As the 20th Anniversary of the John Fowles Center approaches, I thought it would be a good idea to talk about how it all began. I first started to write Fowles in 1978 when I was in a quandary about whether or not to pursue a literary career and/or a writing career. I wrote Fowles for two reasons: 1) I was a fervid admirer of his work and 2) we shared the same birthday: March 31. I knew he lived in Lyme Regis and wrote him a letter hoping that the postman would know exactly where Fowles lived and deliver it which he did. He wrote me back and said: “I think the academy in general does not make a proper distinction between the self-critical faculty a novelist needs and the public kind of critical faculty required in the teacher of literature. On the other hand I have not much faith in the garret theory of artistic creation. The pressures there can be just as bad, of course.” He recommended finding an agent which is a story unto itself and finished by writing: “I am sorry I can’t help more but at least I can wish you well. At heart it’s everyone his own voyage, and I don’t think advice from outsiders can ever mean very much.” I wrote him back thanking him for his thoughtful comments.

Over the years, we corresponded but lost touch until 1996 when I was awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship to teach at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. The Creative Writing Department at UEA had always been considered the premier program in the UK and, at the time, faculty such as Malcolm Bradbury, Max Sebald, Andrew Motion and Vic Sage, among others, were alive and well and productive. At the time, Chris Bigsby was the director of the Arthur Miller Center for American Studies and he asked me if I’d be interested in a pilot project that Fowles had initiated. It was a project that involved turning his Belmont estate into a writer’s retreat after his death. I was quick to say yes even though I had no authority to do so and my family and I traveled to Lyme Regis to meet Fowles and talk about the project. It was the first time in 18 years since we last communicated and meeting him was an anxious honor. But, I thought, he was typically Fowlesian: flattering to my ex-wife, teasing my son, and scolding me not writing more; and admonishing me to visit the Greek island of Spetses where he wrote The Magus. Still haven’t done that. Exactly what I had
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He gave us a tour of his Belmont estate, naming just about every plant in the garden. We talked about his novels, the adaptations of such (which he was not keen on) and about teaching. I didn’t know when and if the Belmont project would ever come to fruition (eventually taken over by the Landmark Trust and the house refurbished), but recalling the Arthur Miller Centre at UEA I asked him if I were to start something similar at Chapman could I use his name. His response was immediate: “Anything to help writing students.” When I returned to Chapman in the summer of 1996 I immediately set out to start the John Fowles Center for Creative Writing, the first invitee being the Argentine novelist, Luisa Valenzuela, who came in 1997. Before the 1997 graduation, Fowles was on tour with his wife, Sarah. Wormholes had just come out and he was promoting the book as best as he could given his state of health which, even then, was fragile. I remember meeting him at the airport and when he came off the plane I held up a sign that read: Miles Green. Miles Green being the protagonist in his novel, Mantissa. When he ignored the sign I went up to him and asked him if he were Miles Green, and he looked at me as if I were a character in one of his novels he’d rather forget. I recall that when I introduced myself to him he shook his head as if he’d just remembered that, in a manner of speaking, he was Miles Green. I love the word dissent.”

Our sporadic correspondence covered twenty years and we met only twice over a period of maybe ten days, but it didn’t take me long to discover what a unique human being he was. From the coffee cups he coveted to his encyclopedic knowledge of every plant in his garden, to tray upon tray of his Smithsonian fossil collections, Fowles was always original, perceptive, inquisitive. He was the consummate curmudgeon, amiably contentious and, like the Existentialists he so admired, lived an “authentic life.” I think he would have been enthusiastic about the center named after him and what its intent has always been. Though the innovation in his work remains, what I miss after these twenty years is his wit, his bawdiness, the rascallian scarf he wore, but even more I miss his aura.

Introduction

John Fowles Center for Creative Writing, Chapman University
Cardenio
by Carlos Gamerro

Cardenio is a novel about William Shakespeare and John Fletcher’s play of the same name, based on Cervantes’ Don Quixote. In the Cervantes original, Cardenio is a noble youth befriended by Don Fernando, a duke’s son. Don Fernando falls in love with Cardenio’s beloved Lucinda and sends him away on an errand in order to demand her in marriage from her father. Warned by a letter from Lucinda, Cardenio comes back on the wedding day and hides behind a piece of tapestry to see whether Lucinda will fulfil her promise of stabbing herself at the altar rather than marry Don Fernando. But she, at the crucial moment, gives her consent, and Cardenio, feeling betrayed by both his beloved and his friend, wanders off in madness to the woods.

My Cardenio was written originally in English, then rewritten in Spanish. The Spanish version has been published in Buenos Aires by Editorial Edhasa in April 2016.

In this excerpt from chapter 2, Shakespeare and Fletcher play around with the original story, trying to make it their own.

Conversation between John Fletcher and William Shakespeare, Blackfriars Gatehouse, London, November 1612.

WS: Now they are free to marry one another.
JF: I was ready for that. Perhaps you’ll like this one better then: once Cardenio and Lucinda are fast married, she jumps to her feet and reveals the bladder of blood she had concealed under her clothes, the only portion about her that the dagger has grazed. Resolving to be revenge, Don Fernando sets his hand to his sword, but all those present compass him, urging him to conquer his own will for, as the curate says, only death can now sever Lucinda from her Cardenio.

WS: The trick is not bad, though I must say I’ve seen it before. Did Cardenio have any part in it? I suppose a clever girl like Lucinda – your Lucinda – would prefer to leave him in the dark, lest he mar all by missing his cue. What else?
JF: This one is a variation of the first two. Believing Lucinda dead, Cardenio steps forth, draws upon Don Fernando, and they fight. Recovering from her swoon, Lucinda steps between them and is twice run through.

WS: Like Romeo, with worse luck.
JF: At this, Cardenio and Don Fernando fall to their knees and vow to build a mausoleum and wash it with their tears till their dying day – You like it not.
WS: I do not like all this embracing and forgiving, Jack. We had quite a run of it lately.
JF: You mean in your plays.
WS: I was trying to follow in your steps.
JF: If it’s blood you want, why then, I’ll fit you. Same as before, but after making a carbonado of their beloved, the two men light on, incensed, each one blaming the other for what has chanced; Don Fernando’s superior swordsmanship carries the day and Cardenio is impaled to the hilt. The lovers are reunited in death. Don Fernando decides to enter a monastery and spend in penitence the remainder of his days.

WS: We have repentance then.
JF: You said no embracing or forgiving. Is penitence banned as well?
WS: Does he repent there and then?
JF: No. He goes off into a wild wood, the same one mad Cardenio would have wandered into did dead men retain the use of their legs, and there meets an old religious man, and after some question with him is converted both from his purpose and from the world.

WS: Is it just my fancy, Jack, or do I note a touch of tetchiness in your answers, together with a shade of mockery?
JF: You are a hard man to please, Will. Very well then, listen to this: the same as before, but it is Cardenio who kills Don Fernando. Lucinda recovers from her wounds...

WS: After being twice run through?
JF: I beg your pardon. This one belongs not to the ‘Lucinda twice run through’ but to the ‘Lucinda stabs herself’ club. She does not actually stick it in, ‘tis but a scratch, to scare her parents...

