

{ THE BEND }

11TH EDITION

The Bend
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This is the 2014 installment of the showcase for the work of students, alumni, and friends of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Notre Dame—the journal known, in previous incarnations as *Dánta*, *La Rue Barbarian*, and *The Rhubarbarian*. This year's edition will simultaneously appear online.

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{ LETTER FROM THE EDITORS }

Dear Readers,

Don't look now (Oh okay, do!), but you've got a little treat in your hands: a sliver slice of the pie that is the past and present body of the Creative Writing MFA program at Notre Dame. We're proud and honored and well, just pleased as Mr. Punch to find ourselves swimming in such a delicious lineage of talented writers who've been shaped, dotted, and baked here. As the metaphor crumbles, please savor the scrumptious writing of some of our former and current students. Read, smack your lips, ask politely for more. On the way, trust us: we're bakers.

Sincerely,

The Editors

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{ Beth Towle }

Selections from *Huckleberry Queen*

ORPHANING

Aren't we all the orphans of descending?
Don't we all lash our futures to the ones
who treat us worst. Our bellies full of the ones
who will love us least. Our bellies
full of the ones unable to get out fast enough to rid
themselves of our sucking weak bodies?

THE DEATH OF THE HUCKLEBERRY QUEEN

When the end comes,
I hope to be damned up with sweat
on a summer day,
wrapped in muslin and laid out
for every watching eye
on the porch, or in the window
of a room where it is cool
and everything is slightness.

When the end comes,
I want ice on the back of the tongue.
I want the biggest stars.
The night should come on quick
and with a bit of a headache.
The moon should be luminous
and I should know
that it's the last one I'll see.

When the end comes,
I want to be lost. I want to lose
some piece of something I loved
so that I know I loved it.
I want to be broke open
with wanting and broke down
with getting what I want.

I want everything to be enraged
by desire. I want everyone
to be enraged by desire.
I want desire. I want rage.

When the end comes,
I want to be nowhere
to be found.
I want to be drying out
in a tent a mile away.
I want my guts to be slick
with want, still slick
with the sweet spit of it trapped in me,
which is how I like it best.
Which is how I want it.

LOVER, she has split apart the breaths of innumerable men. Undoes bodies by the dozens, rends hearts, knocks out their tongues. Tricks to learn and she's learned them all. That it takes the right eye, the softest word, the fullest dress. Takes a deviled hand, an angelic mouth, a human ear. She plucks the strings that sound the loudest. Majors all the minor chords. Plays them out, lets the last note linger.

MELODY

Black gown drunk again,
shoved out of doorways,
blinking at the half light coming
from the cabin.

Be quicker than the last note,
be quicker than the crescendo
which always comes so fast
and loose and split apart at the edges.

Edge me to the worst part.
Let me get so close
that the song slices right through me.
Let the slay of chords
tie me to the bedpost.

THE BIRTH OF THE HUCKLEBERRY QUEEN

I rose through boil,
heavy-headed, a little bit scarred.
Raised lines in the flesh
behind my knees, between my toes.
Burnt lips, red hands.

I rose through boil,
dumped the dolls in the fire,
strung ribbons from hangedman bones.
Turned from milk.

I rose through boil
and sweated out the kindness.
I came to the big house
and left a message on silver platter.
I came to the woodshed.
I took up the axe.

I rose through boil
and rolled the dice.
Friends in the cupboard,
friends on the stairs.
Music like heartburn coming
from the foyer no one can
return to.

I rose through boiled
sheets piled by the backdoor.
I rose from the bed.
I rose from the lake.
I rose from the dirt
so that I could be
born and burnt again.

{ Tony D'Souza }

IN THE WILDERNESS

It's been two years since I published my last novel. Warner Bros. came calling on that one, Todd Phillips was set to direct, the Duplass brothers quickly churned out the script; it was very exciting and I went out to LA a few times. Then everything went silent. My wife and I had a bruising divorce, Houghton passed on my last manuscript, my agent and I parted ways. Now I'm in a nasty legal fight over custody of my kids.

I often think of my friend Chris Napolitano. He was the long-time editor of *Playboy*, handpicked and groomed by Hef. I had a run when I published stories there and would head up to their Midtown offices whenever I was in New York. It was beyond great; Chris was always dapper and handsome and dressed to the nines, a real sparkplug of a guy regaling me with stories of who he'd met, who he'd published. We'd have lunch and Elvis Costello would be at the next table; I'd leave *Playboy* with bottles of booze and *Playboy* embossed shot glasses, magazines and tales of the models; then I'd meet friends in the Village and pass out my swag and stories. It was the most heroic I'd ever been.

Something happened around 2009 when everything in publishing was going to shit; there was a discrimination lawsuit against Chris by a former *Playboy* employee, the New York Post covered all the salacious details. Chris was soon ousted, I heard he divorced, it was a real fall from grace and I'd smoke a cigarette late at night and sometimes wonder what would become of him. I sent him a few emails and they bounced back.

Two years later I found him on Google; he was editing something called *Indian Country Today*. What the fuck was that? I tracked down his new email and sent him a note; he invited me up to his *Indian Country*

Today offices, which were also in Midtown.

Chris was happy to see me and the offices were insane. Whatever *Indian Country Today* was, there was money in it. The place was a stately spread, luxuriously appointed in dark wood, even better than *Playboy*. Chris was odd that day, dodging my questions about his personal life; perhaps he should have been. There was a man in his office, a big bruiser of a guy sitting in the corner in a plaid work shirt and braids and quietly mulling over some paper in his hands. The impression I had was of a Native American mafia enforcer studying a racetrack tip sheet.

Indian Country Today, Chris explained as he led me around, was a nationally distributed startup glossy magazine, a weekly, covering Native American issues. He had been brought in to do it. Starting a glossy was unbelievable at a time when the other magazines were struggling and folding. Chris introduced me to his editorial staff, then his art department, right around fifteen people. At the end of each introduction he told me, "A wonderful talent. Formerly of *Playboy*."

"Where's the money from?" I kept asking Chris, who had managed to save all these former *Playboy* people and put out a handsome magazine that had his creative fingerprints all over it. He didn't answer that question either. The only thing he told me was that one of the magazine's main distribution cities was Washington DC. It was easy enough to figure out on the long elevator ride down: the Indians were funding the magazine with their casino money; their lobbyists were using it to support their legislative efforts on the Hill. Then something else dawned on me. Indian casinos weren't going anywhere. Chris Napolitano at *Indian Country Today* might outlast *Playboy* in Midtown, which is in fact what's happened.

*

I've had to scramble since my divorce, teaching when I can get a visiting gig, hustling after sporadic magazine work and living out of a suitcase, and my kids are often far away. Other jobs have come to me on angels' wings; I was recently invited to lead a tour group to India; twelve days and fourteen people, it was stimulating and lucrative and exhausting and when the group finally left, I stayed. I took a room at the Panjim Inn,

a historic colonial hotel in the Goan capital's Latin Quarter. The plan was to finally start a novel, but my mind continued to be seized with dread, and all I did was sleep.

I needed to just keep moving and soon was on a filthy train, rumbling south through the night, out from Goa and into Karnataka, along the Konkan Coast, where I once set a novel. Its palm trees and villages stand along rivers that pour down from the Western Ghats and slip into the Indian Ocean like warm, opened veins. The train was mostly empty; the two transvestites who were working it, clearly not women and dressed in ratty saris, kept returning to me, caressing my shoulder where I sat to shame me into giving them money. Where did they live? I wondered. Where did they sleep? They spoke to me in a language I didn't understand, teasing me, and I finally pulled out my wallet and paid them to go away.

I stepped off the train in Mulki, a small village two stops north of the port city of Mangalore, found a \$4 room at the bus stand and in the morning went looking for my uncle Francis. He's old now, nearly eighty; he's lived here since fleeing Kuwait before the invading Iraqis during the First Gulf War, losing thirty years of labor and savings as a migrant worker when he did.

He's a snarled old knot of a man, mostly bones and belly, living alone in a small monsoon-beaten house in a one-acre grove of coconut trees. He wears a rag like a pirate's head wrap, is missing teeth. His unshaven face always has the hardened look of suspicion. His Arab wife died decades ago; a daughter was lost to a brain tumor. His son working in the Gulf sends him \$100 a month. Selling coconuts brings in another \$20.

