknown. March 7, 1999.

Coyote Ugly as sociological study: America's life not long before September 11, 2001. A better study than Andres Dubus III's 2008 novel *The Garden of Last Days*.

Find half a page you love.

Being the unattributed comment written in the margins of a Dubus I paperback Writer once came across.

Schaudenfreude.

E&F V.XI

Kurt Cobain's awe upon hearing *The White Album*, telling his manager: this is *good*.

Samuel Beckett once sat through a doubleheader at Shea Stadium.

The friendship and rivalry of David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen.

The end of Myla Goldberg's book deal.

The end of any book deal.

Tomorrowland.

The Cosby Show Season I used, *Reader's Block* used, a Cuisinart ice cream maker, new.

The rage on the tenth page.

Everything I hate is here?

Gustav Schleicher (D-TX).

Coco Chanel may have accidentally kicked off the tanning craze after getting burnt on a yacht.

Debussy was a prodigy.

The interminable funeral of Gerald Ford.

To be human is to be a customer, thought Karl Kraus.
In 1914.

Sartre had no English.

Leave me alone.
Being Ivy Compton-Burnett's last words.

I have been shot. It is over.
Anton von Webern's.

Pastorius's *Bee Hive*—a collection of thoughts from hundreds of books.

The number of times Julian Lennon has listened to "Hey Jude" since its release in 1968.

Chopin was never able to return to Warsaw.

\$135,000,000.
Being what Ronald Lauder paid for Klimt's *Adele* in 2006.

Maximilian Kurzweil.

Artistic self-defilement in the fullest sense of the word. An offense

E&F V.XI

against the most sacred feelings of mankind. The most revolting and disgusting forms and objects that the brush has ever depicted. Depravity dreamed up by an apocalyptic imagination. Painted pornography.

Obscene art.

Being early reviews of Klimt.

Henry Rollins was a member of his high school's herpetology club.

All American writing gives the impression that Americans don't care for girls at all.

Thought Auden.

Walden Robert Perciville Cassotto.

Hegel was constantly in debt.

Life is painful, nasty and short. In my case it has only been painful and nasty.

In Shakespeare, there is always a deeper place to go.

Said Al Pacino.

Los Angeles, California, 1:36 P.M. October 21, 2003.

The sight of a woman reading a paperback novel while behind the wheel of a car headed through a green-lit intersection.

In 1991.

The plane is now in a holding pattern.

At 10,000 feet.

The last album Kurt Cobain listened to was R.E.M.'s *Automatic for the People*.

This is *good*.

Drabble.

Being the term certain editors use to describe stories of under 100 words.

I am scared of Burrito.

The percentage of Americans who cannot locate Las Vegas, New Mexico on a map.

Abandon hopefully all ye who enter here.

Perhaps too much like *Reader's Block. The Last Novel. Vanishing Point. This Is Not a Novel*.

Perhaps not enough.

The attention paid to the line "Attention must be paid" in the immediate aftermath of Arthur Miller's death.

Aphra Behn was accused of plagiarism.
And also found herself in debtor's prison.

The day will come when the legacy of Lincoln will finally be fulfilled and a black man or woman will sit in the Oval Office.

Papa Bush. 1990.

Writer is trying to think of what his parents actually did to him.

Believing makes it sad.

George W. Bush's comparison of the War on Terror to the emancipation of American slaves, during a Lincoln Presidential Library speech in 2005.

It's just us and the guns!

Sitting alone in a darkened theater drinking lukewarm tea out of a tiny porcelain cup and staring at a blank screen or stage.

Being the definition of *nothing* in a children's book the title of which Writer has long since forgotten.

Fitzgerald routinely borrowed money from his editor and his agent.

Roxbury, Connecticut. Amongst family, friends and lover.
February 10, 2005.

The sale and purchase of *American Psycho* was banned in Queensland. In the rest of Australia only adults could purchase the novel.

Chuck Klosterman's veiled suggestion that Kurt Cobain killed himself because Courtney Love wanted to buy a Lexus.

Allen Ginsberg was a vegetarian.

As was Barry White. Vegan.

The dangers of reading Lauren Myracle.

There is no history. There are no works.

The defacing of the Elliott Smith wall on Sunset Boulevard in 2010 by a viral marketing team.

Paid for by Roger Waters.

The dream with no bottom.

This Is Not a Supernovel.

You ain't got much, but you keep subtracting from it.

Saint-Saëns, who wrote his first composition at 4.

Seppuku as the ultimate Hamartia.

Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage.

E&F V.XI

Embracing the hard choices is one of the burdens of command.

Keith Gessen: Markson had to, and it should never be done again.

I write for myself and strangers, said Gertrude Stein.

A complete list of artists who idolized their mothers.

Always forgetting the bicycle is a recent invention.

Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* was banned from the mail by the U.S. Postal Service.

Franz Wright: Some of my best friends teach in MFA programs.

I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.

Somebody is living in this Wal-Mart.

Dappled.

Being what the speaker in "Feelin' Groovy" feels, in addition to drowsy.

The 'St. Vincent' from the hospital in Greenwich Village where she was born.

Caveat emptor.

Tom Hanks was born eleven years after the conclusion of World War II.

This Is Not a Septic Tank Either.

“It’s like kissing Hitler,” said Tony Curtis of his smooch with Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*.

Walter Benjamin committed suicide after discovering that the border in the Pyrenees, his escape route from the Nazis, had been closed.

Albeit closed temporarily, of which Benjamin was unaware.

Yondah lies da castle of my faddah.

Luftmensch.

Tom Hanks was a tween at the height of the Vietnam War.

The closest thing we have to the Great American Novel, Norman Mailer said of *The Sopranos*.

Remembering that Norman Mailer fought in World War II, in the Pacific Theater.

An illness of childhood, Einstein called war.

Old enough to take part in the invasion of Grenada, Tom Hanks

E&F V.XI

was. Or go after Manuel Noriega.

Did Marilyn Monroe at least *say hello* to Henry Miller at some point?

The monster under the bed is you.

Tenuous stuff. Brain-spun. Labored. Self-conscious.
The New York Times, on the music of Alban Berg.

I'm too old to die!

Robin Holloway expressed interest in turning *Miss Lonelyhearts* into an opera. Auden told him it wouldn't work because its characters were too miserable to sing.

Agonies are one of my changes of garment, wrote Whitman.

You don't know about me, without you.

Schubert was dead at 31.

Josephine Nivison.

Charles Ives, when told what was going on in Germany in 1933:
"Then why doesn't somebody do something about it?"

An opera based on David Markson's works.

Get in, get out. Don't linger. Go on.

Don DeLillo is three years younger than Philip Roth.

The metronome was invented by an otherwise disreputable friend of Beethoven's.

Jonathan Safran Foer is a vegetarian.

And, according to Writer's friends, looks at so much Internet pornography that his laptop technician will not look him in the eye.

Never did I concern myself with the idea of becoming a great jazz musician. I just dug playing.

Cosima Wagner carried Richard's eyelashes around in her purse.

The British pronunciation of *baroque*. As if it precedes Obama.

Mallarmé did not see the 20th century.

Nor did Emily Dickinson, or Tchaikovsky.

Everything is political, thought a young Bob Dylan.

Snuffbox with a Jew telling a secret to another Jew.

E&F V.XI

Asses, filled with books.

Markson quotes Mohammed as saying.

Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it.
Mohammed said.

Nothing quite encourages as does one's first unpunished crime.
Wrote de Sade.

"Why me?"

"Because you're on television, dummy."

I am writing *Parsifal* only for my wife—if I had to depend on the German spirit, I should have nothing more to say.

Miles Davis and John Coltrane were born the same year.

According to Ford Maddox Ford, Dickens was not fun at parties.

The last time anyone mentioned the name Hans Blix.

Watteau was dead at 37.

Holding pattern.

The best American prose stylist alive.

Auden called M.F.K. Fisher.

Laurence Sterne had to pay to publish the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy*.

A very long holding pattern.

Marlowe likely did not live to see *Dr. Faustus* performed.

How many times have you died in all the video games you've played?

Markson's Closet.

"BEGIN: Balthus Is A Painter Of Whom Nothing Is Known. Now Let Us Look At The Pictures. Regards. B"

Resisting any semblance of narrative.

I completely ripped her off in *Less Than Zero*.
Said Bret Easton Ellis, of Joan Didion.

Roy Orbison did not live to see "Pretty Woman" played in the movie *Pretty Woman*.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Nick Drake was dead at 26. Pills.

E&F V.XI

Does he have to wear the outfit in order to get the girl who wears the outfit?

Rufus Wilmot Griswold.

Neil LaBute removed all references to Mormonism from *bash: latterday plays*, after being disfellowshipped.

The number of times Don DeLillo had to take the A train in order to write his first published story, "Take the A Train."

Stanley Kubrick did not live to see the year 2001.

Schwoerer.

Leuchtturm 1917.

Writer once lifted a trade paperback novel from an indie bookstore.

And ended up hating the work.

Sloane Crosley and Diablo Cody were born the same year.

Roosevelt's decision, in 1939, to deny asylum to all 937 German-Jewish passengers on board the MS *St. Louis*, when it attempted to dock in Miami.

Berthe Morisot.

At the age of six, Samuel Taylor Coleridge published “Kubla Khan.”

According to a typo in the first edition of the textbook *The Literary Experience*.

Gershwin was dead at 38.

To whom it may concern.

Being the dedication page of John Cage's *Silence*.

Siegfried Wagner was bisexual.

When the soul speaks, then—alas—it is no longer the soul that speaks.

Wrote Schiller.

“How much money is the desk?”

The man waved his hand at this preposterous question.

Why I Am Not a Christian.

Richard Danielpour.

Elisabeth Schumann's first role was as a shepherd boy.

I write because I hate. A lot. Hard.

Mahler wrote his first composition, *Polka with Introductory*

E&F V.XI

Funeral March, at 6.

An artist is someone who does the best she can.
Said David Antin.