WS: Her mother is alive then.
JF: Yes, she is.
WS: What about the other one?
JF: The other what? There is no other mother in the story.
WS: The other plot. The one where Don Fernando kills Cardenio. Was she alive or dead?
JF: Who?
WS: The mother.
JF: What do I care? A pox on the mother! Dead, dead. Dead of the pox! Will, could we forget about the mother for the moment please? I’ve enough on my mind as it is.

WS: Whatever you say, Jack. So Don Fernando lies dead at their feet. Her father is nothing pleased, I’ll bet, but seeing he cannot well marry his daughter to a corpse, we might assume he goes for second best?
JF: Yes. Once he has the stiff carted away he drags the shaded curate from behind the altarpiece, and the wedding is concluded with the spare groom. Do not bother, Will, I like it not myself. Wait, wait. I’m sure I had another one...

WS: This is not writing, Jack, but juggling. Furthermore, in all of these your play would end in, what, act three? What will you fill the
other two with? Jigs? Too bad Will Kemp has danced himself out of this world.

**WF:** Plays have five acts! I had forgotten! See why I need you, Will? Damn it, I must have left it at home. Last night I stayed up...

**WS:** What I think you need is some rest. A few days in the country, perhaps.

**JF:** Ah, here it is. Lucinda swoons, Cardenio stays behind his cloth, and when Don Fernando, after reading Lucinda’s letter, seizes her dagger to stab her withal, a word’s but breath, not aught a man may keep. The ones he hates to hear the most are “such a thing you cannot do,” or rather the ones he most loves, for they are a spur to overlap himself in feats even more daring and unheard of.

**JF:** What feats are these? Is he a soldier? A conqueror maybe?

**WS:** Of wenches’ plackets, aye. He mocks them of their maidenheads and their men of their lives, if they but conceive of standing in his way. Nothing pleases him more than a challenge hotly urged, and those foolish enough to indulge him have to choose between repenting their rashness or their sins: there is no time for both. Dorothea and Lucinda are far from being his first conquests. I picture him, like Alexander, before a map of the world, seeking territory uncharted by his feats. And shall I die, and this unconquered be? Yes, by the Lord, I have it! An overrider! A Tamburlaine of conquest! He’ll overrump every man in the world, present, past or in times to come! O, if only Kit Marlowe were alive. There was a man could help us with this play.

**JF:** How would he have gone about it, think you?

**WS:** About it? He would have gone straight for it, as an arrow to its mark. Such words he would have put into his mouth! Sapphires and rubies on streamers of silk! This is how his Don Fernando would speak:

> Nature, that fram’d us of four elements
> Wills us to wear ourselves and never rest,
> Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
> That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
> The sweet fruition of a maidenhead.

**JF:** Do you know it all by heart?

**WS:** Nay, barely enough to work upon. You’re getting me mixed up with, what was his name, this man from Dover, who claimed he knew all of Kit by rote, and could trot out amazing chunks upon request. A prodigy more of the fair than the cloister, if you ask me, but still... Now what was his name? He had this habit of never owning above one book at a time, and once he was perfect in it, would sell it to pay the next. Finaux! Of course! The Phoenix of Dover we used to call him! He would go out at midnight into a wood, he’d confide after swearing us to secrecy in a most solemn way, fall down upon his knees and pray heartily that the Devil should come to him in Kit’s shape. For his voice would dwindles to a whisper to confess, “I was no other than Master Marlowe made an atheist of me.” God, what a boon! I wonder what’s become of him! Wait! Wait! Here he is! Master Finaux has taken possession of me! He opens my lips, and out come more of Don Fernando’s words:

> Fearing my shower should down him in his throne.

Yes, Kit would get him right. He will travel from country to country leaving no flower uncut; no door will stand against the battering of his ram, no window is high enough for the vaulting of his pole. So, once we have our hero, everything falls into place. Now, for the story. Where to begin?

**JF:** Everything seems to revolve around the wedding scene.

**WS:** It does, it does. Is it our axle-tree. So how do we make it turn?

**JF:** Wrong with what we have?

**WS:** Don Fernando is outwitted by these fools. By Lucinda at least. He’s in earnest about marrying her, stands amazed when he reads her letter, tries to kill her in a fit of rage and kills her father by mistake. Kit’s Don Fernando would not even want to marry her in the first place. Remember you the last meeting between Cardenio and Lucinda, at their window, the night before the wedding?

**JF:** Was it the night before?

**WS:** It is now. What if Don Fernando, advertised by somebody, who – o yes, the friendly neighbour who delivered Lucinda’s letter and now bethinks to avail himself of a double fee – is hiding in the shrubbery and hears Cardenio beg of Lucinda to let him in later, when all are asleep, to make the consummation of their love a bar against Don Fernando’s intent? After this it is as easy as lying for him to have Cardenio seized, stripped, and in his garments enjoy the maid.

**JF:** As you did with Dick.

**WS:** Ha! What, the story of the citizen’s wife you mean? So you’ve heard it as well? ‘William the Conqueror came before Richard the Third’. A memorable phrase!

**JF:** Was it not true then?

**WS:** Alas, no! Too good to be true. Such things only happen in plays. Whoever heard of a woman mistaking her man in the dark? For one thing, my prick is bigger than his. That’s why he became an actor I guess.

**JF:** You were an actor as well.

**WS:** Yes, but not that good.

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*John Fowles Center for Creative Writing, Chapman University*
PARLEZ-MOI D’AMOUR
A NEED TO KEEP A SOUVENIR
DO YOU REMEMBER THAT EVENING?

BY MICHAEL ABBOTT

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First published in The Guardian UK

John Fowles died ten years ago. The two volumes of his Journals were published just before and after his death. At the time they stirred up coverage and debate because they were extraordinarily candid and indiscreet. However, in the past decade the dust has settled and, as is the nature of things, the name of this literary superstar from the 1960s and 1970s is now rarely mentioned.

I was recently leafing through the first volume of the Journals and was drawn to Fowles’ description of his relationship with a young French student at Poitiers University, where he was a teaching assistant. It was his first academic post and he was 24 years old. The episode opens in January 1951:

Sunday January 7th
Sitting about in a café most of the day. People bore me profoundly and desperately. There is one girl who is beginning to interest me fractionally. She attacks me all the time, and I attack her, and we’re not bored while we’re doing it.

Thus began an intense six month romance that clearly made a major impact on the young author. It was his first serious love affair. The student was called Ginette Marcailloux and she was 23 years old. He describes her as a dark vivacious meridional beauty, interesting, intelligent and quick-witted. Soon he was confiding to his journal: "I feel closer to her than anyone else I have ever known." There is endless sensual kissing and caressing, dancing at the student centre, moonlit walks in the surrounding countryside. "The next stage is bed. She is too virtuous for that." Fowles devotes over 70 pages to the detailed description of them growing ever more intimate through the spring. He even begins to contemplate marriage.

Then my eye was caught by a footnote saying that Limoges was Ginette’s home town. I live in Limoges. On a whim I picked up the phone book to see if there were any Marcailloux listed, although I thought that her maiden name would have since been changed by marriage. My finger ran down the small print… Marat, Maraval, Marbouty… and then stopped. There was only one Marcailloux. And it was Ginette.