I first came here twenty years ago, when I was nineteen; even then Francis seemed ancient. We'd gone out in the canoe night after night, set nets for crabs, drank neat rum, sang old songs in Konkani. The most recent time, three years ago, the ex-wife and kids were with me and Francis and his house were far too grim for all that and we'd had our taxi wait.

On the Mulki River, everything in my life has always felt far away, and I've always imagined that one day I'll stay. Poor Hindus live on the islands in the river; I remember a girl in a gold *salwar* being ferried toward

us once on a raft. She'd been standing, statuesque, white flowers in her hair; I'd had my shirt off; I'd stood in the canoe and cast out a net in her direction. She'd blushed because she'd understood I was casting the net at her.

Those days were gone and of course I had my children to return to on the other side of the world. This time, Francis met me at his gate when I hollered, eyed me with suspicion. I explained those first nights fishing with him, other times, the short recent visit when I'd brought my kids. The fog soon lifted and he said to me, "That's right, isn't it? You're that one who is coming often?"

He was wearing a *lungi*, the pirate's head wrap. My visits have always meant a small windfall for him and he became animated and busy. "I've sold the canoe," he told me as he marched around the compound with a long bamboo coconut hook, "but no matter. I will call a man and he will bring one. We'll take rum and bring the nets and drink and do the singing. You remember the singing?"

I asked Francis what he needed and he said he'd like to eat meat, have a drink. So we spent the late morning and early afternoon in the air-conditioned bus stand restaurant. We reminisced about those old nights on the river and soon he was laughing, singing loud, indecent songs, spilling his beer, pounding his hand on the table, rice falling from his mouth. A waiter asked us to quiet down; Francis grew maudlin, leaned into the table, told me again his long tale of the war and his losses.

"What about the canoe?" I said later.

"Yes, yes," he said and composed himself, wiping his mouth with his hand. "I will call the man and we'll bring the rum and drink and do the singing."

When we left, we needed a rickshaw, and by the time we reach the gate, Francis was asleep on my shoulder. I slipped \$100 in rupees into the pocket of his shirt, helped him into his bed, carefully tucked in the corners of his mosquito net. Out on the bank of the river, the palm trees and water were as beautiful as they had always been. I didn't wait for him to wake to say goodbye.

{ Marcela Sulak }

THE WALLS OF YOUR HOUSE

Do not attract attention to yourself in public. This is one of the fundamental rules of good breeding. Shun conspicuous manners, conspicuous clothes, a loud voice, staring at people, knocking into them, talking across anyone—in a word do not attract attention to yourself. Do not expose your private affairs, feelings or innermost thoughts in public. You are knocking down the walls of your house when you do.

— Emily Post, Etiquette

The water cups quake, the canisters of beer cheer, the fire department reservoirs, the salt in the sea shakes.

The bougainvillea's got the willies, the shoe horns curl across the island of Curaçao on New Year's Eve.

The doilies flutter on thick steel nails, on the walls of Morris's living room the painted rabbis shimmy and the plaster crumbles, everyone shakes but Morris.

Morris is old, his companion beautiful (he is an artist and fancies himself the nightingale in Oscar Wilde's fairy tale about unrequited love).

The stoppered perfumes in the duty-free stores long to reach the shore, the silks, cigarettes and cigars swirl, the boxes of tea and the seed pearls agitate.

Everyone has a bit of the demon inside, that's why we can't stand still when city hall, the courthouse, the police department, the customs offices and banks line up behind the thick red ropes of firecrackers, which roar and wave like an escaped fire hose, whipping the demons of jealousy and pettiness, of meanness and spite.

I tremble with the cornpone, the iguana soup.

The oyster crackers crack, the floating vegetable market undulates, along

with the udders of goats.

Even the flamingoes tremble in their sunset-colored pools.

{ Cyndi Vander Ven }

THE HAND THAT HOLDS THE GLASS

Light meets the neat edge
of the gurney where gauzy
sand meets the sea.

The Costa Rican sun spins
back on its axis, arcs along
the parallel of my body, mapped
points where head and feet
meet the brilliant line.

I reach for you, eyes shaded
against blindness, and Joan Didion
hands me a glass of whiskey
across the kitchen counter,
her pale hands smoothing cool
stone as she talks to John,
sagged in his chair, reading
the *Times* and making small talk.
Only when he does not answer
does she turn, shifting the question's
weight, drawn to that familiar
posture of sleep, years of it to lean
on, and finds he's left her, newly
birthed, rapsallion bachelor again,
the paper slack in his lap.

If I could shift the weight
of him, spill the held words
back onto the page, move
this dark, limitless point,
then he would reach for the drink
I hold, wonder at Joan's hand held
as it is against her thin throat,
surprised at the *Times*, all ajumble.
If I could rearrange these words,
then you and I would skim
time at light speed,
ride this brilliance leaning
into the unseen thing.
But love does not alter,
and to try could make us strangers:
you clipping coupons
from *Diario la República* over
breakfast; I sluicing for truth
through *la Nación* at dinner, foreigners
in our own country, stars ajumble.
Rather, we'll stretch toward the warm
sun and the simple words we utter
through the days and years of us, and find
from first one of our ends to the other
the hand that holds the glass.

{ John Crawford }

A TOAST TO THE LOST WRITERS

If you're going to be a writer, you must resign yourself to times of loneliness.

That's why I like to write in coffee shops. The work is still solitary, but at least I'm surrounded by people. The coffee is a nice bonus. Drink enough caffeine, and everything feels like a good idea. Doubts disappear. You're ready to tackle a novel then and there.

Writing didn't always feel so lonely. As a newspaper reporter, I bonded with my comrades in arms on the staff. Our desks were bunched together in a crowded newsroom. Many of us were in our early twenties, just out of college. Others were veterans, older and more cynical, who had covered way too many shootings and house fires.

We made little money as we cranked out our stories. It wasn't easy. Working against constant deadlines made for a stressful life. We met up in dive bars to blow it off and complain about the school boards, police chiefs, and county commissioners we covered. One editor called mandatory happy hours on many a Friday, and at one dive we frequented, the Square Bar, the paper's veteran photographer had his own reserved seat.

In grad school, I met other writers. We were true believers earning our MFAs, and our weeks centered around writing workshops where we supported each other in the face of the inevitable criticisms that came, sometimes constructive, sometimes harsh. We wrote into the wee hours in computer labs, attended the readings of masters whose talent seemed so far out of reach, and hung out in townie bars, drinking round after round and discussing movies, music, and this elusive thing we were all chasing.

Together against the odds, we cheered when someone was published and celebrated when we finished our theses.

Now, years later, some of those creative writers have given up on it. They don't want to return to those hard, dark spaces or, swamped by work and kids, they don't bother trying. As for the young reporters, many moved on to PR and marketing, jobs with less stress and more pay. A newspaper's grind wears you out—that is, if you can even find a job in newspapers anymore.

I feel sad thinking about those lost writers and reporters. Me, I have family responsibilities now, but I'm still at it. I write and edit stories for a college magazine and squeeze in freelance and fiction pieces when I can. I don't hang out with fellow practitioners so much anymore, but if I can get out of the house, I head to the coffee shop. Grabbing a table and power outlet, I've given up many a Saturday and Sunday afternoon sipping, typing, and trying to wrap my mind around some piece and wrestle it to the ground.

While my coffee cools, I look at the people around me. Some gab, some read, and many stare at their own computers. It's nice to have their company, but we never exchange words. This isn't a workshop or a newsroom, and we share no common purpose. They're all strangers to me.

Bombed on coffee, I often think about the lost writers. Do they miss it? Does any of their old fire still smolder? Maybe it can't be put out. Maybe it waits to be reignited. I hope so. I hope they pick it up again, put themselves out there.

At the Square Bar, we held many send-offs for the reporters moving on. Toasting them, we lifted shots and gulped them down. Sitting in the coffee shop now, I toast the lost writers with what remains in my cup. I wish them well, though I miss them, and I miss the wonderful words they used to write.





{ Margaret Emma Brandl }

FUGUE

The lights make halos on the wall and turn the doorway a soft orange. My clothes hung on a rack for days, sometimes with the window open. I type words and send them into space but space is quiet and wind blows the dead plants and someone on the porch is smoking. I sat in an airport for seven hours or more and there was nothing but a haze outside the glass. No matter where we go all the air we breathe is killing us but sometimes it will kill us faster. Beer bottles and beer cans and wine bottles and box wine and spirits in their various bottles and in the end I have nothing but fear, nothing but the corner on the ottoman and the reflection of lights on my phone. Someday we will have lost everyone we once loved. We will wait in airports with no one to fly home to.