A reaction at the close of a performance of *Parsifal*: I felt gradually I was returning to earth. But from where?

“Just passing by, just coming through, not staying long. I always knew this home I have will never last.”

Paul Lewis took up the cello because it was the only instrument on which schools would offer him tuition.

When you're a kid, the things you notice about the circus aren't the things you're supposed to notice.
Said Bruce Springsteen.

“I never lived more than half a dozen blocks away from Djuna Barnes for something like thirty years,” said Markson, “here in the Village, but to my knowledge I never saw the woman.”

Remembering a Sarah, an Allison, a June and a Vanessa. Jewels all.

Happy the man who takes a dip in that.

Plato called Sappho the tenth muse.
Elgar said the same of Jelly d'Aranyi.

Novels are like lace. An art that disappeared with the convents.
Said Louis-Ferdinand Céline.

I haven't been seen with a girl without a mink since the heat wave
of '39.

Caravaggio was from Caravaggio. His 'Flagellation of Christ' was
painted when he was on the run from a murder charge.

Felt, but nowhere seen.

Air travel is like death: everything is taken from you.
Wrote Elif Batuman.

Le vrai Moleskine n'est plus.

Momentarily forgetting in which state Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*
takes place.

Pliny the Older.

The day Maxwell Perkins is forgotten.

John Updike died in hospice.

Prospect Park without the prospects.

The person who teaches writing is not much more than a midwife.

E&F V.XI

Wrote Flannery O'Connor.

Rachel. Nicole. Alma. Marguerite. Middle names all.

Lou Andreas-Salome, the only lover who left Rilke before he could leave her.

Fossil.

What is it about this little book that gives people such big ideas?

“A lot of people who aren't saying ain't, ain't working right now.”
Said Dizzy Dean, after being told to speak correctly.

Exley, Brock Clarke published. Eighteen years after Frederick Exley died.

Retail Resort.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of all those who threaten it.

Milk me! Milk me!

Being the words Milton would cry out to his daughters
when he wanted them to take down his dictation for
Paradise Lost.

The document contains no data.

Am I Too Loud?

The plane has been on its side for some time now. Circling, circling amongst the clouds.

Wherever you are, that's where you'll be.

Often said Writer's high school journalism teacher.

On more than one anti-depressant.

I'd be happy landing somewhere else.

The woman next to Writer says.

Never mind the icebergs! What icebergs?

Joan Didion's passing reference in her essay "In the Islands" to a couple who threw their infant into a Hawaiian volcano.

Decades later, Writer was unable to find anything else even remotely about the incident.

If someone doesn't know who Maxwell Perkins is, can he still be forgotten?

Oyster Wagon.

The failure to remember political or international questions signals their death.

I did what I could.

Fauré to his sons, the day before he died.

Henry Miller's idea that all one needs to write one book, is to have read one other book.

What if that one book were *Reader's Block*?

I think I saw his face in the post office, but I wasn't sure if it was on a Wanted poster or a stamp.

Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson.

We Stalk Others in Order to Live.

I'm not interested in literature anymore....I'm sort of interested in politics now.

Said John Gardner.

Weeks before he was killed in a motorcycle accident.

Douglas Adams died of a heart attack in a Santa Barbara gym.

At the age of 49.

Guy de Maupassant held off publishing any work for seven years while under the tutelage of Flaubert.

Who died three weeks after Maupassant's highly successful first story was published.

Seventeen. Julian Lennon's age when his father was murdered.

Ever find you're in the wrong place.

J.D. Salinger was born on New Year's Day.

If you can't annoy somebody with what you write, I think there's little point in writing.

Said Kingsley Amis.

Soldier Who Gets Slapped.

Good question.

Pippin is tempted to commit suicide by swallowing a flame.

Philip Roth's assertion that he found a napkin in a diner that contained, in a single paragraph, the first sentences of what would become his first several novels.

At eight of the clock on that fatal Friday morning.

A beard! A beard!

E.M. Forster was born on New Year's Day.

Poetry makes nothing happen.

Said Auden.

Looking over a huge catalogue of new books one might weep at thinking that, when ten years have passed, not one of them will be heard of.

E&F V.XI

Said Schopenhauer.

The last time someone read Schopenhauer.

Martha Argerich's relationship with Friedrich Gulda.

Zelenka composed his *Missa votiva* to glorify God after recovering from a serious illness.

Hume and Hume's Connexions.

Harvard University, John Updike's papers are housed in.

The University of Texas, Norman Mailer's.

Coretta Scott King was a vegetarian.

"The singers did what they could."

From a sympathetic review of the first performance of Beethoven's Ninth.

The Barber of Seville was rejected at its premiere.

Norma was likewise a first-night failure, but well-received a week later.

Peter O'Neil, a 9/11 victim, lived in the Amityville Horror house from 1987 to 1997.

One cannot fill one's stomach with the future.

I think every man in the country has the belief, buried away in him somewhere, that he would make a successful editor.

Thought Sherwood Anderson.

Horace Tapscott's first encounter with a white man. Five years old. A Houston policeman, holding a gun to his mother's head.

Giuditta Pasta.

The accusation, verbally implied, at the opening ceremony of the 1996 Summer Olympics that TWA Flight 800 had been brought down by a terrorist bombing—when in fact a short circuit had caused the fuel tanks to explode.

When we feel the most happy, death laughs with us.

Writer was either good or not good at Scrabble. His friends were either not surprised or surprised.

Andreas Vesalius died in a shipwreck.

To be immortal, and then die.

Houston, Texas, the Rothko Chapel is in.

E&F V.XI

Lennie Tristano was totally blind by age 10.

Sylvester Paumgartner.

The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glasses.

Schopenhauer played the flute.

Ira Gershwin outlived his brother by 46 years.

I don't spend more time doing it. I spend more time thinking about how to do it.

Ornette Coleman, on being a mature composer.

Under the Third Reich, Heine's *Lorelei* was declared the work of an unknown poet.

A complete list of artists who flourished when ordered to bed rest.

What is a book by David Markson?

In some ways not unlike *The New Leviathan* of R.G. Collingwood.

Style is a fraud. I think it is the most bourgeois idea that one can make a style beforehand.

De Kooning. Probably pissed.

Somebody is living in this Wal-Mart.

If I had been a big guy, I probably would have been one of them.
Scorsese thought.

To avoid a performance, Martha Argerich made up the excuse
of a cut finger. She then went ahead and actually cut her finger,
disinfecting the area first.

When a bed becomes a deathbed.

Writer either was or was not a great speller. His friends were
either surprised or not surprised.

The orchestra, unlike the piano, has no pedal.
Deduced Siebelius.

Death holds no fear for me. It has a kind of beauty. What I am
afraid of is falling ill and not being able to work. That's lost time.

Ginsberg's papers are at Stanford.

Twain's are in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley.

You don't know about me, without you.

That's good. That's excellent. But we'll do it one more time.
Charles Mackerras to his orchestra. Repeatedly.

E&F V.XI

She was my closest friend, even though she had been dead for 100 years.

Hannah Arendt, on Rahel Varnhagen.

Behind me the branches of a wasted and sterile existence are cracking.

Giuditta Angiola Maria Costanza Pasta.

Bernstein's *Presidential Cantatas* was a failure.

My godmother lived in a handsome house in the clean and ancient town of Bretton.

Lee Wiley's 1939 recording of the Gershwin/Porter "songbook" was probably the first Great American Songbook recording of its kind.

Writer's wife should continue to receive manuscript rejections. She should put them in a file marked: *Nicole Kidman Project 2014*.

Martha Argerich's disinfecting the finger first in some way similar to Marianne Moore's imaginary gardens with real toadstools in them?

"Yes, on the ground."

And he lived for these bastards, he worked, taught, argued for them.

Even amidst fierce flames
The golden lotus can be planted.

Seymour Krim.

Poe was paid nine dollars for publication of "The Raven."

This book, already without much of a plot, no longer has a living character.

Paddy Chayefksy's papers are in the Wisconsin Historical Society and in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Miss, I got what I really went for.

And with no characters. None.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead.

Au moins, je meurs célèbre.

Do something else. The rewards are too personal and small.
Richard Ford, on the writing profession.

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood
For I had wandered off from the straight path.

E&F V.XI

Death is only the beginning, someone was the first to say.

Death is an unacceptable idea, said Damien Hirst.

Decades after V.C. Andrews's passing, books with her name on their covers are still being published and purchased.

Times change and so do the demands of man, and what does not prove great must perish.

Magnificent...it's almost impossible to stop turning pages...my soul was humming.

Wrote Sven Birkets in *The New York Observer*.

Plotless. Characterless.

Lost time.

counselor.

John Milton died of gout.

A novel with no *setting*.

Anne Hathaway.

In a book without characters?

Norman Mailer's sixth wife was the same age as his oldest daughter.

He Knew He Was Right.

Was the plane crash that killed Knute Rockne the first commercial aviation disaster in America?

Virginia was named after Queen Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen.

Breathtakingly seamless perfection...brilliant, high, fine, masterful, deep.

Crit lit.

Nathanael West was seven years younger than F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Medea won last prize in dramatic competition the year it was presented.

Muriel Rukeyser died of a stroke.

Qualmful.

Jack Johnson died in an automobile crash.

E&F V.XI

David Copperfield.

Cause-Célèbre-Club.

Your last novel didn't rank high enough.

Daydreaming of a MacArthur Foundation award.

Words, words, words.

Abbottabad.

From the erudite and extraordinary Markson...subtle, inventive, ineffably moving.

Fifteen paintings by Arshile Gorky were destroyed in the crash of American Airlines Flight 1.

Monroe, Michigan. January 9, 1997.

I played the game out straight to the end.

Arati Sharangpani.

Procter & Gamble.

The publisher did not care to add brilliant material to his list.

Intensely erudite and *beautiful*.

I never knew a writer's wife who wasn't beautiful.
Said Kurt Vonnegut.

Why, this is very midsummer madness.

Not to be born is far best.
Wrote Sophocles.

I killed the town bully.