It took me a few days to summon up courage to pick up the phone. How do you speak to an elderly lady of 87 about a love affair that took place 64 years previously? I dialed the number and played it straight. I introduced myself and asked if she knew John Fowles in Poitiers in the early 1950s. There was a long pause and I expected the phone to go down. But then a faint voice said “Yes I knew John Fowles.” What went through her mind at that point? A complete stranger interrupting her quiet life with questions from a lifetime ago. We chatted a bit and she seemed not to be too disturbed by my impertinence. We arranged to meet the following week.

And so began a conversation that transported us back to 1951 with a description of a young poet/novelist just starting his
career. Ginette is now a neat but frail lady, hard of hearing but with that sharp intelligence still intact. She became an English teacher and never married. She has no surviving family. She described Fowles as a difficult person, confident but reserved, ironic and proud. He was writing constantly, poetry and prose. It was obvious then, she said, that he wanted to write novels that were challenging and different.

“There is endless sensual kissing and caressing, dancing at the student centre, moonlit walks in the surrounding countryside.”

As summer approached in 1951 it was clear from the Journals that his love had begun to cool. Their relationship effectively ended at the end of that academic year as he was leaving Poitiers. It was a difficult parting and he reports Ginette saying “I wish I had never met you.” He describes a final meeting on August 22nd: “She had never seemed prettier to me.” On September 5th a “just and dignified letter” from Ginette, and on December 6th another letter: “for her all is over, dry bones…end is inevitable.” On December 26th, on the eve of his departure for Greece and a new teaching job, he looks over his shoulder briefly: “I shall not find a Ginette again.”

She noticed when he became famous many years later and did read his novels. I asked if she had any letters or photographs from the Poitiers period. “He gave me a passport photo but I lost that ages ago. I had lots of letters from him but I had a clear out not so long ago and they’ve all gone.” She seemed happy to talk but there remained a formality and a reticence, and I didn’t want to impose any longer. We agreed to stay in touch.

A few weeks later Ginette called me. “I think I’ve found something that you might want to see. Come round.” On her table was a thin piece of typed paper; a paragraph of prose and a poem. The prose is a mixture of French and English, which was how John and Ginette spoke together.

“Occasional verse. A souvenir. Without value as verse. I am in the process of typing my complete work. Boring work but necessary. If I die tomorrow no one will be able to decode it. It’s the ransom of likely glory, or the stupidity of certainly being forgotten. Do you remember that evening? Sometimes I write a poem just to remember something, a need to keep a souvenir. Even if the poetry is bad, it still has a sort of value as a point of reference.”

Then there was the poem, with no title but an inscription at the bottom: Café de la Paix 14.1.51. Ginette explained: “The Café de la Paix was where all the students used to gather together. It’s a poem from John to me.”

Back home I immediately cross check with the Journal. And there, as part of the same entry for Sunday Jan 7th when he first mentions his ‘fractional interest’ in Ginette, is the following: “Feel ill and spend the whole evening playing dice with Ginette and Phil. Ginette, dark, vivacious in a not too gleaming way. With fine dark malicious eyes. She treats with a certain mock respect our student-lecturer relationship. I taught them liar’s dice. We played till midnight.”

This is the poem:

O tail of the rattlesnake, struck on sarcophagus!
The five dice roll, dry bones on the marble table…

We hid them in our hands, and pretended,

Pretended that they were what they were not,

That ourselves, we were who we were not,

And not what we really were to one another.

And where did it get us? Nowhere.

But time was killed. So the five dice rolled

And only our masculine honour lay at stake;

But fortune proved a careless mother.

We prayed for four aces

And unblinking between our covetous fingers

Found only the vacant faces of two low pairs.

So lied, and tried to disguise our fears.

But she knew us both, as if we were married.

So we yawned and lit another cigarette,

Watched the players of cards at other tables

And what the waiters fetched and carried.

Wine, coffee. Wished we had heels of wind,

Till it came to our turn to lie again.

Cleopatra triumphant!

Mark and Julius in retreat!

But we can prove by direct quotation

(Un coup de dés n’abolira jamais le hasard)

That we didn’t deserve the situation.

Dark Ginette did all the winning

And we, tall twins in short calamity,

Reluctantly had to lose –

But consoled ourselves that with women

And dice you only hope.

And do not choose!

Written next to the final stanza, presumably by Fowles, is ‘mauvais!’ Bad!

“If I die tomorrow no one will be able to decode it. It’s the ransom of likely glory, or the stupidity of certainly being forgotten.”

Ginette is puzzled why anyone would be interested in this story. On the face of it, it is of minor interest; a footnote to a footnote in literary history. But on the other hand it is a chance encounter that has opened a door into a room full of memories. I am holding a fragile piece of paper, an unpublished poem that marks the beginning of the first real love affair of a celebrated British writer. I have a picture of a French provincial cafè full of noisy students in a fog of filterless Gitanes, drinking coffee and cheap red wine and arguing about Jean-Paul Sartre. And in the middle of it are John and Ginette playing dice, falling in love. It’s a piece of paper that almost disappeared, but which survived. If I don’t write it down now, it will be lost forever.
When I was a young boy my father was killed. It was during the First World War. They found my father's body not far from his bicycle alongside the road. He had been shot, once, in the head. My mother was left to raise me, alone, and I fear my presence was only a reminder of all she had lost and everything she could never again attain.

At the age of six, in the early hours of one winter morning, I recall dreaming, standing at the top of an apartment building's marbled stairwell, looking down over the railing at the endless center of floors below, and listening to the echoes of the neighbors directly beneath me. Filled with excitement at the sound of their boisterous dog, I dashed down the stairs in order to obtain a better view and one of my legs gave way. Falling directly onto my knees I didn't allow myself to cry aloud from the pain for fear that my mother would find me. I held onto my knees and muffled my cry by hiding my face between them. A woman walked up the stairs to ask if I were alright as her dog hurriedly followed behind. When I looked up, her lapdog leaped toward me, jumping onto my chest and licking my face. Startled, I awoke from my dream, filled with the unexplained joy a young boy feels in a glorified moment between pain and pleasure to find that my mother was not next to me.

I climbed from under the covers and slid my feet into the small worn slippers my mother always placed at the side of our bed and walked to the doorway. As I stood looking outward toward the center of the main room our wood burning oven remained: unlit. The oven's iron legs were mounted on four green tiles and on top of the oven, a candlestick held a spent white candle as the light from the fireplace trembled on the walls. I could see my mother lying on the floor. Her legs were splayed, in front of her.

Slowly I approached her, until the sound from beneath the soles of my slippers became silent. There, next to the warm of the fire I stood over her. From the corner of my eye, I noticed an outline of a man's figure standing in the front doorway with the faint moon behind him. He stepped a few feet forward to make himself visible. With his bearded face and long arms, our neighbor appeared more clearly. As they often had, at dawn, he and my mother exchanged honey for eggs.

"The end of the rope was, twisted, around itself, no differently than a sleeping serpent. Where the noose had loosened I could see bruises on her skin."