DOROTHY

The walks you took through woods and fields, the cow you nursed and paraded at the show, the tornado-nights spent in the basement—whistling creak, house-noises. A refuge for other nights, when the TV-glow and plastic clutter made your Plato's cave. In the morning you wondered if there was ever anything other than shadows of tricycles and rainbow stacking rings; ever anything beyond the noises of feet on the kitchen floor, on the second-floor stairs. To return to your farm days, to your vegetable sales: soft earth, wooden trays, aligning the carrots in rows. Smooth root-flesh, warmth: the perfect eye-flaws of a tuber; the translucence of a lettuce-leaf; the dirt-smudges of a cauliflower. If only tomorrow you could wake up in your bed and find that it was only just a dream.

{ Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé }

XÚN XÙ JIÀN JÌN :: PLEASE TAKE NOTE OF THE
PROPER SEQUENCE

Dr. Eichelberger had a habit of rotating his head, to get his blood circulating, he said. He did this frequently while he was saying something, usually something he found difficult to say, like an assessment, which wasn't forthcoming of therapists in general. Or a self-help method to take home, like self-administering antihistamines for hay fever. The idea of cognitive therapy actually working got him into a tangle, as if any possible success of thinking one's way out of life's problems was a long shot, something he needed to wrap his head around. Narrative therapy was his modus operandi, and he was known to be good at it. Dr. Eichelberger took his time with letting his clients reveal their own pasts, their thoughts about different life situations, even current affairs, if they were into that. They would understand their neuroses better, and everyone had neuroses. What were Dr. Eichelberger's neuroses, Gigi wondered. She asked him once, and all he gave was a smile, which already seemed to be something of an effort on his part. This one-way street of communication wasn't choice for Gigi, but it seemed to counterpoint the kinds of communication she enjoyed with other men, which was reciprocal. Not always happy circumstances, of equal relations, but at the very least, two people were talking to each other, learning more about each other. Even if one inevitably seemed more keen or needy. Or in the moment. There was an acorn right at the tip of her forefinger, by the left. It seemed to teeter on

its point, its embroidery a bit frayed. So many people must have told their stories on this couch. So many memories have filled this room, and how many have receded to the place from which they came.

QĪNG ÉR YÌ JŪ :: SOMETHING EASILY DONE

It's not common for a therapist to start a session with food. Dr. Eichelberger made this another habit. He'd offer assorted hors d'oeuvres, colorful curiosities on a silver tray or porcelain dish. Deli meats, with a wedge of cheese. Sliced from a Pimiento or Pepper loaf. Cod roe, or sometimes even Sevruga caviar. Freshly toasted bruschetta. Beside it, a shallow bowl of olive oil. With the bruschetta, he had the habit of picking them up with his forefinger and third finger, the way chopsticks do. He took three for himself, a kind number he said, after which he knocked back a tequila shot. Alcohol was also permitted during therapy, a technique to loosen his clients around the edges, get them to drop their guard and speak with less inhibition, thereby committing more deeply to the process. A healthy method, he said. He made sure not to call his clients "patients," this Gigi overheard once when he was speaking to another doctor. He had recommended a "patient" to a bona fide asylum, using the word out of carelessness, then correcting himself quickly. Were these serious cases? What did they do to warrant his forwarding their case to another specialist? Were they violent there, in the room? Were they a danger to themselves, or to their loved ones? Or worse, to larger society? "That was a complicated case study," Dr. Eichelberger said to Gigi before spooning some roe into his mouth. He said case study. Not case. Again, as if he's put this man in a separate box. The box had the same shape and color, but it had been placed in a different room.

XÚN GUĪ DǎO Jŭ :: ALL RULES AND REGULATIONS TO BE OBSERVED

“So, sex was never an enjoyable activity for you, is that correct?” The phone rang, its loud ring making Dr. Eichelberger leap to his feet, stagger to his desk as if shocked at his own forgetfulness to leave it off the hook. He took the call anyway, an important one it seemed. His back faced Gigi, as if an invisible wall had formed between doctor and client. He spoke casually about another client. Gigi felt like a patient, so that’s what the distinction felt like. An alterity is what Geronimo would have recognized it as. Gigi turned to her side, still lying on the couch, and picked up an open-faced sandwich. There was beef tongue on it, and a poached egg. She took some onions from the adjacent sandwich, and placed it on her own, to mask the taste of the meat. She also added pepper. Dr. Eichelberger’s desk had neat stacks on it. Everything was organized, as to be expected of a doctor. But one cupboard against the left wall was filled with every kind of thing. A real mess, and it seemed that was the one place he allowed such ill discipline, or abandon, depending on the way you looked at it. There was a large corkboard near his desk. Seated in his swivel chair, he would push himself with his legs to reach it, and retrieve a picture from it, ever so often. It was a collage of pictures. Were they family portraits? Were they his clients? There were newspaper cuttings. A crossword, an old one. Unfinished. There were pages torn from books. Many of them were paintings. Gigi recognized one. It was a piece by Anselm Kiefer. The one with the white cot near a window. The window seemed to belong to an attic, the ceiling being so low. There are no people in this work. Closer

to the viewer, it no longer feels like crawlspace. It's about Parsifal, and his quest for the Holy Grail, but Gigi didn't know this then. The cot is Parsifal's, but it might as well have been Gigi's.

DIĀN PÈI LIÚ LÍ :: ONCE EVEN HE WAS DESTITUTE AND SEARCHING

Dr. Eichelberger's wife lived in Quebec, where she could live close to Frenchness, she said, and so her roots. Gigi only knew of her through her conversations with Dr. Eichelberger. She seemed nice enough, went to college but never finished to open a bakery. "She was good at it," Dr. Eichelberger said, betraying his fondness for her. "I was in college. Still young and insistent on remaining naïve. There's the terrible resistance to bending to the ways of the world at that age, don't you think? To ignore all the adults and their finger wagging and open warnings about the big, bad world. And how it'll swallow you up. To be careful, and have your wits about you. No one wants to become that jaded person. No one wants to become that suffering fool wagging that limp finger like a know-all. But we grow into that role we've abhorred all our lives." He opened an album, and brought it to the couch. In it were pages of photographs he'd taken of the cakes his wife had made. The cupcakes were charming. They were works of art, the detail astonishing. "She was an inventor," Dr. Eichelberger said. "She created things all the time, and her life was infused with that raw energy. Of being so close to life, its sheer force. Just standing next to her, you could feel the world rush up to her. And her hands. They turned everything to gold. She didn't just make cakes, she was good at doing hair, she also worked at the garment factory, and

quickly got promoted to design clothes for a line. She had two thin belts that she wore with everything. And she looked lovely in a dress, especially when she twirled to show me the front and back.” Gigi knew how he felt. That he wasn’t born with that same joy. That he didn’t have the Creator’s spirit. He pretty much said it in those words. He said it one day to Gigi, pouring himself a glass of vodka, almost to the brim as if the glass wasn’t tall enough. He said all he did was try to repair something in other people—all he did was open their minds, and take a look inside.

CHUĀN YÚN LIÈ SHÍ :: LOUD AND CLEAR

Dr. Eichelberger segmented his life into neat rectangles. His recollections seemed to frame themselves according to the number of times he had to move, or overhaul a place, upon which his wife would make a visit. To peel around the front door, step into the house, spend an hour sizing up the space, then moving in as if she'd never insisted on anything at all. The windows had grills, and one-way mirrored glass. The kitchen top could not be marble because it was too porous. The drawers had to roll out smoothly, and lock into place when shut, without the slightest sound. All the crockery matched. As long as it was blue—any kind of blue—it belonged. Once, she realized a blue saucer was really more green than blue, and tossed it into the bin, then retrieved it for the neighbour's cat. "The wooden laminate flooring was a nightmare," Dr. Eichelberger said. "When the washer sprung a leak, the laundry room flooded. The water got under the flooring into the seam between it and the older tiles. In six months, the floorboards swelled, and some dislodged." Dr. Eichelberger pried apart a couple of them, and beneath was mold. Its green sickened her. She moved out two days after, saying she felt the whole house was mildewed. That she couldn't live in a space she couldn't see.