There is no way of being a creative writer in America without being
a loser.
Said Nelson Algren.

Reads as addictively as an airport thriller...masterful.

Writing in bed, Mark Twain preferred.

Schrodinger's conundrum.

Writer was left-handed.
As was Osama bin Laden.

Watson, you idiot, somebody stole our tent.

E&F V.XI

Jedwabne.

Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage.
As is already more than self-evident.

The Persistence of Memory.

For a long time I used to go to bed early.

Seventy-two sturgeons?

Go. Fish.

Machines cannot think.

Watson.

Debbi Stone.

I think I can I think I can I think I can.

Alarmingly moving...yes, you should read this book.

Poor Tom's a-cold.

Impecunitis.

This Is Not The Last Novel.

One of America's most original voices.

Hypnotic...a profoundly rewarding read.
Wrote Kurt Vonnegut.

No, it's not a novel, but it is a masterwork.

No one but Beckett can be quite as sad and funny at the same time as Markson can.

No one.

Trashcan.

Dear Gabe, The drugs help me bend my fingers around a pen.

This work is dedicated to no one, save those who would find pleasure in it. That is the most profitable decision.

Hindemith's father was a house painter.

"Pretty much the high point of experimental fiction in this country."

E&F V.XI

Hysterics suffer from mainly reminiscences, thought Freud.

Oakland, California, Harry Partch was born in.

da Vinci was illegitimate.

But you who philosophize, disgrace, and criticize all fears. Take the rag away from your face. Now ain't the time for your tears.

Fats Waller was dead at 39.

Yet Norman Mailer came
and spoke some kindly words.

Temistocle Solera.

Kafka was a vegetarian.

Wastebasket.

Selah.

The University of Nottingham has most of D.H. Lawrence.

The University of Buffalo most of Joyce.

Blue Note Records once changed hands to the Transamerica Insurance Company.

Lucien? *Oh, Lucien! Oh, oh, oh, Lucien, oh!*

Samuel Barber had such a love for croutons, he asked they be sprinkled at his funeral.

Cassio. Roderigo. Emilia. Othello. All respond "Ha!" in response to Iago's jokes.

Für Elise was likely misnamed.

All Jews have a certain gene that makes them different from other people.

Thilo Sarrazin. August 2010.

Writer's children either looked at his unpublished manuscripts or didn't give a shit.

Oh, most lame and impotent conclusion.

A novel with no *hot girls*.

A novel with no *going somewhere*.

Each life is a perspective on reality, thought Ortega y Gasset.

E&F V.XI

It took Klopstock 25 years to complete *Der Messias*.

John Malkovich: It's hard to explain how you end up in *Eragon* and not *Goodfellas*.

Dr. Doolittle was a veterinarian.

Pocahontas. Sacajawea. Hester Prynne.

You look like a beautiful painting without a frame.
Daniel Barenboim told a young Martha Argerich.

Emily Dickinson and Helen Hunt Jackson were born in 1830.
And died five decades later, nine months apart.

Saxe Holm.

Evert Duyckink.

Dollars damn me.

It is obvious that a mediocre book is always too long, and that a great one usually seems too short.
Said Edith Wharton.

There will be no pictures of Michelle Obama blowing her nose.

Verdun.

At the time of his suicide, David Foster Wallace held the Roy Edward Disney Chair in Creative Writing at Pomona College.

After her partner of twenty-four years, George Lewes, died, George Eliot officially married a man twenty years her junior.

And died six months later.

Moose. Indians.

Jackdaws love my big sphinx of quartz.

Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children.

Said David Lodge.

khorosho.

Amy Tan responded to her 90-hour work weeks as a technical and business writer by writing fiction after work hours.

And eventually publishing *The Joy Luck Club*.

A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me.

Said Nabokov.

You know Frost always steals any show he is a part of.

Said John F. Kennedy.

President-elect John Finley, Frost called him at the end of his recitation of “The Gift Outright” on Inauguration Day.

Palimpsest.

Nathan W. Weinstein.

Tolstoy’s attachment to teaching. Despite having never finished university.

Joe Laptops.

Being what Martin Amis called just-any average bloggers able to effortlessly pour their thoughts out onto the Internet.

In 2003.

Did Pyrrho of Elis ever set a building on fire?

Did he ever so much as think about setting a building on fire?

I do not take much to modern books, because the ancient ones seem to me fuller and stronger.

Said Montaigne.

Opchanacanough.

Fanny Burney.

The book is too short.

Said J.R.R. Tolkien on his epic trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*.

Now I envy those saintly Yankee women in their clean cool New England homes, writing books to make their fortunes and to shame us.

Ha!

Are Aida and Iago the only four-letter names pronounced with three English syllables?

Writer spent all day dreaming of MacArthur Park.

I love Roth's writing, but I'm just not that involved with Jews.
Reasoned Ned Rorem.

Monk died of a stroke, but lived to hear disco. As did Duke Ellington, who died of lung cancer.

"You're different from Norman Mailer."

"Not at all," said Bukowski, "we're both about 25 pounds overweight."

Leonard Lauder donated \$131 million to the Whitney in 2008.

Four million dollars less than what his brother paid for Klimt's *Adele* two years before.

Johann Georg Albrechtsberger.

Ives had to pay to publish *114 Songs*.

The futility of this project.

In some ways a mix tape to the great humanities gig in the sky?

If you put too much emphasis on continuity, you can be left with nothing else.

Thought Morton Feldman.

Lexington, Kentucky, Mary Gaitskill was born in.

A novel with no *dad*.

“He’s dead, so what can I do about it?”

Arnold Schwarzenegger, in response to his mother’s request to attend his father’s funeral.

It is a truth generally accepted that the future Edward VII, while Prince of Wales, was the first man to cuff his pants.

Airplane! was selected by the Library of Congress for the 2010 National Film Registry.

“Can’t you think of a better way to kill me?”

A pupil of Liszt upon hearing a piano composition by Nietzsche.

Music for children who have mixed feelings when they see a Toyota Sienna.

The Marquise Went Out at Five.

Using a pile of manure as a makeshift replacement for a stump, William Jennings Bryan said he now knew what it meant to stand on a Republican platform.

I wasn't even paying attention to what I meant.
T.S. Eliot, late along.

Solomon Cutner's father was a tailor. As was John Coltrane's.

People should have regular jobs and write their scripts at 5 A.M., according to Francis Ford Coppola.

The reasoning of the rapist brothers in *Családi tüzfészek*:
Don't scream. Do you want more of us to come? Isn't two enough for you?

The Theory of Moral Sentiments.

You slipped your poem into mine.

Piatigorsky was a prodigy. As was Solomon, who after his stroke never played again.

Dickens lost money in a speculative venture in southern Illinois. He was to curse the Mississippi in his writings thereafter.

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Tom Eliot. Bill Bryan. Wastebasket.

The last time someone opened a book by Walter de la Mare. The last time someone opened this book.

Passengers on Colgan Air Flight 3407 who had already purchased or received Valentine's Day gifts.

A novel with no sex.

And what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?

Was T.C. Boyle's story "Friendly Skies," first published in 2000, a reaction to the crash of Alaska Airlines Flight 261?

Music for children who have mixed feelings about going to a Safeway.

Defiance unlimited.

This has got to stop.

Most journalists have a novel in their heads—and that's where it should stay.

A shower of arrows rained on our dead mules from the closing circle of red men.

It lacks irony for all the right reasons.

Igen igent mondok meg fogom císánlni Igen.

If someone sins against you, go talk to him.

August 1, 1981, Paddy Chayefsky died on.

P.T. Barnum's apocryphal tale of Jumbo sacrificing its life to save that of a fellow elephant, the young Tom Thumb, at a railroad classification yard in St. Thomas, Ontario.

Death by self-emulation.

The likelihood that Dawn Brancheau at least heard of the episode of *30 Rock* in which a character says, "Like a killer whale going nuts on his trainer at Sea World"—in the two years before Brancheau's demise by the orca Tilikum at a Sea World in Orlando.

Martin Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, won the Somerset Maugham Award.

Writing, Jean Toomer later gave up.

60 million square feet of unrented office space is the equivalent of fifteen darkened World Trade Towers.

Wrote Joan Didion.

In 1990.

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Like flies to feces, the Bedouin to the buses.

“That plane looks like it’s going to hit.”

Says a character standing on a New York City rooftop in Don DeLillo’s *Players*.

Published in 1977.

The amount of work consumed in a house fire that Arthur Miller considered reconstructing.

Snowhill, Alabama.

When the job required travel, I developed such a fear of airplanes my head trembled from takeoff to landing.

Wrote Judith Wax on page 191 of her book *Starting in the Middle*.

Not long before she perished in the crash of American Airlines Flight 191.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of all those who threaten it.

For the greater glory of the right.

Said Cervantes in reference to the loss of his left hand at the Battle of Lepanto.

Unamuno.

You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.

Leon Trotsky is misattributed as having said.

Eunuch.

Rodney Bingenheimer.

During a period of financial difficulty, Wagner considered moving to Minnesota.

The Kennedy. The Jackie Robinson. The 101. The 405.

Helmut Newton's mother was exceptionally vain.

Currer Bell.

J. Gordon Whitehead.

How was this possible?

"Is the *Gates of Wrath* a good short novel title? Or is it too much like Steinbeck?"

Ginsberg to Kerouac. 2/24/49.

Ginsberg.

Men do not like epics, whatever they may say to the contrary, thought Poe.

His general obsession with the length of works.

Stuart Cloete: 15 novels in the Chicago Public Library.
2 copies of *The Abductors*.

Robinson Jeffers did not live to see the Kennedy assassination.

9/11: Eudora Welty. By fewer than two months.

Aristotle assumed men and women come to cities so that they might become more human.

Shine, perishing republic.

Portnoy's Complaint was a flop. *The Rachel Papers*, natch.

In the novel it's a bunch of roses; in the screenplay it's a torpedo boat.

Thomas Ollive Mabbott's papers are at the University of Iowa.