Kneeling down, I sat on my knees, placing my face lower, closer, into her. Her face appeared dull in the glow of the fire's light and she gazed at me with open still eyes. They were beautiful. A rope had been loosened from around her neck and lead outward on the floor away from her body. With great confusion, I looked up at my neighbor and then back down at my mother. I followed the rope's length with my eyes. The end of the rope was, twisted, around itself, no differently than a sleeping serpent. Where the noose had been loosened I could see bruises on her skin. My mouth pulled me downward, where I placed my lips, and kissed the discolored parts of her neck. I then allowed my eyes to follow the shape of her slightly arched eyebrows, the dark chestnut lining of her hair along her forehead and her individually spaced eyelashes. I looked at her lips, the small point of her chin and thin nose. Then, my eyes stopped. At the center of her neck, where the height of her defined collarbones met, there were no marks or bruises. I stared at this part of my mother's skin. There, at the small hollow, between her collarbones, she remained free from the visible wounds of her pain. Suddenly, the mounting weight of our neighbor's hand on my left shoulder triggered me to stand. From where I stood, I memorized the outline of my mother's body, and in the fire's weakening glow, the images lived in the dark spaces of my mind as a boy and in the shadow of who I would become as a man.

I turned around, looked up at Mr. Petrovic, wrapped my arms around his legs, burying my face into them, and wept. Mr. Petrovic led me toward the front door and motioned for me to wait. I waited at the doorway, shaking, between two worlds, and watched as he bent down and closed my mother's eyes. He lifted her arm, placed her hand in his and removed a small ring. He walked back toward me and placed the ring in the palm of my hand. My mother's hidden pain had come to life by revealing itself in the marks of her skin I left behind as Mr. Petrovic and I walked outside, hand in hand, away from my world, away from the inside of my house, and into the stillness of dawn that had been awakened by the crow of roosters.

In the short coming days I would remain with Mr. Petrovic and his wife before a middle-aged woman arrived at their home. A small valise, prepared for me, was sitting next to the door. Mr. Petrovic said that I would be well cared for and he and his wife bid me farewell. I trusted the man who held the wilted child I had become in the days following my mother's death, and the same man that brought my mother eggs every morning, to fill the delight of a child who soaked the center of his mother's morning bread into the soft yellow yolk that warmed my belly. The woman, who did not introduce herself, picked up my belongings and together, we left the house. As we slowly walked away I turned my head back once. In the winter's air, clouded waves blurred the white uneven outline of the chimney spout and the tiled roof of our neighbor's home that resembled a child's plastic toy abandoned on a vast dirt road where nothing else stood around it.

I wondered how warm the woman's skin was under the layers of black clothing and her heavy unbuttoned coat. A long chain necklace was loosely wrapped around her neck from which a rather large and long metal cross hung and sat over the white fabric of her chest. The woman continued to hold my hand but said little. I watched the cross swing from her left side, to her right. From her right side, back to her left. I looked up at her and told her that I knew something was wrong that night. My mother used to sing to me before going to sleep I said. The woman looked down at me and smiled. I would never mention my mother to her again.

A car with rounded metal over thin tires waited for us at the top of the road. A man stepped out from the driver's seat and opened our doors. I climbed into the back seat, the doors closed, and we drove off. I did not turn around. As the tires sprang over the pockets of the path, I could see the dust lifting from the dirt and gravely ground coming up from the sides of the car and imagined leaving a trail behind us as we moved into the clear air ahead.

"Upon entering the house a large fireplace held a hanging cauldron with small flames that danced at different heights below and around the cauldron's base."

We drove for the next handful of hours before stopping for food and drink. My eyes peered out from the car window attempting to look into the windows of a small house made of stone as an old woman opened its weathered wooden door and happily gestured toward us to come into her home. The driver opened my side of the car door and I stepped out, following the middle-aged woman in black clothing. Upon entering the house a large fireplace held a hanging cauldron with small flames that danced at different heights below and around the cauldron's base. The scent of warm bread and meat stew filled me with hunger. The inside of the house was barren: a small wooden table with five chairs stood at its center, a wooden cross hung on the wall near the table, and there were slight pockets about the floor making the ground uneven. Warmly, I was motioned to sit at the table. Apart from the old woman, everyone settled into their places. The old woman then placed a basket at the center of the table. The basket was abundantly filled with golden crusty bread shaped by the indentations of her fingers in the dough. Pouring water into our small glasses from a tall thin metal pitcher, she spoke
of the wonderful eggs she gathered that morning and I sat with my hands in my lap staring at the bread as my mouth watered. The old woman momentarily sat at the table and the adults began to pray. I bowed my head pretending to listen to their words as I stared into my palms on my lap. All I wanted to do was eat. Before putting my spoon into the bowl, I looked up, and the old woman who lived in the house smiled. I ate every single part of food that was put in front of me and did little more than listen to the conversation of the adults. The coherency of their words were muffled and seemed to fade in and out of the magnified chewing sound between my temples. The echo coming from my throat as I gulped my water was interrupted by the old woman’s gasp. Suddenly, the sound that seemed to stand still in the small spaces of time in my mind was replaced by her gasp followed by the words that she had forgotten to share the most important part of the meal with us. Embarrassed, she speedily walked toward a wooden cheese box before returning with a very small round dish filled with Kajmak. Everyone screamed with delight and my eyes widened. We continued to eat. Following our meal, the four of us sat near the fireplace as the driver methodically turned the handle of a copper metalized coffee grinder. The two women lowered their voices as the scent of ground coffee beans filled our senses and blanketed the words that quietly filled the room. Before darkness would fall, we were on the road, once again. I turned around to wave to the old woman who had welcomed us into her home from behind the rear window of the car before turning to face forward. My eyes began to fall heavy as the chatter from the front of the car fell silent and the late afternoon sun, peering slightly from the sky, filled the empty seat next to me. This is all I would remember from the time I left our neighbor’s home in Belgrade to the time I arrived at the Bay of Kotor.
With the turning of the seasons, waterweeds. It occurred to him, strictly speaking, but a three gallon lidless cube salvaged from a chemistry laboratory. In the height of the summer, which was by now two months gone, the sun crossed the sky almost overhead, and the house was illuminated by leafy sunlight through a bank of windows under the shallow eaves, but in the autumn the sun fell away again in the direction of the ocean, and the interior grew dim, so that Johnson needed a lamp to read by even at mid-day.

With the turning of the seasons he shifted the fish bowl around the small room, because he took a keen enjoyment in the rays of sunlight that rippled in the clear water and shone through the translucent green leaves of the waterweeds. It occurred to him now that a competent engineer might have designed the house to spin on a sort of lazy-susan advantage of natural light. But he was no engineer; he was a woodworker, envisioning compartments for coffins, that would function as a cannibal in the story: a simple old fashioned wooden coffin, with a Morbid shape of old fashioned wooden coffins, that would function during his life as a tool box. He envisioned compartments for hammers and saws and planes, for squares and levels and a set of bits and augers; cubbyholes for nails and screws and wood dough; slots and panels that could be arranged and rearranged over the passing years until, when the sun was setting at last, metaphorically speaking, he could remove the interior complications more or less altogether, leaving only a nook and a cranny for the few things, beside himself, that he wanted to take along to the afterlife.

He had instantly pictured the finished box in his head: its pipe in water and electricity and to pipe out sewage, turning the treehouse into something more livable. He had enclosed a cold water shower, too, the kind of thing that he couldn’t have done when Myrt was alive, nor would have had any need to do, except as an antidote for idle hands.