HÙN WÉI YĪ TÁN :: CONFLATION TO CONFUSE MATTERS

“The invisible frightened her,” Dr. Eichelberger said, on his way back from a hidden door in the wall. The door led to another small room, and all Gigi could see was a row of steel cabinets. When he shut the door, the door became the wall again. On it was a poster, another framed reproduction. It was a Piet Mondrian, nothing familiar to Gigi. The thin-lined ellipse hit the edges of the frame, as if ready to burst out from its confines. Within it were various lines, all as thin as the circumference, the lines criss-crossing each other. The lines drew pathways. There was one almost complete square near the top, divided into four small squares. There seemed an exit to this labyrinth out the bottom of the ellipse. It looked like the Empire State as well, and looking at the picture that way, the criss-crossing lines looked like old warplanes. “The title of the piece is ‘Pier and Ocean,’” Dr. Eichelberger told Gigi. “That’s not a building but the pier. But yes, the ocean looks like it’s carving out an internal territory... What wasn’t immediately comprehensible to my wife frightened her. She was a tactile person, a person who needed to be in touch with reality. I eventually got a contractor to strip out the flooring, to redo it. Beneath it, over the original tiles was a kind of floor mural. She’d painted all over the floor. It was a thick, black paint meant for wood, not cement. From the front door, it looked like the face of a man. Or a map of a part of the world. There were

islands. One seemed to be hilly. It was filled with hills. The Tree of Life was in its own circle in the middle of this. This also looked like an island in the archipelago. I'm positive she drew herself into the picture. There was an isthmus that looked like a half-open eye. That was her eye, I knew. And it was looking back at me.

{ Steve Owen }

FIVE FATHERS

My father's death was a ten year death. During that span, his room crowded with five fathers who jostled and stooged for my attention.

First Father: The Ten Year Father

The ten year father lies in bed for ten years. Bits of ten year body fall off, or need removing. Occasionally a doctor comes in, leans over to sniff my father's toes. He delivers an opinion. After he delivers an opinion, he puts his stethoscope against my chest. He shakes his head as if he can't hear anything. Terrific, he says. When the door slams on his way out, a toe falls off the ten year father's foot.

It looks like a small tree timbering over.

Timber!

Actually the top part of the toe puckers into a small yellow hole. I stare at the yellow. I keep staring. The tone begins to wander. It warms. It cools. It doesn't stop changing tone.

The ten year father, during this invigorating convalescence, inflates like a dictionary. The ten year father whistles like a Lifetime show. The ten year father sobs like a pen. During this span, medicine bottles mountain his dresser-top. I can see us in the mirror rolling down the mountain together. There we are: rolling.

We roll.

I push the lead back in, and the home plate father cheers. He leaps back on top of the dresser. He leaps off.

He scores the winning run! (I push again.)

There he does it again!

(I keep pushing.)

Third Father: Uniform Father

The uniform father stands staring into a dark corner of the room. The uniform father is nude. His body is smooth and unscarred as sandpapered marble. The only marks on his body are goose bumps. The uniform father's butt trembles.

A spotlight shines on the uniform father's gold curl head. He turns and salutes. He marches back and forth. His balls jiggle. He stands, balls swaying, in a rigid line. An army uniform clothes his body. He starts telling the Dachau story.

The uniform father is among the first Allies in camp. He sees skeletons waving rags from tall trees. He sees rotten bodies in fresh holes. He executes camp guards, pointing a finger at them. A small door opens like an elevator in each Nazi head. The uniform father's body is covered in viscera.

The Dachau story is the uniform father's brother's story. The uniform father's brother is the army brother. The army brother doesn't tell the Dachau story. The army brother talks about boats.

The uniform father spends the war on a medium-sized boat. The uniform father delivers nondescript war supplies. The uniform father never talks about those.

What are those supplies?

After the story is finished, the uniform father's uniform disappears. He begins marching and jiggling. He sways.

The uniform father has a handsome gold curl head.

Look at it go!

Fourth Father: Dollar Father

The dollar father showers the room with dollar bills. He cradles his belly like a pregnant money sack.

A few bills slip from his belly. His eyes begin glittering like sweaty coins. He begins yanking wads of cash from his belly. He throws the wads up in the air. His belly sack wheezes as it empties.

When the dollars land, they've become season tickets. Baseball, football.

There they are.

In the front row. Over the dugout. The dollar father yells at the players on the field. He tells the manager things.

Lying in bed, the ten year father gets covered in piles of tickets. The ten year father smiles. His feet fall off. They slip between a pile of season tickets on the floor.

The dollar father looks scared. His face begins to crumple up. It looks like a paper testicle.

The dollar father hurries to the bank.

He withdraws the money from my account.

Fifth Father: The Killing Father

The ten year father is always asking about death. He says that it would be good for death to come. He would like it to come now. I tell him that he looks good in this bed. We, the other fathers and I, want him to live forever.

This is a nice bed, I say.

Look at you in this bed!

I unclench my ten year father's teeth. I push food inside. I water the ten year father. The ten year father weeps. He never blooms; he un-wilts. The ten year father cries. He weeps and cries. Cries, weeps. Weeps, cries.

It goes on like this for a while.

The cries.

The cries, cries, cries, cries, cries!

I think about killing the ten year father. I think about killing everyday.

I don't. I let his tears pool in my paper coffee cup.

Have I always been like this?

Look at this cup of tears, I announce. These are mine now. I can drink those.

Killing tears! (Brown ink.) The brown cools. It warms. Cools. (It doesn't stop.)

I stand and I stand there watching the killing father, who wears my face,
sit atop my ten year father.

He rides him. Yee, ha!

He rides and rides him. He rides him every day for ten years. When he
rides him, the ten year father shrinks. His giant hands hold the ten year
father's tiny face. He places a kiss on the ten year mouth.

He gives a kiss every day. He kisses and kisses. Look at him kiss!

Smooch!

The killing father makes pain. This death grows more painful each day.
The pain grows. The death grows. It continues to grow and grow.

Like this.

The killing father never kills. He is only killing.

I collect tears from the ten year father. I collect tears. The room fills with
empty cups.

The ten year father is dying!

The ten year father is dying!

He dies. He dies. He dies. There he goes again.

He dies.

He is dying.

The ten year father never stops.

{ James Matthew Wilson }

ECCE HOMO

I have started asking for power.
My friends mostly.
I would like power of attorney
Or to be charged with feeding their golden retriever
while they are in Florida.

The two of them go there every year now.

I see them running on a beach.
Or sitting on blankets, reading.

When I picture the bronze-age fleece
of his chest, burnished in cocoa oil
the picture blots out

And I go back to thinking about me.

I've never been.
When they get back, I certainly don't ask to see any pictures.

She just smiles while her husband writes out the check in the kitchen.