Vassar has Mary McCarthy's.

Bertram Goodhue.

Aldous Huxley died on the same day as John F. Kennedy.

"I don't think I'd like to do it over again in any way," said John Coltrane of *My Favorite Things*.

In 1962.

Rosalyn Tureck's grandfather was a cantor.

Glenn Gould was born in Toronto and died there.

Whitman's New Jersey home on Mickle Street, now a Boulevard, stands across from what is now a penitentiary.

Chicago, Illinois, Sigmund Florsheim was born in.

Douglas Adams was one of two non-Pythons to receive a writing credit for Monty Python.

A cannon buried under flowers: Schumann's impression of Chopin's music.

Schumann taught me nothing but how to play chess, said Brahms.

Plath's markings in her copy of *Gatsby*. Writing 'L'ennui' next to Daisy's kvetching.

Now you're Jesus' age, but you've only been betrayed by the calendar.

Kohler, Wisconsin, John Michael Kohler wasn't born in.

Discontinued.

It's all so arty there's no art left in it.

Alles in Ordnung.

“You’re not the racist. I’m the racist.”

Pure art never enters into competition with the unattainable perfection of the world.

Said A.K. Coomaraswamy.

Unable to generate interest, E.A. Robinson self-published his first two volumes of poetry.

And achieved immense success when President Theodore Roosevelt wrote a review of Robinson’s second book, *Children of the Night*.

Subject verb object. Subject verb object. Subject verb object.

Michael Dorris was the first unmarried man in the United States to adopt a child.

Twenty-six years before he committed suicide.

A country which needs heroes is an unfortunate one.

Said Brecht.

Even more unfortunate is the country that needs heroes and has none.

Wrote Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

She left her hat in San Francisco.

I am just going outside and may be some time.

It's for myself and my friends my stories are sung.

Edwin Arlington Robinson.

The Brick Tower Motor Inn. Concord, New Hampshire. Hour
unknown. April 10, 1997.

New Haven, Connecticut, Karen Carpenter was born in.
As was George W. Bush.

Go ask Heidegger.

Only white Americans can consider themselves to be expatriates.
Said James Baldwin.

Falsely sensitive, Saul Bellow called *Another Country*.
Among many other things.

Whatever is felt on the page without being specifically named
there—that, one might say, is created.
Wrote Willa Cather.

1. Men novelists—Psychology—Fiction 2. Fiction—Authorship—
Fiction 3. Writer's block—Fiction.

While living in Ireland, Edmund Spenser would take to the top of
his tower and unload his musket on the local peasantry.

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Dictionaries of the simulacrum, all.

Of the 120 tales in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer completed 24.

The principle of the collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century.

Said Donald Barthelme.

Prince Machiavelli.

I am asking for only one thing—let me finish my work.

The end.

Maggie Cassidy.

The perfectly acceptable self-characterization *I don't really like to read*. In almost any social context.

A 1685 Fourth Folio, wrapped in blankets, was once found in a utility closet of the L.A. Public Library.

I deny the accident.

Jackson Pollock. Before dying in one.

Johnny Appleseed was a vegetarian.

As were Ben Franklin, Twain, Thoreau and Darwin.
And Tolstoy.

I don't identify with the Jews. I have enough trouble trying to
figure out who I am.
Said Kafka.

John Lennon once mailed John Cage cookbooks.

A novel not written within the moral code of the days when you
could check an automobile on a flight from Paris to London.
For no extra fee.

I merely took the energy it takes to pout and wrote some blues,
said Duke Ellington.

Bülow named all of Chopin's 24 Preludes. Only *Raindrop* stuck.

Henry Gaylord Wilshire.

Delphina Potocka.

As far as too loud goes, follow the general outlines of the Christian
life.

Rostropovich was a prodigy.

When I die, I open a bordello. You know what is a bordello, no?
But against every one of you—all—I lock shut the door.

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Said Arturo Toscanini, to a recalcitrant orchestra.

A symphony is no joke.

Als ick kan.

While composing his second Cantata, Anton von Webern lived in war-ravaged Mödling. The bombings resulted in numerous relatives taking refuge at his residence.

Then I go out at night and paint the stars.
Says a Van Gogh letter.

The ability to call a fork a spoon and then eat soup with it, being one of Ginsberg's definitions of poetic license.

Lansing, Michigan, Bethany Beardslee was born in.
On Christmas Day.

Peggy Guggenheim's father was killed in the sinking of the Titanic.
Linda McCartney's mother died in the crash of American Airlines Flight 1.

All poems compose one poem.

We sat in the mountains eating lousy vegetarian food.

Charles Olson used his Guggenheim Fellowship purse to buy his mistress a horse.

And later complained they shouldn't have given it to him all at once.

“Copying there is, period.”

The public wants work which flatters its illusions, said Flaubert.

Stephen Crane had to pay to publish *Maggie: A Girl on the Streets*.

Christmas Day, Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife were executed on.
By submachine gun.

If an actor thinks he has attained a higher level of skill than he has reached ... he will lose even the level he has achieved.
Said Zeami.

Publius Vergilius Maro.

In Aleppo once.

Magniloquence.

I lisped in numbers for the numbers came.

Guy Davenport's observation that there are no childhoods recorded in Plutarch.

Thank you for the lovely sheets. We hope you will be able to come

E&F V.XI

over and sleep with us sometime.

Living in exile in what is now Romania, Ovid was unable to finish the *Metamorphoses* before his death at age 74.

Trachiniae.

Late have I loved thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new.

Lesbia's pet sparrow.

After 1965 or 1970 Glamour will begin to envelop memoirs. Few will be valuable; most of them will deceive more than they enlighten.

Wrote Douglas Southall Freeman.

In 1947.

A man once lived in the land of Utz.

Rule number eight: don't let your prose rhyme.

Romulus Linney died with only one of his plays having received a Broadway production.

Which closed after five performances.

adab.

Balkh, in northern Afghanistan, Jalaloddin Rumi was born in.

I heard a phone buzz when I died.

Publius Ovidius Naso.

A tax collector, Cervantes at one point worked as.

Did it ever cross Socrates's mind *not* to drink from the cup?

It is only very recently that the ability to forget has become a prized skill.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims: all believe in angels.

Who am I?

Jeremy Wade Delle.

After new French girlfriend.

Isosceles Kramer.

All steal, but Ries by handfuls.

Charlie Ives.

Were I the moor, I would not be Iago.

Himmelpfortgrund, Austria, January 31, 1797.

Who would not rather be he than any of the persons who laugh at him? Margaret Fuller wondered about Don Quixote.

Margaret Fuller.

And all that you are, past and present, once more comes into focus, every morning, when you awaken.

There's nothing that annoys me more than a comma out of place, said Whitman.

Charles Alkan was probably killed by a fall under an umbrella rack.

Paganini was a prodigy.

Cratylus.

Writer remembered a walk down 57th Street. She was holding *Notes from Underground*, he was holding *The House of the Dead*. Despite the titles, it was a sunny day.

People don't remember who the critics were, Robert Redford once said.

You're almost there, 57th Street.

Vanishing Point was the answer to the question: what postmodern novel is filled entirely with trivia?

At a bar in Greenwich Village.

John Coltrane once bought a guitar because his hotel neighbor complained he was making too much noise on his saxophone.

Bullshit.

Whitman wrote *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate* when hard-up for cash. The composing took three days, under the influence of perhaps several bottles of port.

Dere's no guy livin' dat knows Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo, because it'd take a guy a lifetime just to find his way aroun' duh f--- town.

Socrates spoke of the ancient saying: hard is the knowledge of the good.

Fontainebleau, summer 1921. Oil on canvas, 6' 7" x 7' 3 3/4".

Boulez conducted his last opera at 82. Janáček wrote four operas in his 70s.

The Jews: A Fictional Adventure Into the Follies of Antisemitism.

Ives's papers are at Yale. The Library of Congress has Bernstein's.

You don't know about me, without you.

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In order to save his sugar cubes for the coachmen's horses, Anton von Webern was willing to drink his coffee bitter.

Toni, to family and friends.

Bessie Head.

Bemidji, Minnesota, Jane Russell was born in.

Isak Dinesen's lover was killed in a plane crash.

Ah, I have asked too much, I plainly see.

El otro lado.

William Sydner Porter.

Ford Maddox Ford sang Ovid to get himself off to sleep.

Despite selling well, Poe's books earned him only \$300 over the course of his lifetime.

The loss of an eye saved James Thurber from having to fight in the first World War.

Martin Eden.

Clarice Lispector.

Markson's Book Club.

An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection, said Henry James.

One must keep one's distance from the supreme artists.
Wrote Cynthia Ozick.
Who felt she'd been betrayed by Henry James.

Le poete maudit.

Edith Wharton paid to publish her first book of poetry.
When she was thirteen.

Zora Neale Hurston. John Cheever. Richard Wright. Saul Bellow.
Ralph Ellison.
All of whom were members of the Federal Writer's Project.

Susan Sontag wrote *Illness as Metaphor* after she survived cancer.
And died of leukemia over two decades later.

To look at a thing hard and straight and seriously—to fix it.

If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain
that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul.

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Katherine Anne Porter took over two decades to complete *Ship of Fools*.

O. Henry served three years in a federal penitentiary.

Indian No City.

People at first were not so much concerned with what the story meant; what they wanted to know was where the lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch.

Said Shirley Jackson.

A short story padded.

Being Ambrose Bierce's description of the novel.

Did Otis Redding in fact die on the dock of the bay when his plane crashed into Lake Monona, three days after recording the song?

To choose the place where one dies is also the greatest joy in life.

Wrote Yukio Mishima.

During the last few years of her life, Kate Chopin was made aware of libraries removing copies of *The Awakening* from their shelves.

In St. Louis, where she was then living.

As an adult, Robert Craft inadvertently came upon his childhood teacher's private memos. One read: "Encourage Craft."

Everything we see could always be otherwise.

The list has no end so I'd better stop here.

In America the people who write are the people who read.
Wrote Poe.