He emptied bottled water into the fishbowl now, filling it to within an inch of the top, and then, in the bucket on the floor, he swirled debris out of the waterweeds before wiggling them down into the gravel in the bottom of the bowl, burying the lead weight wrapped around the base of the clamp. Between the greenery he placed a porcelain castile with an arched tunnel. Even if a man couldn’t live in his castle, he could at least pass through it from time to time. He bent over the bucket again to net out the fish, a Chinese telescope moor, uncommonly fat and with bulging eyes. It had been Myrt who had named the fish Septimus, which was a damned good name for a fish. When he released it into the clean water, the sunlight shone on the gold stomach scales and glowed through the jet black translucent veiltail and fins, and the bowl was transformed into the living ornament it was meant to be.

The fish moved lazily around its kingdom now, going to the surface to gulp air, swimming awkwardly in its obese way, peering myopically out at the world. “Why two glasses?” he asked the fish aloud, watching it wiggle its way through the arch of the castle. “In case rigor mortis should set in,” he answered, laughing shamelessly at the old joke.

Watching the fish swim through the clear water, he noticed a gently moving reflection in the glass itself now, although when he tried to make it out it disappeared. When he looked beyond it again, focusing on the now-hovering fish, the reflection reappeared, a shadowy bending motion, as if someone reaching down into a trunk or a box to retrieve something, and then standing and turning away. He looked behind him, and through the window saw that a limb from the avocado tree was bowling in the afternoon breeze, but he could see nothing in it that suggested the reflection in the glass. When he turned back to the bowl, Septimus was still hovering in the water beyond the open arch of the castle, looking back out at him, but the sun seemed to strike the glass from a slightly lower angle, and the reflection was gone.

On that morning forty years ago he had come into the kitchen for another cup of coffee, where he found Myrle washing dishes at the sink. In an ill-thought-out rush of enthusiasm he had told her about the “box,” as if she would be placated by the euphemism. She hadn’t even looked up: no shock of horror, no gasp of surprise, certainly no notion that his idea had any value. She had simply gone on with the dishes as if she hadn’t heard him. He laughingly mentioned the two glasses and the sherry in order to work the rigor mortis joke on her and lighten the leaden silence, but it hadn’t helped, and her wordless dismissal of the subject had lasted the rest of her life.

Afterward he had gone walking by himself in the neighborhood, designing the fine points of the box in his head: the joinery and the finish, how he would clave the outer walls of cross members, top and bottom both, to keep the planks from cupping over the years. He had some heavy brass screws that would make a nice pattern against the oiled oak. Beyond the exposed screws, however, and the finger-jointed corners and the cleating, there would be no ornamentation at all. When it came to the afterlife, fancy gawgos were like coals to Newcastle, or worse, shameless marks of vanity. The same could be said about a toolbox, which was meant to be functional rather than decorative.

On his walk he had gone some distance beyond his usual haunts and could not recognize the name of the tree-shaded street that he had found himself on. He was on the point of turning around to retrace his steps when he saw an open garage door. In the dim interior a sheet of plywood was set up across a couple of big cardboard boxes. Odds and ends of old junk lay on the floor, and although there was no sign posted, and no one visible inside, from the look of things it was pretty clearly a garage sale. He stepped in out of the sunlight, and right off he found a half dozen things to buy: some heavy brass strap hinges for a nickel a throw that even back then were worth five bucks. They were more showy than a piano hinge, but they were sold enough to work first rate on the casket lid.

At about the time he had these treasures collected, an old woman came out from inside the house with a shoe box full of barware that had seen its day.
Among the muddlers and swizzle sticks and cork pullers was a single sherry glass, lead crystal etched with a likeness of Queen Isabella of Spain. The glass held perhaps three ounces, and had an octagonal base and a gold rim, the gold worn thin from long years of use. Johnson bought it at once, thinking about the afterlife again. Of course in time he would want two of them, one for himself and one for Myrt. If she made it to the next place before he did, then he would bring the glasses and the sherry and the rest of it along and catch up with her there. If he went on ahead first, then he would be ready for her when she arrived.

And of course buying the single glass right now pretty much justify his building the casket—which, he would readily admit, tempted the hell out of fate—because the single glass answered that particular superstitious dread with a counter-element of superstition: you could safely tempt fate, he reasoned, by building your own coffin, if you challenged fate to find you a matching sherry glass. Fate wasn't always dealt the high card; like anyone else, it had to wait for the aces to come around.

Even the likeness of Queen Isabella was a kind of portent, or at least it was another piece that fit in with the growing puzzle of their lives: Myrt enjoyed a glass of sherry, a habit she had acquired years ago during their European travel, and Johnson had developed a taste for the stuff himself, at first out of deference to her. In Barcelona they had found a dusty old rectangular bottle in a market off a narrow alley, estimating from the layer of dust and from the price that the contents must somehow be remarkable. At their pension, Johnson had accidentally dropped it onto the stones of the courtyard, and the wine had certainly smelled as good as it must have tasted. Myrt had soaked the label off the shards and pressed it in a big dictionary. Much later yet—Twenty years? Twenty five?—Johnson had found an identical bottle on the shelf of a Vietnamese liquor store in Little Saigon, entirely by chance, the squatty green bottle catching his eye. He had brought the wine home and given it to her with a bouquet of roses, and Myrt had dug the old label out of the dictionary to compare it. It was still faintly scented with sherry after the long years and had called up memories. Swept with nostalgia, Johnson had shown her the garage sale sherry glass, making up a stretcher about why and when he had bought it. Having only one of them, they had found two other glasses to toast with, and early the next morning, while Myrtle was still sleeping, he had retrieved the sherry glass from where it still sat downstairs and returned it to its lonesome double niche among the tools in the box, sliding the little protective panel door closed in front of it.

Nowadays his shop was closed up, locked with a big padlock. The few tools he needed for routine maintenance he kept below the treehouse in the renovated garden shed. The key to the shop padlock, along with his long disused house keys, also lay in a niche in the casket, or more accurately in the toolbox, since he was still living and breathing. Over these last few years he had become a man who carried with him only a single key —only the one key for the old Cadillac, which with a certain artistic foresight he’d had re-keyed a decade ago so that the ignition key and the trunk key were the same. It was true that he had a copy in a magnetic Hide-a-Key box hidden beneath the bumper, but a copy wasn’t the thing itself, and anyway the magnetic box might have lost its hold and fallen onto the roadway years ago, as often happened.