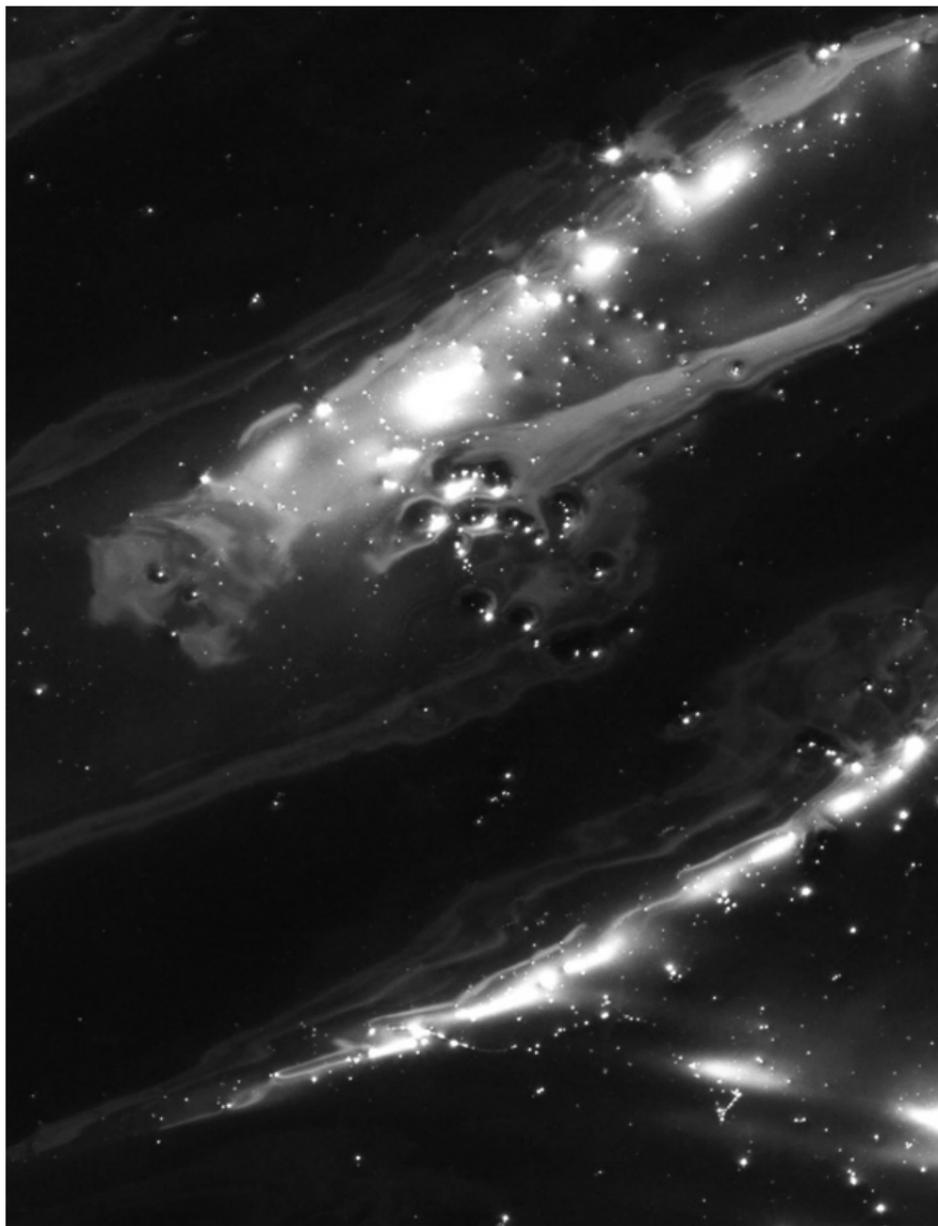
Her glossy lips beam.
She's squatted down, darkened legs tightly balanced,
In no picture hose and the gray skirt she wears for air travel.

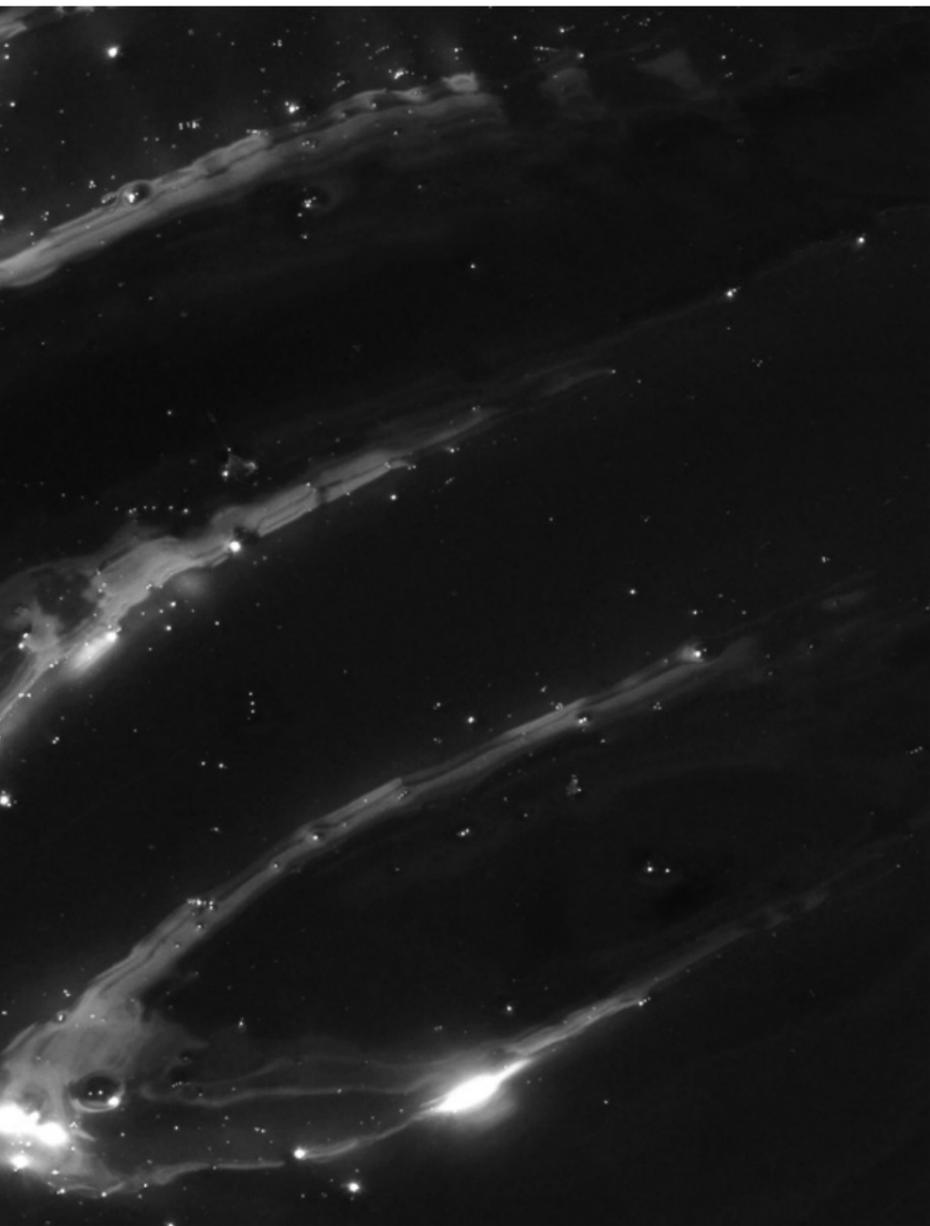
Her free hand is buried
In the shaggy, thick flank of the dog
Who's already gone back to sleep.

That's when I start to crave additional power.

The kind that gets you on a beach in Florida,

Proud and certain in the warm and waiting midnight
Of a tangled thatch of hair.





{ Dani Rado }

THE MAN WITH A TREE GROWING OUT OF HIS HEAD

Everyone believes he's sad, this man with the tree growing out of his head. They offer him kind looks to his face and sympathetic glances behind his back. They speak to him as if he's a little slow, or deaf, or someone he loves has just passed away. (They would never say "died," they would always say "passed away," these people who look sympathetically at the man with the tree growing out of his head.) That is, when they speak to him, they speak in a deliberate monotone while they reach out and gently squeeze his upper arm, but only for a moment, not to offer him comfort so much as to show him, and everyone around them, that they are not afraid to touch him, that they are not afraid they might catch dumbness, or passed-away-ness, or tree-from-the-head-ness. Though they are. Every arm squeeze, every nod, every smile is underlain with a better-you-than-me.

Like the sun in eclipse, no one looks directly at the tree, at least not for long, and so, at this dinner party as they stand in circles of conversation, those in the circle with the man with the tree growing out of his head look at everyone else first, study them all from shoes to treeless crown as a momentary respite from the temptation to look at the tree on top of his head.

When the man with a tree growing out of his head decides to chime in (he is witty but they'd never be able to see that), they turn their bodies slightly toward him but dart their eyes like furtive birds searching for a place to land. To look this man in the eye, or anywhere on his face, would be to look too close to the tree growing out of his head, and they

know if their gaze lands too near, they won't not be able to resist the gravitational pull.

So they stare at a spot on the ground and soften their focus as if they're pretending to listen to poetry. Instead they're making a game of deciding what a blurred knot in the hardwood floor most resembles. Is it a bird? A climbing monkey? A distorted face? It is not a tree though, and they can't understand that the man with the tree is telling a story that is both funny and self-effacing.

A bird—a bird you see!—carrying bramble in its beak, landed on the tree growing out of his head as if she were going to build a nest, he says and gestures to the crook of the tree limbs. The audience, released from its self-imposed obeisance, finally looks up at the tree and takes it all in, the thin white trunk of a birch rising from his skull, but not from the center, as you'd imagine, but a little forward and a little to the left, his left. It's also not a tree as you'd imagine. It's only eight inches tall with a large black knot of a missing limb on the front and an abbreviated branch jutting to the side with a single poised leaf attached.