Verdi clung to an unrealized Lear project for decades.

Sappho is not mentioned by Dante or Chaucer.

Clara Schumann was a prodigy. And was reported to have nearly fallen off her stool trying to negotiate some of Scarlatti's crossed-hands acrobatics.

I don't know which of my compositions I like better; I like them all, because I liked them when I was writing them.

Eric Rohmer credited his love of the number 6 to its frequent appearance in his favorite authors, from Virgil to Stevenson.

Henry Miller has one fault. He thinks he thinks.
Said Nelson Algren.

Art Blakely played drums on Monk's first and last recordings.

Pythagoras was a vegetarian.

Anne Lister.

E&F V.XI

Maria Thins.

Encourage craft.

Columbia. Harvard. Yale. Princeton. Brown.

Being the top five colleges of *New York Times* wedding announcement participants.

We can by no means enter directly into the nature of a dog; behind the appealing eyes and the wagging tail lies a mystery as inscrutable as the mystery of the trinity.

Said D.L. Sayers.

Writer remembered Daisy, before she passed, pawing the same spot in the kitchen. Death under the floorboards. Then Daisy herself was dead.

The port of New York is in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Harry Truman was the first president to sit for a book signing.

Where in Markson is a man killed at his own book signing?

The physical world is meaningless tonight
And there is no other.

Well, he's 40. So he won't even look at a woman over 18.

John D. Rayner, who dreamed of the creation of a human being

unable to shed blood.

Utter submersion of the spirit in the surging torrent of feelings, Wackenroder defined romantic music as.

The best discourse upon music is silence, wrote Schumann.

Strindberg believed all of Wagner's good passages were stolen from Mendelssohn.

All steal, but Markson by handfuls.

Life is present only when there is no stagnation and the regularity of nature is not obstructed by the forces of death.

Wrote Gimbutas.

I'm too much of a hack to have writer's block. I just churn it out.
Malcolm Gladwell was gracious enough to admit.

At least Judas didn't go into some apostle protection program. He hung himself. He knew what he did.

Loose-limbed, bold, unfettered fantasy.

Being an early review of the *Eroica*.

It's usually the stupid people who develop long illnesses, said Auden, who died of a heart attack.

That's good. That's excellent. But we'll do it one more time.

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Bronx, New York, Murray Perahia was born in.

Rape Culture. Porn Culture.

No.

What I really feel about America is that it's given me a place to be myself—but myself as I was formed somewhere else.

Said Jamaica Kincaid.

Frank O'Connor's formal education stopped at the fourth grade.

Our first stories come to us through the air. We hear voices.

Wrote Margaret Atwood.

Nun with bread.

Yukio Mishima publicly petitioned to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Was it Judy Garland who died while fixing a car, which, while parked at an incline on a hill, broke free and ran her over as she was underneath, wrench in hand? Or was it Mary Poppins, or was it the toilet all along?

Good Friday, Lincoln was assassinated on.

Nostophobia.

The Tatler and *The Spectator*.

And *The Rambler*, *The Adventurer* and *The Idler*.

Endless, the imprecision of the language.

Charles Lamb's mother was stabbed to death by her daughter.

Who, rather than go to prison, would afterwards be taken care of by her brother for the rest of her life.

You either wrote a story every night or watched television. I wrote a story every night.

Said Ann Beattie.

Norman Mailer enlisted to fight in World War II intending to write a great novel from the experience.

Joan Didion was a child of the Great Depression. Philip Roth was a child of the Great Depression. David Antin was a child of the Great Depression.

Plan and Make Your Own Fences and Gates, Walkways, Walls and Drives.

Being the title of one of six how-to books Annie Proulx published in the 1980s.

At the time of his death, none of Fitzgerald's books were in print.

"That day I showed him the anemones and pansies, which he particularly liked."

Airport Writer airport airport.

E&F V.XI

It's not so much a novel as an ingenious alibi.

Vailima.

zuihitsu.

Once, I had a dream of fame. Generally, even then, I was lonely.

Why people have expected me to write a second and a third and a fourth book like *Cane* is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life, said Jean Toomer.

The date is in doubt.

Letting my brush write what it would.

Each of the sentences I write is trying to say the whole thing, i.e., the same thing over and over again.

Said Wittgenstein.

Gawd, the prose!

Pneumonia, once known as the old man's friend.

An education, David Markson called Stanley Edgar Hyman's *The Armed Vision*.

Philip Roth's comment that some of his success could be attributed to voraciously reading Céline instead of Proust.

Joyces write. Readers read.

Talent borrows, genius steals.

The World of Yesterday.

Writer's last recollection: his niece showing him that a standing pencil looked like the Empire State Building.

Writer knowing that such a standing pencil had been Lamb's inspiration.

Genius is one hundred percent directness—nothing more.
Wrote Walt Whitman.

A novel with no *reconsidering*.

Both Beethoven's and Schubert's bodies were exhumed twice. Following Schubert's first, doctors were astonished by his skull's delicate, womanly organization.

Reality is covered in depth in the news. I don't see what fiction can add.

Said Eric Rohmer.

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Hey hey, Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song.

Wagner described the entrance of a kettledrum in *Parsifal* as “the finest thing I have ever done.”

Nabokov’s admission that his greatest achievement in *Lolita* was the description of a haircut.

Never did I concern myself with the idea of becoming great. I just dug working.

It was my companion at the most miserable time.

Writer? Writer? Milk me! Milk me!

V.C. Andrews died of breast cancer. As did Kathy Acker. And Grace Paley.

The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture.

Freud’s salons were held on Wednesday.

I found myself sitting in the library, and again sitting there alone.

Schubert was a torchbearer at Beethoven’s funeral.

Distant mountains excite the fancy, for beyond them we place the

scene of our paradise.

No, I'll not say a word about it—here it is;—in publishing it—I have appealed to the world—and to the world I leave it;—it must speak for itself.

Old Dean Chantilly.

They don't have self-steam and confidants.

Face to the departure, my heart have the unspeakable taste.

Let me not seem to have lived in vain.

You must treat us like children.

And you're free.

I shall not write what Klimt said to me down, because I don't think I'll forget it in a hurry.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of all those who threaten it.

What I'm Going to Do, I Think.

\$1.95 used. \$12.99 new. \$8.45 discounted.

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A wad of Big League Chew. A heat-sensing hypercolor T-shirt. A spider in the pool.

Who were you?

Hour known.

I played a number in a game. The dice have rolled. I have lost.

Childless.

Writing about Feldman after Feldman writing about Feldman may be something of a challenge.

Tenuous stuff. Brain-spun. Labored. Self-conscious.

Walt, because his father was Walter.

Encourage craft.

FIN

8

Truinas

April 21, 2001

Philippe Jaccottet

translated by John Taylor

It was the 20th of April, on the eve of André du Bouchet's burial, when his daughter Marie called to ask if I would say a few words for the occasion. I told her I wasn't sure I would have the courage to do so. Then that same evening, after imagining the burial would be even more sorrowful if no one spoke up at all—even as I already suspected no genuine ceremony would be held—I quickly wrote this down:

“In the last letter received from André du Bouchet, dated the 31st of March, these words: ‘Arrived at Truinas in a marvelous snow storm. . .’

And these lines from Hölderlin's ‘Mnemosyne’ came to mind:

*And snow, like lilies of the valley,
Signifying nobility of soul
Wherever it's found, half-shines with the green
Of the Alpine meadows where
Heading up a steep road
And speaking of the wayside cross
In memory of the dead,
A traveler with
Another, but what is this?*

‘Nobility of soul’: words that have become almost unpronounceable. Yet this is what we all loved and admired in André du Bouchet; like his fiery spirit preserved until his last days despite what he had to endure; and that valor, which he also kept up until the very end, and which I always envied.

This is why Anne-Marie and I would feel strengthened, reinvigorated, every time we came back from Truinas. And if there was still daylight, the narrow stream would be glimmering further on, to the right of the road, after Dieulefit, like light going on ahead of us, leading us, having broken through the equally glimmering rock cliff in places. These are the things we kept close to us for more than fifty years; these are the things he reached in words as few other poets have been able to do, shooting his arrows from a bow strung to its keenest tautness.

Incandescent words.

To hear them no longer, I mean pronounced by him, will be greatly missed by everyone.

‘Taken away at Truinas this April 20th as if in a marvelous snow storm’; ‘snow, like lilies of the valley’—they won’t be long in sprouting up—‘signifying nobility of soul, wherever it’s found’ . . .”

Having left Grignan at about nine in the morning and as we were driving to Dieulefit through the Valley of the Lez, which narrows as one continues, I pointed out to Anne-Marie that the clouds ahead likely announced snow. Indeed, wet and heavy snowflakes started falling just after Dieulefit even as the fog was thickening enough to worry us somewhat about the end of the drive. Upon our arrival in Truinas, the whole landscape was sprinkled white, the air was cold, the paths were muddy; so that the sentence with which I had intended to begin and end my speech—the “snow storm” that was still a mere metaphor in my mind—would have to be modified since the snow which had been qualified by André himself as “marvelous” and which had accompanied his forced departure from Truinas at the end of March, was now falling again—but for his last return. . .

At the end of the small valley, when we arrived at the little cemetery alongside a chapel which, moreover, we had never entered, a mechanical shovel was still digging the grave in the miry earth. A few people were standing there, strangers as well as friends, but no family members as yet, so we decided to shelter ourselves from the cold and the sparsely falling snow by going into the chapel which, because it was deconsecrated, seemed even sadder and colder. At last we spotted Anne, then Marie, then Paule and Gilles. It clearly seemed as if nothing, absolutely nothing, had been planned or organized; not to mention a ceremony or ritual, which probably none of us expected anyway; nor even any attempt at some kind of order: there was a sort of strange bewilderedness as well as something wild which, perhaps, ultimately fit the occasion. Anne-Marie gave her arm to Jacques Dupin who had nearly slipped on the sloping ground. In a small sloping enclosure where, I think, there were still only one or two graves, the coffin had been placed on a construction site trestle table with metallic legs. I was struck by an impression of strangeness that continued to grow as time went by: because of the unexpected cold, the small snow-sprinkled valley that I was beginning to discover beyond the low cemetery wall, and even more so the kind of disorder and bewilderedness, the long silence—to the extent that I realized, later, that I had not thought for a second about a dead body lying in the coffin, let alone the body of such an old friend, not for a second—and I do not believe this merely stemmed from an unconscious defense mechanism against excessive emotion . . .