Septimus nosed the top of the water, and he pinched some flakes out of the canister of food and sprinkled them into the bowl. Someone had told him that a goldfish’s stomach was only as big as its eye, in contrast to people, whose eyes were often bigger than their stomachs. Whether any of this was true he didn’t know, but it was true that a well fed fish could easily live for a month or more without food, and for that he was grateful, because he wasn’t such a recluse as all that: if he were to pass away—when, that is to say—the postman at least would find the mail piling up in the box out front, and one thing would lead to another. He picked up the empty bucket and went out, hauling it down
the stairs that wrapped around the tree trunk and setting it in the shed below. Then he ascended the stairs again, stopping for a breather on the first landing. His heart fluttered like a small and helpless bird, and he felt the familiar faintness coming on, profound enough so that he sat down hard on the plank stair and focused all of his energy simply on the moment, on his own being and on the sun-dappled shadows that moved roundabout him. He leaned his head against the railing post, breathing in the scent of weathered redwood mingled with the sharp bay leaf smell of dead avocado leaves. After a time the pain in his arm faded and he stood up again, got his bearings, and climbed to the tiny veranda, where he entered the small house, stepping onto the little piece of Turkish carpet and lying down on the bed. He gazed again at the sunlit fishbowl, listening to the rustling of leaves in the afternoon wind. It occurred to him now that his existence had largely been that of a beachcomber on the lookout for seashells and flotsam, finding lucky odds and ends by chance up near the high tide line, as he had found the first sherry glass or the second bottle in the market, and that although the swiftly passing days were slipping away from him at last, they hadn’t failed to cast up—not miles to go, like the poet, but if he was any judge of the ocean, the tide was making, and wouldn’t wait for him any more than it would wait for the next man. He descended the stairs and entered the garden shed, where he lifted his carpenter’s tools out of the box, laying them carefully on the several shelves lining the wall. He found his house key at the bottom and put it into his pocket with the key to the Cadillac, then walked out onto the back lawn, finding with unexpected happiness that the autumn sun had a certain amount of warmth in it. The fig tree was shedding enormous yellow leaves, one of which drifted to the ground beside him as if to illustrate the passing of the season.

He crossed to the car port, looking at the closed up house, the clapboards layered with dust, and he swung open the little gate, heading out toward the front sidewalk, closing the gate behind him. He opened the driver’s side door on the Cadillac, leaned in, and slipped the key into the ignition, then closed the car up. Out front, the neighborhood was going about its usual Sunday afternoon business. He waved cheerfully at a neighbor, who after a seemingly puzzled moment, waved back at him, and he stood for a moment to watch a dozen crows hard at work in the branches of a pecan tree across the street, the broken husks of the pecans littering the sidewalk below, staining the concrete with brown streaks as they had done every autumn without fail.

He turned to look at the front of his house, taking it all in: the broad front porch with its rusted porch lamp and swing with rusted chains, the overgrown bushes in the flowerbeds, the big glass picture window with dusty and sun-faded curtains long ago drawn across it. He climbed up onto the porch and fitted the key into the knob, pushed the door open, and, after locking the door behind him again, walked into the kitchen, breathing in the dusty, closed up scent of the place. He half expected the kitchen clock to have stopped at some defining moment, but it hadn’t, and the seconds ticked away as ever. The clock was a white porcelain Delft affair with blue Dutch children wearing wooden shoes standing in front of a blue Dutch windmill—something Myrt had found in one of the antique shops that she had frequented downtown. The clock’s old thread-wrapped cord wasn’t in the least frayed, a testimony to better days, when the things of man were built to outlive their owners.

He had felt that way about the casket when he had built it, and he still did. Despite its destination, there was no reason that the joinery shouldn’t be tight and square and the materials first rate. He had driven into Los Angeles, to a big lumberyard that sold hardwoods, where he had picked out quarter-sawn oak planks without any checking or splitting. They had cost him plenty, in time and money both. He had hand rubbed tung oil into the wood to finish it, renewing it every New Years Day through all the years since, making up excuses for the hour or so he spent in the shop while Myrt watched the Rose Parade. All in all it was a shame that a man’s coffin couldn’t be left to later generations, like a well-built chair. But like the man himself, it was a piece of furniture that was meant to be buried. Time and dust, he thought, running his finger over the Formica countertop and smiling at his own joke, happen to us all.

“Dust motes swirled in the sun rays that slanted between the window curtains, and the clock ticked away heavily, filling the house with its solemn reminder.”

He went into the living room now and sat down heavily on the couch to rest. Dust motes swirled in the sun rays that slanted between the window curtains, and the clock ticked away heavily, filling the house with its solemn reminder. He looked around, recalling those times when he had lived in this room every day and evening, when he had come down the stairs before dawn and turned on the lamp, when he had gone to bed at night and turned the lamp off again. His eyes were drawn to the narrow hallway that led back to Myrt’s sewing room. She had long ago hung a framed mirror on the hallway wall to give it the illusion of size, and from where he sat, looking at the mirror nearly edge-on, the glass was a confusion of shadows, which, like the ghostly reflections in the glass of the fishbowl, seemed to him to be moving. He watched curiously—seeing in it the same suggestive shape, the bowing and reaching and turning insistently repeated—and after a moment he stood up and walked toward the hallway, regarding the shadows until they faded from view and it was his own face he was looking at in the mirror.

He opened the door to the sewing room and walked in, seeing the cut-out pattern parts still lying on the long table—pieces of a shirt she had been sewing for him. The
old ironing board with its ivy-decorated cloth stood against the wall in the corner. Nearby sat the silent sewing machine, and next to that the sewing cabinet that he had built with wood left over from the casket. He wondered suddenly if his building the sewing cabinet had been inspired by guilt: probably it had—but good things sometimes resulted from dubious motives, and in the end it was all one. On the opposite wall the closet door stood part way open, and he shut it now, admiring the door knob, which was made of old leaded glass that had turned purple in the sun, another of Myrt's antique store purchases. It had always been the loveliest door knob in the house, and Johnson had never been the type to despise a doorknob or any other simple and unadorned thing. Taking out a handkerchief now, he wiped the glass clean of dust and peered into its transparent depths, where he saw once again the familiar shadowy movement. Knowing that the room behind him was still, the curtains drawn across the windows, he abandoned the idea that what he saw was a reflection. It was rather the presence of something, or of someone.

“Man in fact is just about to enter on a totally new phase of his existence... I do not like people who I feel are blocking the way through.”

He turned slowly, expecting he knew not what, and for a brief moment there appeared on the wall behind the sewing cabinet the same moving shadow, which dimmed and disappeared in the moment that his mind acknowledged what it was—the shadow, or perhaps the shade, of a woman opening the lid of the sewing cabinet and removing something from inside—or else putting something there. He stepped to the box, put his own hand on the dusty wooden pull, and opened it. There, lying among bobbins and spoons of thread, lay a small package wrapped in white paper and a ribbon and bow. There was a card attached, the corner of its envelope slid through the ribbon.

It was an anniversary card from Myrt, undelivered. Clearly she had hid the package in the sewing chest, waiting for the day of their anniversary. He read the card twice and put it into his pocket, and then slipped the ribbon off the box and pulled the paper loose, bailing it up and tossing it into the trash. Inside the box was a tissue-wrapped gift, which made of old leaded glass that he saw was a reflection. Taking out a handkerchief, he wiped the glass clean of dust and peered into its transparent depths, where he saw the way through.

Carrying the glass he walked back out into the hallway, across the living room, and into the kitchen again. He opened the cabinet that held the few bottles that he and Myrt had kept for company, and took out the square bottle of sherry, put away at the rear of the shelf since that first toast when he had brought it home from the Vietnamese market.