Because of this, people who hear of the man with the tree growing out of his head before they meet him are always a little disappointed. When they hear of him, they can't help but imagine a massive oak or towering pine, or even a Christmas tree fully decorated, sprouting from his head, and he balancing it perfectly like a woman carrying a basket of fruit to some remote marketplace. Or a dancer with a bowl of fire. Or Atlas with a tree instead of a world. They know, as you know, that Atlas carried the world on his back, but still they're both burdens.

And so the natural wonder that strangers feel when they pass him on the street, flits around the dinner party guests but never settles. The host had promised them a marvel and only delivered this tiny miracle. Along with a bottle of wine or an appetizer, these guests brought expectations that were bound to disappointment. This didn't mean they didn't want to look, but they were also warned by the host, who is doing his best to keep all the conversations polite, not to stare and not to wonder.

Right here! exclaims the man with the tree growing out of his head

as he points upwards to the branches, and the guests think, their pity plumbing to even farther depths, But a bird couldn't build a nest there. It's too small.

When the groups reshuffle and certain guests are freed from the companionship of a man with a stunted trunk jutting from above his left eye, they turn and stare behind his back as if they're a magnifying glass ready to spark a conflagration on top of his head.

But he isn't sad, this man with the tree growing from his brow, not even when birds land on it to build nests. In fact, this man with the tree is in love. Nobody believes it, especially at this party, not because they think he's incapable of loving somebody, but they think no one is capable of loving him. Well, maybe someone with a simple mind who'd think the thing was a beanstalk sprouted from a tale she'd heard. Otherwise, his only chance would be with a woman that'd claim to love him until she satisfied her need for penitence, dreamed up over some past misdeed, something too mild to be a real offense, but the worst behavior she could manage in her charmed life. Or a woman trying to quell the echoes that she's a worthless person as some boyfriend or father once told her. But inevitably, after awhile, any of these women would be standing in the doorway of their apartment with suitcase by her side, assuring him it wasn't the tree, that he should think better of her than that, that she'll always remember him well, as he should her, and then she would leave and go on to tell future lovers she had once loved a man with a tree growing out of his head.

But let's not be so hard on her, she's only a person these dinner party guests invent after they hear the man with the tree growing out of his head claim he is in love. The condensation of their whispers rise to give her shape in the cold night air as they tighten their scarves about their necks and finish their cigarettes or continue the walk home from their host's lovely house. When they return inside, she dissipates behind them.

She is in love with the man with a tree growing out of his head. At night sometimes, and sometimes in the morning, they make love. Sometimes this is in the conventional manner, and sometimes it is with the tree growing out of his head just above his left eye. And sometimes she, writhing on the bed above him, is exploded in light, as if the tree is a conduit wand for light springing out of his head. The light is the tree and the rays are the branches unfurling rapidly through her, the limbs extending into her arms and the roots splitting down her legs, twining themselves around her bones and under the muscles, each, slendering into more limbs and then into buds that open into leaves just as she is opened to this tree alive inside her while one branch takes a path straight up from his head to her own to sprout at her crown, and she, overcome, clasps her mouth, bending the arm and the new limb inside it, and he, the man with the tree growing out of his head, reaches up and tugs at her elbow, wanting to hear all of her released in that moment. He loves her sound, he thinks, and she loves his tree, she thinks. Together they are both the wilderness and its inhabitants, an ecosystem and its reverberation, and together they think, Love love love.

{ C.Kubasta }

THE HEGEMONY OF THE SO-CALLED “T-SHIRT BRA”

I want to sing in praise of nipples. A strange song –
many already exist. The muse reclines,
the nipples don't. But

shopping for bras in any store, the eye
is assaulted by rows and rows of technicolored,
pre-formed breasts, hanging neatly
from plastic hangers. Smooth macaroons, molded
Barbie, nipple-less breasts, candy-store dots
on white paper, unlike

yours, or mine. Sing a song
of breasts that are flat, or elongated,
or differently-sized, or large-nippled,
or small-nippled, pink or brown. (I admit) I
pluck the errant hairs on each aureole, not wishing
to sport bobeches outside
of the holiday season. But this

my only transgression. I've seen
uncomfortable faces, on friends, students,
salespeople, when I plead for bras
that aren't already equipped with breasts.
They look away, startled

by my strange request. The lack
of eye contact makes me wax
verbose: I want my breasts
to look like
my breasts; my breasts
have nipples.

Although, to be honest, that semicolon
is a bit much – no one
talks like that. Talk like that
reduces my sister-in-law to rolling eyes, leaving
the room, muttering, “Don’t get her
started . . .,” but listen

the world we inhabit becomes
narrower and narrower
when aesthetics become ideology,
whether nipple annihilation
or waxing. I will

continue to embarrass
those in my presence: the poet
rarely reclines, and her nipples
never do.

THE OTHER

I met him in a bar. We argued politics for about an hour. Then, he said, “I think you should sleep with me.” I agreed.

*

For our first “date,” he made reservations at a vegetarian bistro (I was, then), and as I was twirling in the mirror, in a borrowed skirt and my favorite top, I looked up to knocking on the window. Who knows how long he’d seen me admiring myself, myself. We walked to the restaurant –at one point differing on the speed of oncoming traffic, I dodged out, he pulled me back, but neither of us would give in.

The car bore down, horn blaring. I twisted, unsleeving myself from my jacket, and jumped across, out of the way of the bumper.

*

At dinner, he knocked over the bottle of wine. The waiters arrived, white cloths to mop up the Bordeaux, smiling, “Is this your first date?” I had fennel leaves, stuffed. It was the first time I’d seen a fennel leaf.

*

These things are true.

*

I cooked for him; he cooked for me. I made
stuffed mushrooms; he made
risotto. A recipe he'd learned from his wife.

After dinner, I savored a hand-rolled cigarette and strong coffee. I'd need
energy
for what lay ahead. I'd guessed he was married, asked.

*

These things may be true. I was 21, and I think
I may have loved him, knowing there was no future; his wife, my
return. I may have loved him because there was no future. Even now,
if I were to believe in love, I'd believe in him, in us. In those moments,
impossible,
that I believed were happening, happening to me.

In us: when I set the building alarm, and he pinned
me against the wall, voice in my ear, "How much
time do we have?"

*

I try to picture him now, passing 50.
One of the last days, I was broke
and had a month before my return flight, and asked
for money. We went

to the ATM. Whirring, whirring. I knew
I'd never pay him back –made no attempt
to pretend. That's the face I remember.

*

If that's true, what
does it signify? His wife was enroute "home" for the holidays, we were
stripping the sheets, removing my evidence, cheerfully vacuuming and
scrubbing, finding me trapped in the stairs, the boxspring, everywhere. I
saw him

twice more: once that he knows of, another
unobserved, walking with his father, and I sat
and said nothing. What was there

to say? When we went on that date, before I guessed, before I may have
felt whatever I may have felt, we walked along the river, and when I read
Borges's "The Other" that's where I picture, the bench there along the
river, beyond the stairs that smell like piss and below the weir where that
spring's flood a cow got hung up, bloated.

{ Monica Mody }

TWO PAGES FROM MAY, PIGEON POINT
OF 2013

Twenty-fourth day of May

Poetry bores me, these days.

In the shattered remains of conch shells, how many people searching for
(life) for (meaning).

If I were to hand you the conch shells, you'd place them on your
mantelpiece or break them or throw them away.

I want you instead to raise them to your ears & sing, the songs they are
singing—

each song filled with the smudginess of meaning only gods can know.

I want you instead to raise them to your lips & drink.

What they are filled with is honey, blood for your thinnest veins.

I want you instead to bite them until your teeth shatter, & shells grow
out of your teeth, shells that are reaching the ground, shells that ants can
scale—& little animals—& climb up so you nurse them.

I'm tired of poetry, these days.

But when I listen, I find etched in me ways to be cruel & ways to be
kind, ways that are teaching me to grow like a sun-tangled flower
towards faith & reason. All of it is spirit.

Rub it on your eyes & see.
It grows in the cracks between words.
Between things, between people.
Alone, it might be harder to see.
Spirit grows sturdier in the company of people, words, even things.
Spirit, listen. Who am I writing this for? I did not want to write. I'm tired
of poetry these days. You called to me to pick up a pen & I'm writing.
But my fear really is that I'll be selling my words to those it is easiest to
know.

Twenty-fifth day of May

Something troubled me at the door.

It was words I did not recognize.

I asked the words in & they walked in, already at home.

I looked at them & still did not recognize them.

The words were like bees surrounding me from all sides, buzzing with
news & anticipation.