All ritual forgotten or deliberately rejected, and even the opposite of a ceremony, be it simple and quiet: the silence, the wet cold, the snow that had now stopped falling or was becoming rain, and this kind of waiting among those who were standing there somewhat dazed, almost as if lost.

At the end, instead of some liturgy which I, the old-fashioned one, would perhaps have preferred (yet which, I realize, would have been out of place when what was “true” was precisely this disorder, this confusion I have mentioned), words were pronounced almost

randomly and—deep down—not at all randomly; like those flowers that could be made out here and there beneath the snow. Dominique Grandmont neared the grave and read “The April,” André’s poem from 1983, and it was beautiful because it was about a “blue windowpane” and flowers, ultimately in opposition to the muddy grave, as words were flowering there, wildly: as was in turn Jacques Dupin’s exclamation: “André, my brother!” (and as I continued not to think of him as a corpse, continued to look only at the landscape as I had never seen it—and later I would also tell myself I would never have been able to pronounce words like those, nor like that, and that this was not to my honor). After which I read my few lines: “snow, like lilies of the valley, signifying nobility of soul,” aware that I was touching upon something, all the same, that was irrefutable and that had linked us to each other from the onset. Finally, someone whom I did not know stepped forward with a book in his hand and started reading in turn—it had completely stopped snowing; and his choice of text further deepened my astonishment and emotion because I immediately recognized the final pages of *Obermann*, notably the lines beginning “if the flowers were only beautiful” which, in the 1960s, had given me genuine enlightenment, to the extent that I used them as the starting point for a chapter of *Landscapes with Absent Figures*.

I listened, and the words read aloud penetrated in me as deeply as the landscape of that wintry April around us:

... Century after century, so many hapless wretches will have stated that flowers have been granted to us in order to cover our chains, to deceive us about them at the beginning and even to contribute to our remaining bound till the end! Flowers do still more, but rather vainly perhaps: they seem to indicate what no human mind will ever delve into more deeply.

If flowers were only beautiful to our eyes, they would still seduce us; but sometimes their fragrance leads astray, like a fortunate situation in existence, like a sudden calling, a return to a more intimate life. Whether I have myself sought out these invisible scents or, especially, whether they offer themselves

up, provoking astonishment, I receive them as strong yet precarious expressions of thinking whose secret the material world veils and encloses.

I was listening, even more moved:

. . . but daffodils or jasmines would suffice to make me say that, as we are, we could sojourn in a better world.

What do I wish? Hoping, then no longer hoping, means being or no longer being: this is what man is probably like. Yet how is it that after the songs of a moving voice, after the fragrance of flowers, and the sighs of the imagination, and the élans of thought, one has to die?

Then I listened as “a woman full of loving grace” approached “with no other veil” than a curtain, before withdrawing, coming back “while smiling with her voluptuous resolve”—like another, infinitely more precious, species of flower; after which, brusquely: “But then you will have to grow old.”

As if the most mysterious and the most necessary quality of every life had been touched in passing, almost idly . . . until the final pages of the book, which were also the final pages read that morning in front of the empty grave:

If I make it to old age, if, one day while I am still thinking constantly yet have given up speaking to human beings, I have a friend next to me to hear my farewell to the earth, may my chair be placed on the short grass and may quiet daisies be there in front of me, in the sunlight, beneath the vast sky, so that as I leave this life that keeps passing by I will once again sense something of the infinite illusion.

These sentences had been written, as if in a hush, two centuries beforehand; on that April morning they had just been read, also in a hush and with what fitting intuitiveness, by a voice that was even trembling a little; and it was no less than as if they

were filling all of space before blending into the fog hiding the horizon.

After that, once we had gotten back into the car and then driven off in the wrong direction down the road to Félines for a moment instead of heading directly for the house where friends were expected—some of whom we waved at while driving past—those big sloping meadows, those ravines with boulders like whole mountain chunks that had been halted there for centuries in their fall, two horses as well, motionless in a recess of the narrow road, those trees in bloom on terraced slopes, all this beneath a light layer of snow that only barely concealed them, all this—how to put it?—more beautiful, that is more real in its strangeness, in its wildness, more intense than I had ever seen; all this at once wild and “in well-ordered array” like the oak trees in another of Hölderlin’s poems that I recalled, a “presence” that I had perhaps never in my life felt as strongly, that was indubitable and perfectly incomprehensible, truly “marvelous,” yes, like the snow storm in André’s last letter.

One or two days later, back home and thinking about that morning, about Senancour’s exclamation: “Daffodil! Violet! Tuberoses! You have only instants! . . .,” I ventured this: never will the daffodil say “daffodil,” and this is probably why it seems at once so beautiful and so elusive to us. Flowers have no sight, no tears, no voice. Like the snowflakes that morning, like the boulders, like the mud.

Petit-crû, the dog, was seemingly watching, understanding a little, beginning to understand: he was partly crossing over to our side. The story of Paradise was perhaps not a vain fable: looking and speaking must have been born when human beings stopped being wholly inside the world and in harmony with it as plants and stones appear to be. “Their eyes were opened”: and after the invention of sources came that of tears, infinitely different from each other.

With these thoughts in mind, I saw us once again in the “well-ordered array” of that extraordinarily real and silently radiant place, with those human figures who had come together not without difficulty, the young foreign woman walking down the road to Truinas, Gilles and his daughter walking on another road—the one

on which we had spotted the two horses—along with those human beings who were slipping in the mud of the sloping little cemetery, who were cold, and whose voices, if they ventured to be heard, sometimes trembled a little; sad human beings of course, but not of the kind who show it overtly; especially as I saw them once again, saw us again, human beings who were strangely awkward and lost as if the “well-ordered array” that had long characterized, not only trees and ravines, but also the lives and the deaths of all of us, had come apart, leaving us distraught before the grave, at the end of this small valley, almost like poor people burying one of their own, the victim of some disgusting war, quickly, on the edge of the fighting . . . So unarmed.

Black figures ready to come apart as well, like snowflakes, but so much more miserable than snowflakes.

More miserable except that, lacking the ancient words of some liturgy, we had gone in quest of words that were hardly less unanchored than we were, along with the simplest heartfelt cries (“André, my brother!”), trying them out in the air against death, those very words that are born of the first exile, that would never have been formed and that would have remained unnecessary without it, thereby attempting to tie ourselves back to the world, at least for as long as it takes to pronounce or hear them, to the “marvelous” world of sightless, voiceless things, to the world of flowers and snowflakes on flowers that are blooming or beginning to bloom.

And now comes back to mind another moment of that morning of the 21st of April, when nearly all of us gathered once again in the house in Truinas. A very calm Anne de Staël, her great inner force undamaged by sorrow, came over to speak to me for a short while. She told me that a few days before André’s death, when she offered to read some pages—which had seemed particularly complex to her—written about his poetry, he rejected the idea; yet gratefully accepted her suggestion to read some of Emily Dickinson’s poems, which, as Anne confided, she had always admired; and she added these words more or less, with that frankness we can only appreciate in her: “As if, facing death, only what is self-evident withstood . . .”

I later thought it was as if, during that strangely full morning,

other threads had been added to all the interwoven correspondences which, for so long and despite our differences, I had perceived between André and myself. One of those correspondences was the thought of the “simple” (which, however, is not the word: Dickinson is not “simple,” nor Hölderlin, nor Hopkins, nor André himself) as what alone could be opposable to death, an idea that had preoccupied me for years. The other thread was Emily Dickinson’s being mentioned in that moment of mourning, because of what I had written twenty years before, after Gustave Roud’s death, and which I could not fail to remember now:

“On the afternoon of the funeral, I was struck by the presence of a few objects, which seemingly summed up a life, on his desk cluttered with probably unread books and with mostly unanswered letters. First, the photo of one of Roud’s farmer-friends, a winter woodcutter who was wearing a fur hat, and, in front of this photo, a postcard showing, I think, the head of an archaic Apollo; then a small volume of Emily Dickinson of which Mademoiselle S. told me that he knew by heart a poem that he would constantly reread, in the original, during his last months:

*If I shouldn't be alive
When the Robins come,
Give the one in Red Cravat,
A Memorial crumb.*

*If I couldn't thank you,
Being fast asleep,
You will know I'm trying
With my Granite lip!*

I have often stated that my decisive encounter with Roud and his oeuvre, when I was an adolescent, fortified me with respect to a poetic philosophy in which the craft of writing and how one lives—how one stands up to life—should be inextricably linked. I doubt that André du Bouchet would have much liked Roud’s books, nor even his translations of Hölderlin. Yet the two men were similar in

discretion and dignity, “at the same height”; and even more so at the roots of their oeuvres by means of certain deep harmonies, of which the appearance of the pure figure of Emily Dickinson, as they were about to die, was a poignant sign.

Quite a few of us were in the house and close to one another as rarely happens: André himself was as little dead as possible, if one may speak in this way. And those unheard-of echoes, in the two senses of the word, were circulating in the air as if we had been caught in the network of a “silent music”—the *musica callada* of Saint John of the Cross—and held there together, living together in a house other than the stone one braided with plants that was sheltering us.

A network, yes, it was exactly that, as I assured myself more and more while recalling our long and, most often, tacit friendship.

“We have the same reasons.” Despite the widening gaps in my memory, I still hear André du Bouchet saying these words, just like that, during our first meeting, which took place at the Abbey of Royaumont during some cultural festivity of which I have forgotten everything; we were introduced to each other by André Berne-Joffroy, as he recently reminded me: in 1948, perhaps; in all events, a very long time ago. . .