At the back door he hesitated for a moment, leaning his weight against the wall and looking back one last time, before tossing the house key onto the kitchen floor and closing the locked door forever behind him. When he stepped into the sheltered darkness of the garden shed, the casket was a long shadow on the low sawhorses that supported it. He had always noticed that there was a time right at dusk when, even with the lights on, things were darker than they would be a half hour hence, when it was night, and this was surely such a time. He set the bottle and glass down and leaned against the casket itself, catching his breath for a moment before going on, letting his eyes adjust, wanting to get through this in what was left of the light of day.

Earlier he had emptied the tools out of the box, and now he slowly and carefully disassembled the various notched-together panels that had defined its useful existence, laying the wooden dividers behind him until the casket contained only the built-in compartments, most of which already held his afterlife accouterments. He slipped the bottle down into its own narrow space and the sherry glass into its niche, and just like that the thing was finished. He stood for another moment regarding it. The cribbage-board and the deck of cards were one of the travel sets they had used early in their marriage, and he found that they were only barely familiar to him now. He took the plastic wrap off the first of the books, Priestly’s The Good Companions, and riffled the pages, finding an old postcard bookmark with a picture of Yosemite Valley on it. The sight of the card made him think of the label on the first sherry bottle, still pressed in the dictionary inside the house, and for a moment he regretted the loss of the house key. But the label wasn’t useful, really. It was mere nostalgia, and there wasn’t a lot of room for nostalgia in a casket. The idea almost made him laugh, but his heart began to skip and flutter, and abruptly he found himself sitting on the floor, looking up at the tarnished brass screws in the wooden cleats that crisscrossed the bottom of the box.

He realized that he had passed out, and he sat there recovering for a minute before he hauled himself heavily to his feet and made his unsteady way back outside, looking up into the sky. There was still enough sunlight in the west to call it dusk, and a scattering of fleecy white clouds made the sky above the susnet look interminably deep. He rested three times ascending the treehouse stairs and used both hands to turn the doorknob. He was tempted to lie down on the bed for a breather, but he knew it was unlikely he would rise again.

Septimus humped around as usual, looking for food, and Johnson fed him again, a healthy pinch, deciding to leave the light on over the bowl. He looked around him one last time, then bent over to straighten the covers on the bed. “Well...” he said out loud, but he couldn’t find any useful way to finish the thought. Sentimental old fool, he thought. Myrt had called him that more than once, and apparently she’d been just as right as rain. Closing the door behind him, he went back down the stairs, haltingly, holding on tight to the rail and planting his feet carefully.

In the shed he realized that his mind was made up, and he had been since Myrt had shown him where to find her anniversary gift. It had been a day of indecision, but the second sherry glass had finished the forty year job of putting together the casket and had made the way clear to him at last. He removed the bottle and the two glasses now and set them on the closed bottom half of the lid. A clucking pain shot down his left arm, and he held his chest, stopping dead still and closing his eyes until it receded to a dull ache. He had to use his teeth to pull the cork from the bottle, and his right hand shook when he poured the two glasses full.

“Over the river,” he said, carrying the first of the glasses to his lips and draining it. He winked at Queen Isabella, and then threw the glass against the wall of the shed, where it shattered and fell. He picked up the second glass, raised it in a silent toast, and drank it too, and then, using up what was left of his strength, he hurled the glass after the first, the shards scattering among the others on the floor. A weight as vast and as heavy as the sky and earth together seemed to be crushing his chest as he fumbled the cork back into the bottle and put it back into the casket.

But now he was free to go, out at last into the waning sunlight. His breath came in shallow gasps as he tottered across the yard and sat down hard in the open air among the fallen fig leaves, resting his back against the tree trunk, the evening clouds and the first stars turning far far above him in the sky, and the wind rustling the foliage around his small house, hidden now within that leafy darkness. The glow of the fish bowl shone as ever through the shifting foliage, casting its dim light out into the night.
Imagine that bus, a coffin on its roof. Its long shadow crossing the desert without witnesses. Pan-American Highway due south, coming from the Peruvian border. And here, in Pampa Hundida, we were waiting for it—with a mixture of fascination and morbidity. Impatience to see how the whole thing would end. Still, sometimes, on glaring sunlit afternoons like this one, when the wind gusts and the dust of the pampas swirls up, I imagine that bus, and I still lose myself thinking about it on the highway, the coffin on the roof rack, as though it would never turn off toward our oasis, never reveal to us its irony.

Imagine the honorary Spanish consul in Pampa Hundida, Pío Barrales junior: the pharmacist who, along with his father’s pharmacy, on the westward sidewalk off the Matriz Square, also inherited those blue eyes, the circumflex frown, and the chronic sunburn of an exile who fled the deluges of Asturias only to die in the desert of Atacama. Shortly after being named honorary consul by a socialist government in far away Moncloa, Barrales junior insisted on burying an alleged fellow countryman. He was an unknown man, gaunt and dressed in black, who arrived in the city having first crossed through the desert; he stayed in the Hotel del Perigrino. It isn’t clear for how long, maybe a week. Yes, it was probably a week while he visited local businesses, carrying a plastic briefcase, polishing his scuffed-up shoes by wiping the toe of each one against the back of the opposite pant leg, lisping out his introductions, that he represented I don’t know what company that manufactured scales; although he never managed to sell any. He did this until, on one of those afternoons that extinguish all hope—a gesture of the shining Saturday afternoon—the unknown man hanged himself in room 22. The next morning, when the door was eventually broken down, a damp shirt was found twirling on a clothing hanger over the sink, as though his anxiousness to hang himself had overcome him while he was scrubbing its frayed cuffs. On the nightstand was the unpaid hotel bill, inflated by the price of two bottles of Del Monte anisette and a telegram sent overseas. After checking with the company, it was revealed that the telegram had read: “I have gone too far.” The intended destination must have been still more cryptic than the message because it had been returned from the central post office in the Cibeles Plaza of Madrid with the message “address unknown.”

“And imagine finally, before it gets dark and the worst of Sunday has passed, and before the two of us go our separate ways…”

In the absence of a passport, this paper was enough for Barrales junior to deduce that the suicide victim was Spanish. A Spaniard lost in America. Like Barrales junior and his father, who had also gone, and lived, too far away—and maybe—too late.

While Judge Larsson ordered the corpse transferred to the hospital morgue for autopsy, the pharmacist made an appearance at the dining room of the Spanish Residents’ Association. Let’s say that it was a Sunday and that the members were finishing their long family lunches, amidst thick clouds of cigar smoke and expensive brandies. Barrales crossed the dining room without looking at anyone. He avoided especially the exiles or descendants of Republican exiles, like his father or like himself. But these people, unlike he and his father, had forgotten their pasts, had been assimilated, and they had long since associated with the economic émigrés who had gotten rich running mines. They had grown so chummy with these sorts that after the military coup they tolerated, and even celebrated, the portrait of the General that the others hung in the meeting room. After that Barrales senior made his family promise that they would never again set foot on the premises of the Residents’ Association, as long as they lived.

So that afternoon few could believe it when they saw Barrales junior walking toward the carving table in the center of the dining room and leaving there a big tin jar that looked like a container of powdered milk. The pharmacist had covered the tin with stationery from the consulate’s office which announced, in all capital letters, “Collecting donations to bury an unknown Spaniard with due dignity.”