I picked one up & it crawled out of my ear.

Soon I was leaking, shedding bees.

Soon I was birthing bees & the bees sat waving at the window, inviting
the curious to come in, come in.

{ Drew Kalbach }

I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

Avril is the cruellest mom, breeding
unabashed with vague intention, greeting
strangers at the stranger's gate.

Slap me on the patio. I'll take it now. I'll war-dial
like a pro from my two-seater until
something clicks before the profile listing.

Tease me out. Into post-lunch productive
strained lighting conditions I merge
with abandon, I merge with historical notions

of manhood, I merge with my partner
and my partner rejects the thought.
Avril lines her eyes in black and rejects

online privacy, just because. Be neutral
in a sub-clause or dangle my delightful
cloned alternate-world version:

they called me the cybersex boy.
Doff screen and squat. I rolled over
another link to prove the first existed.

Ease me back, Avril. Post bath, raccoon-eyed Avril.

Famous pop singer had a bad epileptic fit, Avril.
Unreal, pity. Gained back momentum. Good evening, Avril.

ANYONE WHO WANTS TO DEFECATE
IN THIS PLACE IS ADVISED TO MOVE
ALONG,

back toward their hamburgled bungalows, back into the beachfront
failsafe little shack of a heaven

which laps against toes in sleep, which in sleep surrounds the brain of
my handless demons with Braille,

or back toward the flat screen on which the softened and jelly-like
stomachs of our favorite baby girls

are displayed prominently above my bedroom mirror. It satisfies and
tingles which leads toward

full bodied candelabra in a fast food restaurant, or to my grandmother's
false teeth draped in pearls.

Move back toward grimy hairs clogging ice cube trays, toward facialized
screamers,

toward fairgrounds in which flame-filled dancers decry the state of my
avatar and get groaning

when I lick live wired skin to get back into the baby girl's good graces,
and still

where can a body squat and flush out its bowels without threat of eye-gouging email spam.

The commercials have just gotten golden, they've won their awards and lined them along their mantles,

they take off their shirts and sell hairy-chested goldenboys to the ailing elderly for pennies on the dime,

each toward a new funk ruined, each toward a bigger pinky swollen,
each the same train

which chugs and bleats on through my closet until those baby girls get back and reset their giggles again.

No dark crusties will sit and sweat a spell, no they'll do so elsewhere
away

from the water tower, away from children who pay so well when caught
half nude in public,

away from aquaducted tears which tear up the pavement beneath our
ruddy splintered feet.

Gleek now or forever hold your bowels close against your skin, gleek
into the tender cheeks which chew

marrow from ancestral bone forests, gleek now and leave this dizzy
smelling dung heap

of a refrigerator store and purchase the proper doors, the proper dividers
in all the proper colors,

each new plastic speck another goldish star pinned into your skin, leave,
move along,

stay unspoiled but still roiling gutted, perched and prepared to satisfy,
fast but remaining full.

LATTICE SHADOWS by Jayne Marek





{ Jace Thomas Brittain }

PERHAPS.

“Though I say not
What I may not
Let you hear,
Yet the swaying
Dance is saying,
Love me dear!
Every touch of fingers
Tells me what I know,
Says for you,
It’s true, it’s true,
You love me so!”

They dragged off the actor playing Willie when the thing was finished, once the audience had finally disappeared. He was tired of crawling—the guy who plays Willie, whose name is . . . whose name is . . . I call him Willie, who’s been dragged off face down from the mound then off face down across the black wood stage, having left a bit of the dirt from the mound in trail behind him. And more! His moustache came off at the end of this little dirt trail which followed his dragging, capped it: the hairy little casualty of war. The adhesive was stronger than the last one, the first Battle of Britain lip couldn’t hold against sweat, and twice it came off during a performance, and naturally that reflects poorly on all of us, so the adhesive was made stronger, now it takes a good dragging to get the damn thing off. He didn’t mind that it came off then, I thought. The performance was over. For the time being, I thought.

The man who carries the two shovels stepped on the moustache and it traveled with him attached to the bottom of his rubber soled shoes, I thought. His name is Jack or James or Liam, I’m sure because he handed one shovel to Stephen and addressed him so, and once one is Stephen the other must be Jack or James or Liam. And I guess they were just digging around the revolver tonight since after each had ascended his respective sloping side of my dirt mound, neither had addressed it—verbally or otherwise—each had started to dig and as they continued,

each avoided it, though it was more of an impediment for Stephen since it was more on his side than the other. I asked Stephen if he'd like me to move the revolver and maybe because I hadn't my arms yet he didn't answer me. In fact, I hadn't my shoulders or much of my neck yet, they having just started to dig like I said impeded in terms of speed some by the revolver having been left. Since the young woman who usually removes the handbag and my or maybe Winnie's hat and the revolver had filled her two hands with the shopping bag then the hat and left the revolver. Perhaps she intends to return, I thought. It'd be nice to have another woman to talk to, Stephen being unresponsive perhaps because of my as-yet-armless helplessness and the other being silent and unaddressable until his name comes to me, I thought. Prior to the performance, since the woman who takes the props away is the same woman who delivers them or at least similar, I had said while buried up to my waist in the dirt that I'd wait for her after the show was over, right here, I said. A joke. I had prepared something to say about the revolver, when she returned for it, she or the similar one, to wit: watch where you point that thing! Was I one joke away from cracking her tough exterior? Two jokes from drinks after the next performance? From there, things get exponential as we laugh at the expense of the lousy Stephen whose advances she's always rejecting, at some point the jokes will be hard to count, and a bond having survived the difference in our age and envy probably too, since she wanted to be an actress but was too ugly to be one, especially a young actress. Maybe I could even be a mentor figure, now there's something. Watch where you point that thing, I'll say when she comes back, I thought. Though, there stayed the revolver and Stephen and Jack or James or Liam having left since they were only the excavators of my upper half. Liam, that's it. He must have been Liam, since I know it's the Jacks and Jameses responsible for my lowers, sure to be here any minute, I thought and I thought they better hurry since those responsible for the uppers had, perhaps impeded by the placement of the revolver, done an incomplete job digging me out only just barely freeing one arm, and I thought, where are the lower diggers have I been forgotten? I cooed.

When the lights go off, I thought, then I'll start to worry. No sooner or later. The lights went off. Oh Jesus, I thought. That's the thing, isn't it? To be left all night, up to the tithers in a dirt mound. If they don't come, will they at least let me use the facilities, stretch my toes before the next performance? No one to speak to, it isn't so different from day to day, but nothing to speak of, that's the thing. There was nothing to do, but speak of the things that are left—the revolver, the dirt up to my waist, the moustache having fallen off the rubber sole.

And on that moustache: on the floor when it ought to be on the face oughtn't it? Oughtn't he be able to grow his own? He's a little young, sure, but virile. It's dark where he shaves just as soon as he's finished. And he sits back there half his days behind that mound, looking at me from the waist up, imagining me waist down I suppose, and passing over the questions he doesn't ask. He doesn't know much about me, I know, I don't say much, unlike her my counter-part. He, unlike him his counterpart, has quite a lot to say. But! The questions he doesn't ask: are you nervous? Do you have plans later? Did you have memories before? I could kill him. In fact, I wish he were dead, I thought. I lifted the revolver—a toy, I thought. How could he know I loved him, the younger man? That I had to, I thought. He played older just fine. And I was playing older too, I remembered. Ten years up and for him twenty, I thought, that makes ten between us—how much is too much? Not very little, I thought, no. He looks up at the end every time with those eyes and the shaking and in performances gone by the moustache would threaten to jump, and his body seemed untenable and fragile, frail like an old woman, and how could I not love him intensely in that moment? I could not, if I weren't to sing, I thought. But I was to sing, every night, and how could I not love him with an intensity that threatens and ultimately fails to destroy the both of us? How, I thought, I could watch his flesh melt at so many degrees over and over and over again. How, I thought, sincere is the boredom with which his head drops as he prepares to be dragged tired as he is from crawling on all fours night after night? I grabbed the revolver with my unburied and free arm, and I thought, I could just kill

him.