Five brief peremptory words in which I wholly recognize him today; brief and brusque words since they could be based only upon an immediate intuition; five words that I myself would have been incapable of finding because of my doubting mind and this cautiousness that I have never rid myself of. Five words whose aptness I now perceive with astonishment.

(Whereas the consequences of those “reasons” in our books have been so different that they have sometimes seemed almost incompatible to me; and I have wondered more than once how André could put up with my books, and how I could feel for his so much admiration. As if, in the final reckoning, from the same soil, plants of very different species could sprout. From the same soil, that is: the “same reasons.”)

Similarly, our common admiration for Hölderlin.

In *Landscapes with Absent Figures*, which dates back to 1970, this note added to a few pages of reflections about the same poet:

“One of the most admirable [images written down by Hölderlin], among many others, is found in a sketch of a hymn to Christopher Columbus:

*since
for so little
the bell used
for ringing out
dinnertime
was out of tune, as if by the snow.*

It is difficult to grasp the relationship between these lines and the hymn itself; but suspended as it is here, the image suggests a haiku; and some readers will understand if I say that I find in these few words *the infinite opening* that makes me live.”

It's no coincidence that I had idly contented myself with pointing to the enigma of this fragment, while underscoring the gleam that drew my thoughts to it, and that years later it was taken up by André du Bouchet as the impetus for and the title of a meditation in which he progresses into regions I could never have neared. However, since each of us had granted the same special place to Hölderlin's oeuvre in our own poetic adventures and had both translated some of his pages, it was clearly by choice that we had spent time in the same vicinity of the mind. No surprise, either, that a fragment of “Mnemosyne” almost immediately occurred to me for bidding farewell to him. Not only because of the snow, the lilies of the valley, and the “nobility of soul,” but also because of the evocation of the two travelers who go over a pass marked with a cross “in memory of the dead”; and for this theme of crossing over, which will have accompanied me all my life, and for the multifarious echoes it was raising in me, beginning with the opening of Büchner's *Lenz*:

On the 20th of January, Lenz was walking in the mountains. The summits and high slopes were covered with snow, gray stones were tumbling down to the valleys, green meadows, boulders, and spruce trees.

*It was damp and cold; water was streaming from the
rocks and gushing over the path. . .*

Then, emerging from behind those lines—or those slopes, those cliffs—Celan’s admirable *Conversation in the Mountains*, translated into French as early as 1970 by André du Bouchet and John E. Jackson:

We Jews, having come here like Lenz, over the mountain. . .

And still further back, a memory less immediately convincing but all the same still alive for me: that “Winter Voyage into the Harz” which almost reconciled Rilke with Goethe’s poetry. . .

From there, only a few steps inside myself were needed to arrive at the *Winter Journey*, at Schubert whom, as I discovered one day with some surprise, André admired as much as I did; even as Schubert had been loved, in what I would call a still more intimate way, by Gustave Roud once again; he whom I had been able to compare, toward the end of his life, to another “winter traveler”—and I had never afterwards looked at the low windows of his country house bedroom without the frost flowers evoked in one of the most beautiful lieder of the cycle being re-engraved in my mind.

Echoes less numerous than obstinate and heard in the depths of the heart, all the way to those words which were written so generously for me by André and whose ending in fact makes both Schubert and Goethe surge forth: “What the spirits sing above the waters.” A waterfall poem, a “pure sunbeam” falling from the abrupt cliff and becoming a foamy iridescent veil and murmurs in the depths, all the way to the smooth mirror of the lake where constellations are reflected:

*Human souls
How like water you are!
Human fate
How like wind you are!*

Why then, when I arrived in Truin as that morning, did I immediately sense I was seeing the reality of the world as if it were “in relief,” as

if it were submerging you, almost taking your breath away? I could initially imagine that the painful circumstances had made my sensibility more acute; and that, moreover, the unexpected snow which had so quickly transformed the landscape had somewhat sharpened my eyes. (I must add I had always found Truinas to be a beautiful, “true” place—beautiful because “true”—, including the big low house that had become the heart of the place.)

The sprinkled snow over all things: the encounter, either the first or the last, at the beginning or at the end of the season—a surprise—snow and meadows, snow and foliage; the discovery of all things around us as if they were freshened by a sort of weightless plumage, the surprise—as if a very big bird had swooped down and grazed the ground for an instant, the light touch, fresh, almost immaterial—virginal, as I think that one can and must say (“The virgin, lively and beautiful today”). The boulders, the ravines, the meadows, the hedges, the bouquets of trees, the few stone farmhouses, indubitable as ever and at the same time, how to put it? lightened. . .

The presence, weight, and density of this bit of the world were impossible to call into doubt; and in addition, the very event of the burial that had also become strangely “truer,” true like those stones and that mud, through the total lack of ceremony and through what I said, even with its apparent disorderliness, bewilderedness, a sort of awkwardness before death.

Wild.

Wildness: what lies in the depths, is unaffected, the recovered foundation, ground on which one doesn’t sway—the very qualities ever so present in André du Bouchet’s books—at the very place where, one night, many years before, I had broken a heel bone after overstepping the path and falling from one dry-stone terrace wall onto another one: the opposite of a dream; and with that, the light snow, like feathers left behind by a late migration.

The encounter, which is almost impossible to express, of snow on apple buds beginning to bloom; touches of pink in all that whiteness.

The cold, the mud, the fallen down boulders, the orchard in bloom; but also those two motionless horses, beautifully wooden in color; and the people who were walking there, and the naïve feeling they were all friends, or should have been, because of the common magnetic pull towards the grave, and towards the house.

And the other, even stranger feeling, in me at least, that there was no emptiness, no absence, that only the coffin was empty, as it were. I will even venture this: there was no real sadness, in me at least; rather an emotion at once calm and intense, but no heartbreak, no revolt. (I have to say what I myself felt: nothing more—as I have always tried to do.)

Everything was livened that morning: the sensation of the reality of the world, of the marvelous reality of the world in a moment when contraries meet; and the feeling of human warmth, of, yes, I'll say it again, a "nobility of soul" beaming inside and outside, beneath the snowy sky as well as beneath the roof of the house.

But the greatest marvel, which was capable of arousing, paradoxically if not scandalously, a kind of muffled, timid, yet nonetheless powerful joy, definitely consisted of the words, which were another species of flowers and snowflakes that had sprouted, had flowered, had floated for a few moments midway between the earth and the sky, immaterial things and yet not entirely so, words impossible to produce if there had not first been the flowers, the boulders, and the clouds that they sometimes evoked, yet emerging from a place utterly different from the earth and the sky, born of ourselves, emerging from the heart, unable to be spoken except by us, and speaking to us alone—and those words, yes, obviously, had won out that morning over emptiness, for as long as that morning lasted; but with what lightness, what lack of pretentiousness, without the slightest accent of triumph—I would like to know and be able to say how—as simply, as miraculously, as a stream cutting its way between high grass and rocks (and it was in fact faithfully flowing down below).

A luminous smoke.

Or the fragrance risen from the depths of a heart no longer

closing itself off from the world.

A net knit of words, which gathered, which enveloped like a coat, yet which did not enclose, imprison—quite the opposite; since all the words chosen were expressing a crossing over, were themselves the crossing over, one step after the other—and the mountain, ceasing to seem a wall, had simply become what carries snow at its summit, night that blooms on its distant summit at sunrise.

(Here, another passage from “Mnemosyne,” which immediately precedes the one I quoted:

*But what we love? Sunshine
Sparkling on the floor and dried dust
And the shadowy woods of the homeland. . .*

And finally, just after the same passage:

*. . . but what is it? By the fig tree
My Achilles has died. . .)*

This is how the visible and the invisible, natural things, animals, human beings alive or dead, and their ancient or new words, as well as sadness and a kind of joy, can end up woven together. And once something that looks so much like the most intimate part of the mystery of being has been grazed with what is most intimate in you—however frail you might be, however moronic you might become—how can you forget it, how can you keep it to yourself?

Attached Pages

I have now given shape, though clumsily—so clumsily that, in the past, I would not have divulged them like this—to these pages begun immediately after the 21st of April, 2001, and dragged around like a burden for three years, the burden of an unsatisfactory draft, of an unfulfilled promise. Now published, despite everything, because of the impulse of friendship that they originally signified; and because of what they wanted to say and say again, before I will assuredly no longer be able to do so.

If I had at least spent days rewriting them, touching them up, giving variety to them, enriching them! No, those days were mostly spent keeping my distance in order to avoid the evidence of my failure; and I was not distracted in the least by other chores that would have given me an excuse.

It's barely if I could note down, from time to time, the extent to which I felt "undone"; not "torn apart," but "undone."

Also ill-at-ease, as never before, when facing what always seemed essential to figure out.

Ill-at-ease, undone, disgusted at times, yet with some final remaining persistence.

On another day, I remembered this line from a sonnet written by Góngora in old age:

¿ Caduco el paso ? Ilustrese el juicio
that I had translated as:
Caduc le pas? Que l'esprit s'éclaircisse. . .

[A faltering footstep? May the mind clear itself up. . .]

That this line kept haunting me was perfectly natural. But what if the mind itself "falters," I thought? Against that, nothing could be done. And this provided an additional reason for not postponing the completion of this text, if that morning in Truinas had truly been, as I happened to believe, one of the rare moments when I had recovered my "inner balance" during these years "in the ravine." After which, I had quickly let go once again.

I was experiencing a moment when "winged words," or what had always been dreamt of as such, fall to the ground in piteous disorder; a little like those woodpigeons, in the Pyrenees, flocking into the net that captures them—a spectacle which I had seen in the Pays Basque in 1938, when barely a teenager, and to which, I think, we were taken so we could admire the "great show." I fear I judged it to be so at the time.

And as I was musing during this rout of my thoughts, I wondered if a few of those woodpigeons soaring over the wooden-framed net cast up toward them, had safely flown over the pass. The very thing I could have dreamt for those "extreme words."

(*Parole estreme*, said by dying Clorinda to Tancredi in Tasso's octaves

translated into such admirable music by Monteverdi.)

Even later—it was now the 3rd of November, 2003—I had nevertheless received, once again, a sort of sign: as viewed from a path between the place known as Gleizes and the Rocher des Aures, a few of those poplars that shine or, rather, light up like candles with yellow, almost golden flames, against a backdrop of dense dark-green pastures—especially in front of a rather steep slope where grazing cows seemed to be painted on a vertical panel, as in Books of Hours. Those kinds of lamps whose flames barely tremble in full daylight and which stand upright in the high hollows, at the ends of those small quiet valleys; and their truly golden light, their sunset light, having at last returned to my weary eyes so they can open again for at least as long as it takes to pass by, below.

Signs that are aids and that have become rarer.

And finally, in desperation, nearly three years to the day after that morning in Truinas, this resolution to content myself—but “content” is saying too much—with the work done.

Because what I have tried to retain here becomes something more and more remote.

Something that will end up resembling a foreign language that you had long thought you understood and even had dared to speak, and that becomes little by little unintelligible.

Or a long effective remedy which would no longer work and for which no substitute could be found.

Or it would be like a hand that withdraws, a face that turns away.

Life’s sunlight that moves one step back, then many steps back.

I wonder if a bird can still fly through that sky.

(Originally published as *Truinas, le 21 avril 2001*, Éditions La Dogana, 2004.)

Translator’s Notes

“And snow, like lilies of the valley. . .” This poem by Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) has several versions. See the discussion in Hölderlin’s *Sämtliche Gedichte* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2005, pp. 1031-1052). I have translated the German version that Jaccottet used:

Und Schnee, wie Maienblumen
Das Edelmütige, wo
Es seie, bedeutend, glänzet mit
Der grünen Wiese
Der Alpen, hälftig, da ging
Vom Kreuze redend, das
Gesetzt ist unterwegs einmal
Gestorbenen, auf der schroffen Straß
Ein Wandersmann mit
Dem andern, aber was ist dies?

Jacques Dupin (b. 1927-2012), French poet. Along with André du Bouchet, Yves Bonnefoy, Michel Leiris, Gaëtan Picon, Louis-René des Forêts, and Paul Celan, Dupin founded and edited the important review *L'Éphémère*, beginning in 1966.

Dominique Grandmont (b. 1941), French poet and translator.

“The April” was actually first published by Janine Hao in 1963, then reissued by the Éditions Thierry Bouchard in 1983. Jaccottet recalls the latter date, which corresponds to an edition that circulated much more widely among the poets in Jaccottet’s and du Bouchet’s circle. Jaccottet notes “croisée blue” (blue window or here, arguably, windowpane) as an image; the actual context is: “croisée renvoyant la couleur de sa lumière au ciel bleu qu’on ne voit pas, est pour jamais confondue avec lui” (windowpane sending back the color of its light to the blue sky that cannot be seen, is forever blended with it).

The French writer Étienne Pivert de Senancour (1770-1846) published his novel *Obermann* in 1804.

Jaccottet’s *Paysages avec figures absentes* was first published in 1970 by Gallimard.

“In well-ordered array.” From Hölderlin’s poem “Lebensalter.” The German phrase is “Wohleingerichteten (Eichen).”

“Their eyes were opened.” A common phrase and concept in the Bible. See Genesis 3: 7, 21: 19; Acts 9: 8, 18; Luke 24: 31, etc.

“One of those correspondences was the thought of the ‘simple.’” Jaccottet is alluding to the epigraph that was used for the first issue of *L'Éphémère*, the review co-edited by André du Bouchet, Jacques Dupin, Yves Bonnefoy, Michel Leiris, Gaëtan Picon, Louis-René des Forêts, and Paul Celan. The notion is often

discussed in du Bouchet's essays; see Clément Layet's preface to du Bouchet's *Aveuglante ou banale: Essais sur la poésie 1949-1959*, Paris: Le Bruit du Temps, 2011. The idea of the simple is found in Plotinus.

Gustave Roud (1897-1976), a Swiss poet and short-prose writer who exerted an important influence on Jaccottet. Jaccottet's study *Gustave Roud* was first published by the Éditions Seghers in 1968, then expanded for a new edition published by the Éditions Universitaires de Fribourg in 1982. Roud's translations of Hölderlin are collected in *Poèmes de Hölderlin* (Lausanne: Mermod, 1942), a book that was reissued by La Bibliothèque des Arts in 2002.

"If I shouldn't be alive. . . ." Emily Dickinson's poem is No. 182 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Boston / New York / London / Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1960).

The *musica callada* ("silent music") of Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) is mentioned in strophe 15 of *The Spiritual Canticle* (second version).

André Berne-Joffroy (1915-2007) was a French critic and art exhibit curator.

"since / for so little". From Hölderlin's fragment "Entwurf zu Kolomb IV". See Martin Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1951):

Von wegen geringer Dinge
Verstimmt wie vom Schnee war
die Glocke, womit
Man läutet
Zum Abendessen.

". . . taken up years later by André du Bouchet as a title. . ." Jaccottet refers to the book: . . . *Désaccordée comme par de la neige* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989).

Georg Büchner (1813-1837) published his novel *Lenz* in 1835.

Paul Celan (1920-1970) published his *Gespräch im Gebirg* in 1959. See the *Gesammelte Werke*, volume 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983, pp. 169-173). Jaccottet quotes a sentence toward the end: ". . . wir, die Juden, die da kamen, wie Lenz, durch Gebirg. . ."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) wrote his poem "Harzreize im Winter" in 1777.

E&F V.XI

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) composed his song cycle *Winterreise* in 1827. The evocation of “frost flowers” is found in “Frühlingstraum” (“A Dream of Springtime”): “Doch an den Fensterscheiben, / Wer malte die Blätter da? / Ihr lacht wohl über den Träumer, / Der Blumen im Winter sah?“ (“But there on the windowpanes / who had been painting leaves? / You may well laugh at the dreamer / who saw flowers in the winter?”).

“What the spirits sing above the waters.” From Goethe’s poem “Gesang der Geister über den Wassern.” Jaccottet quotes and paraphrases lines from the second strophe. The quatrain is found at the end of the poem: “Seele des Menschen / Wie gleichst du dem Wasser! / Schicksal des Menschen, / Wie gleichst du dem Wind!” Schubert uses the quatrain in his Lied D714.

“The virgin, lively, and beautiful today.” The title of a well-known sonnet by Mallarmé (1842-1898): “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui / Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d’aile ivre / Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre / Le transparent glacier des vols qui n’ont pas fui . . .”

“But what we love?” The aforementioned poem by Hölderlin, in the version used by Jaccottet:

Wie aber liebes? Sonnenschein
Am Boden sehen wir und trockenen Staub
Und heimatlich die Schatten der Wälder . . .

. . . aber was ist dies? Am Feigenbaum ist mein
Achilles mir gestorben.

Luis de Góngora (1561-1627) was a Spanish poet. Jaccottet has published two translations of Góngora, *Les Solitudes* (Geneva: La Dogana, 1984) and *Treize sonnets et un fragment* (Geneva: La Dogana, 1985). The line “¿Caduco el paso? Ilustrese el juicio” is found in the sonnet beginning “En este occidental, en este, oh Licio. . .”

“Extreme words. . .” From *Il combattimento di Tancredi et Clorinda* (1624), composed by Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), who used a libretto based on *Jerusalem Delivered* by the poet Torquato Tasso (1544-1595).

8

David Ewald's work has appeared in such publications as *Metazen*, *Eclectica*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Denver Syntax*, and *BULL: Men's Fiction*. His full-length play, *Mormania*, was part of Paragon Theatre's *The Trench*. He currently serves as Nonfiction Editor for *Eclectica Magazine* and lives in California.

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Born in Switzerland and a longtime resident of France, **Philippe Jaccottet** (b. 1925) is one of the essential European poets. His recent poetry and poetic prose writings are now available in John Taylor's translation: *And, Nonetheless: Selected Prose and Poetry 1990-2009* (Chelsea Editions). His collected writings are soon to be published as a volume in Gallimard's prestigious "Pléiade" series, a rare honor for a living author. He has been awarded several European literary prizes, including the Petrarch Prize and, in 2010, the Schiller Prize, the highest Swiss literary distinction.

Adam Klein is an Assistant professor of English at The American University of Afghanistan and the author of the Lambda Book Award-nominee, *The Medicine Burns* (High Risk Books) and the novel *Tiny Ladies* (Serpent's Tail Books). His work has appeared in *Bomb*, *The New York Times* "At War" blogs, *openDemocracy*, and *The Huffington Post*. Most recently, *Fourteen Hills* nominated his story, "A Hardship Post" for a 2012 Pushcart Prize. He is the singer/songwriter for The Size Queens and has published interdisciplinary pieces on the blog sites of *Electric Literature* and *Ninth Letter*. The band's most recent song-cycle/video, *Consumption Work: Tammy, Cybertariat, At the Aral Sea* is available here: <http://thedoctorjockleburgreview.com/medium-cool/album-premiere-consumption-work-by-the-size-queens/> Dzanc Books will publish his book, *The Gifts Of The State: Afghan Authors Under Thirty* in December 2013, and he has a prose work forthcoming in *Fiction International*.

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John Taylor is the author of the three-volume *Paths to Contemporary French Literature* and *Into the Heart of European Poetry*—all four books published by Transaction. He has also written seven books of stories, short prose, and poetry, the latest of which are *The Apocalypse Tapestries* (Xenos Books), *Now the Summer Came to Pass* (Xenos Books), and *If Night is Falling* (Bitter Oleander Press). Besides Philippe Jaccottet's writings, Taylor has also recently translated books by Pierre-Albert Jourdan and Jacques Dupin.

Veronica Vela has a Master's from Brown University, has published in several journals, and was recently accepted as a contributor in fiction at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Vermont. She plans on pursuing her PhD in English in the fall.

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8