Each night an audience surrounds me and was I ever nervous? No, I thought, I feel just the same surrounded by crowds who don't know me at a bar. Crowds of people I'm surrounded by and I feel just the same—buried to the neck, I thought. I'm quite tall I suppose, though that isn't it. Though mine is the tallest mound in a production yet—list productions, I thought, but couldn't. I know there's been several up to 1969 and ours runs through the winter and onward, so I'll be the tallest of the decade—and I'm even on my knees in that tall mound, a supplicant gesture or a pathetic one. In any case, I'm on my knees, and I'm frozen and obscured for ninety minutes a night. More, as can obviously be the case, as is the case here tonight in the near pitch black in the mound with nothing but one free arm and a fake pistol, I thought.

I aimed the pistol down where he would advance and fall unable to continue the next night and the night after. There his eyes would tell me what I know, and that's where I aimed the pistol and pulled the trigger. He was a young Richard Johnson type, though that bully couldn't manage this role if he ever got old and tried it on. Willie, my Willie was young too, only ten years ago in talks to play James Bond spies and dashing types, and I know the type that type hangs around and among those that hang around the types who he would and wouldn't fornicate with, the types that would and wouldn't with him and his type. Gotta know the types, I thought. And still, the intensity that overwhelmed me and all I could do was sing most nights, came from those eyes which ten years ago might have belonged to a Richard Johnson. And tonight that intensity made me aim the pistol where those eyes would be the next night and I pulled the trigger and the blast shocked me near stupid.

There's your disruption, I thought. This is no night after night, I thought, and I thought, there's something new. The echo rose and cased the joint anew, it explored a world remade in its own image.

My ears rang.

Tinnitus, they call it, I thought.

It unfurled from and recoiled into the weapon.

It is a weapon, I thought. She doesn't call it that, I thought, meaning the girl who brings it out. She had called it a prop.

The ringing unfurled from the weapon and recoiled into the weapon I held above my head by my extended free arm, the only one. But I know this unfurling and recoiling is a lie. I know that it's pointless to imagine sound waves as these growing concentric circles.

And I thought, why chase circles gone by or try to predict when the single ring—as opposed to ringing—the single ring I hear will never return?

This pistol went off tonight and never before as far as I was concerned, never before—by design, never before, by his design, night after night neither Willie my Willie nor I had affected this change during the ninety minutes assigned to us, but God! What if Willie or I had? What now, I thought, now that Willie or I could?

So when she, the one who had called it a prop before she had failed to retrieve it come performance's end, when she came out, she came out in a huff. She's in a huff, I thought, when I've just fired the damn thing. After she said her Lord Almighties, she asked me if I was insane. Like I'm the one who put a loaded gun onstage in a theater that fills with people nightly, I thought and said.

It's a prop gun, she explained.

Blanks, she explained.

Used in countless other shows, she explained.

This won't help our burgeoning friendship, I thought. I thought the joke about watch where you point it was all the more serious, since—blanks or no—I didn't want a damn revolver pointed at me. She started toward the gun and made the motions with her hands like she planned to take the gun and I thought, I'll point it at her.

She backed off when I did, but she didn't put her arms up like I thought she would.

Don't move, I said.

It's a fucking prop, she said.

So move, I said, and she didn't.

What if, I said, I had grabbed the gun on the stage? What if I had pointed it at myself—or, I said, at him! What if I had pulled the trigger while pointing the gun at him, I said. What if, I thought, I had directed that echoing blast at him? Imagine how his bones would have shook, I thought. Imagine how his veins might have dried right up, I thought. And I imagined him scared to death, his wide eyes staring past the barrel of the gun at my own eyes. Do I think, I thought, that they'd take the thing away now? Replace it with some plastic imitation? I had only fired it once.

I only fired it once, I said. Only pointed it at her, I thought.

I handed the gun over to her and hoped to see it again. Though the way she ran out, I thought, the way she ran out . . .

When they started to finish digging me out later, they got down to above my waist and I said, wait. Wait, I said. It'll be the night after before too long, I thought and said. Leave me here, I said. Tell her to bring my hat and my shopping bag and all it contains, I said. The J-named diggers of my uppers nodded. Okay, they said, okay.

Here I am, dirt up to above my waist, I thought.

No change.

The lights will come on, I thought, and no change.

Night after night they turn on the burning sunlight, and I begin, I thought.

That's what I find so untenable, I thought.

The lights come on, no change from the night before, and I begin, I thought.

The night after that, I thought, the lights would come on and no change, I would begin again as if it were daylight.

The lights came on, and dirt up to my waist, I began—again, as it so happens:

Another heavenly day.

{ Mary Dixon }

MELONS

In the grocery store
beyond corn, carrots, bean
sprouts and broccoli heads,
he gazes at choice,

fumbles over melons
muttering words to cantalope
halves that he gropes
and squeezes, testing

a smell to what his wife said
when unable to eat them
for some foul ripening

his wife fights
an insidious invasion
combing through the
wispy losing of her hair

what she said his fingers
could not understand as
he brooded over the rind,
they must give to the touch

white sheets stain orange

and the bandage along
its layers; can someone
tie up the split melon?

{ Amy Irish }

THE NATURE OF THE MOTHER, PART ONE

The sow mother calculates the cost.
This is no docile bovine, giving and giving.

Her beady eyes tally up the daily slops; the size of her litter;
How much she can give, how much they will take.

And they do take. Of course they do.
The offspring, planned for and wanted

Or otherwise. They squeal and swarm over her,
Biting at the teat, demanding more. If she is tired

Past exhaustion, they wake her with brutal need.
While she is working, in drudgery

Or bliss, they push her down.
In the mud. Force the milk from her body.

Of course they do. And what if the milk runs out?
Then she calculates another way – how much

Can she get back? Calcium, marrow, meat
Leached from her own body, taken without quarter.

This one, here. Is he enough? And perhaps his brother?

They are all so hungry. But so is she. Starving.

Depleted. Ruined. She searches for another source of food,
Anything, anywhere else. Yet still the milk runs dry.

They scream their wanting, arch their backs and thrash
Against the world. Its heartless cruelty. Of course they do.

They know nothing else. Until she
Knows nothing else. An endless

Circular equation. With only one end.
They deafen her with need. But she

Does not cry out. And if she did, to whom? There is no God,
Of any religion, ready to sacrifice his sacred flesh to save

This solitary mother. There is only the sow
And a solution she turns towards, finally, ready.

* * *

In the Buddhist text “The Hungry Tigress,” Prince Sattva looked down from a cliff and saw a starving tigress about to eat her newborn cubs, and compassionately sacrificed his body in order to feed the mother and spare the cubs.

THE NATURE OF THE MOTHER, PART TWO

I am cut and bloody, slit open like a gutted fish.
You are the knife.

I am stitched up like a rag doll.
You are swaddled in a straightjacket.

THE NATURE OF THE MOTHER, PART THREE

Just when teeth close in, breath hot & hungry –
Just when desperation turns to fear turns to finality –

She lifts me by the scruff of the neck. Helpless
And flailing against her rescue. For her embrace

Is fierce Her love, severe. Her safety,
Which she gives no choice in my taking, is rocky

And dark as a den or a new womb. Her cleaning
Of wounds is painfully salty, abrasive, a thorough

Tally of wrongs given and received. Her rough tongue
Rubs me raw. As raw as I need to be. Removing

Dead skin, dead weight, dead layers numbed
By a world affixed on death. Her healing,

A slow agony. A hurt that makes me feel
My pain again. The pain of being alive, again. The ripping

Terror and release of being born, again and again.
She gives me this gift, the hurt of being loved. Tells me

Every mother is also a child, twice broken by birth

And learning to crawl as best we can.

And then, at last, she gives her ferocious
Warmth to me, purring her satisfaction as I release.

And then, at last, I can finally sleep
Knowing my children are safe, at least

From me.

{ Sarah Bowman }

THE NOW YEARS

untutored
wild children
our days

we as
time-bearing
we as breath

recollection
reflection
sequencing events

cave drawings
on the brain
walls

we as here
not just-of-this
but as-this

blown-hatch
wave-faces
racing outwards

flickering
even the far-off
places

the back roads
of self-time
we as now

first person
transferors
future to past

when I am
where I am
in zero-length time-lapse

worlds of matter
worlds of light
come crashing

landscapes extend
sun-soaked
margin-less

rock-scraped
rivers
we settle

ready to kill
or eat
or sing

we as born
14 billion years ago
human

this epoch
we're in
took time-us

to swim through
coil pots
functioning

we as compost
to the next
vulva-phallus-loaming

ground-flame
wishing-well
oak-spirit

self-designing
creature
need-meeting

being
storing seeds
container of containers

eternal
offering
to what's forming

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