You have to imagine him there, the honorary consult and socialist city counselor—flushed, scowling, haughty—waiting alongside the carved-up Serrano ham, without even a gesture, until the hall fell completely silent. A silence broken, finally, when he deigned to talk, although without looking at anybody, and despising everyone. He apologized for disturbing the digestion of the wafer swallowed at the noon mass and later the sucking pig devoured during the Sunday lunch. He was sorry, but it was his duty to communicate to the community that a compatriot had just been found hanging in his room at the Hotel del Peregrino. He could have spared them the details, but he preferred to share them: the long purple tongue, the stiff, dripping erection, the holes in his shoes, the empty pockets. He was convinced, certain, sure that these miseries would move the members as much as they had moved him. Barrales concluded, trusting in the proverbial charity of the association, that they could save their countryman a final indignity—“The burial shroud and the trowel of lime, the unmarked grave. At least you, Spaniards, will see to it that he is buried like a Spaniard.”

And then the honorary consul stuffed a bill into the improvised alms cup before leaving without even a good-bye. You would have to imagine all that to suspect that Pío Barrales junior—son of the “commie Barrales,” as they called his father there—had made a bid to collect donations in the Spanish Residents’ Association, there of all places, because he was already counting on their greed. And on his revenge.

All seemed to be going as planned when, by the day’s end, the consulate’s seal on the alms cup was broken—before the tiresome formality of the notary Martínez—and a measly pile of change clankingly spilled out. Something like a thousand pesos in those days, and mostly in pennies and nickels. Alms insufficient to pay for a round of beer in that very dining room, let alone enough to pay for a burial. But it sufficed to communicate the bad blood of the tipsy association members, of their hefty wives, and of their bluster and furunculous offspring, who all entertained themselves by passing from table to table the alms cup that that insolent Barrales junior had had the audacity to leave for them on the carving board, filling it to the brim with the small change reserved for tips.

The rest will have gone like this, or else some other, similar way. But what is for sure is that the next day, Monday and at midday so that one could fail to notice, the pharmacist strode across the Matriz Square with the heavy collections cup on conspicuous display in his hands. He went to the windows of the Belloni funeral parlor, pausing so his reflection could linger in the glass, a long moment no one would ever forget... And then, he was inside for a couple of hours trying to buy a casket, haggling for better prices, calculating the price and size of “in the name of the Spanish residents.” He started with one of light mahogany, on which Belloni had placed the perpetual sign “reserved” (perhaps for himself). And he then proceeded to rule it out along with all the others, one at a time, for being too expensive. He cast them aside only after exploring the most abject possible discounts—“how much for this one, but what about without the cushion and the silk lining?”—not even leaving aside the plainest and the smallest ones, those white coffins made for children, in which case he asked if it could fit a grown man if he were folded over. He finished by pulling out and counting the change from the collections cup on the lid of the cheapest casket, one made of resinous pine, on which he erected little turrets of copper pennies. He lost count and started over, taking his time, making sure he could be seen through the windows of the Belloni mortuary, where he and the mortician, inaudible but in plain sight, bargained over a casket.

Belloni—he told me this himself, later on—was on the verge of giving it to him for free, if only so that he could lower the blinds.
and head off to lunch. But he changed his mind when Barrales junior inquired if it would be possible to carry the coffin to the cemetery upright in a wheelbarrow since there wasn’t enough money for a proper funeral car. The mortician later assured me that the notion, in addition to expending his patience, also stung his professional pride.

Without the casket, but with the alms cup displayed more prominently than a paten. Barrales junior left for the cemetery. In the dusty administrative office of the necropolis—besieged by nameless mausoleums, crooked crucifixes, washed-out tombstones—he was taking account of plots and holes in the ground. Visiting them and testing them out, he asked after the minimum dimensions for a man’s corpse, checking to see if the cheapest available ditch, one reserved for a five year stint, could be rented for six months, since his compatriots’ donations could only cover that long. This last part, though, he didn’t say (he didn’t have to since at this point half the city was saying as much anyway).

The next maneuver he carried out right here, from a public telephone in the bar of this very hotel. With the door to the booth wide open—so that we would all hear and so that those of us playing cards could enjoy it—he called the consul of the Kingdom of Spain in Tacna, Peru. He shouted at his colleague to buy a “poor man’s coffin” out there, where the perks of the exchange rate, from Chilean pesos to Peruvian soles, would mean that what was already cheap would turn out to be almost free. And he also told him to send it over, to charter its passage right away: but not by hearse, because “here compassion does not provide for that sort of thing,” rather, let’s see, send the coffin by bus, like a package, on the Morales Moralitos bus line: certainly, on account of the sad circumstances, they’ll agree to bring the casket free of charge. Because there they may be poorer, Barrales howled into the receiver at his counterpart, but they would always have space on the roof rack. “And in their hearts!” he concluded with a bellow. (It was then that the journey began, the bus with a coffin on its roof, which, in a way, hasn’t reached us yet.)

In the meantime, and so that they wouldn’t toss the countryman into an unmarked grave nor have to pay for more time at the morgue, Barrales made arrangements with the director of the town hospital, doctor Montañé, and got his permission to bring the rigid corpse to the pharmacy. We will never know, and this is another mystery of the story I’m telling you, why Montañé authorized this. They say that Barrales junior offered to discount certain opiate drugs for the treatment of terminally ill patients, making a reality one of the doctor’s philanthropic dreams. Others argue that Montañé, sarcastic and bored as he was, and a keen connoisseur of human trifles, was simply amusing himself. Whatever it was, the pharmacist got his authorization. And so Tuesday afternoon no one could fail to see the gurney wheeled out of the hospital with its funeral heap lying beneath a green sheet. No one could ignore that V of the stark white feet that came out first, with the tag that had the unconfirmed name of the unknown Spaniard tied to a big toe and dangling as though this were (and it may well have been) a body on sale.

“Imagine a long week without news, dramatized further by the delightful rumor that the bus has broken down...”

In his pharmacy Barrales junior prepared a bed of dry ice for the body, which, after the autopsy, was disemboweled and injected with formaldehyde. And he kept it under the counter, right where he stored his medicinal herbs, something we all knew because, with or without pretext, Barrales invited each of his clients (and he had many in those days) to have a look below the table at the remains of the unknown Spaniard. Who among those who saw the body couldn’t remember that? The tobacco-stained teeth jutting out like a rabbit’s; the waxy nakedness, stitched up from the Adam’s apple to the pelvic; the neck, which was violet from the rope, the pharmacist invited us to touch with a finger. And as we did, he murmured: “here I have my poor countryman, waiting for the arrival of his Peruvian casket.”

How we all waited for it. Because, unsurprisingly, the image of the coffin traveling atop the roof rack of the bus, its oblong prow cutting through the dry desert air, became a town wide obsession. There was also the daily humiliation of the Spanish Association, which understood bit by bit the plan that the socialist pharmacist, esteemed son of that father the “commie,” had laid out for them. They understood, as well, the perfidy of bringing the coffin on the Morales Moralitos line, notorious for its slowness, lack of punctuality, and gruesome accidents. The delay, drawing out the wait, would only accentuate the infamy of their stinginess and would confirm that they were “tight like cunts,” in the sordid double meaning that the nickname coño takes on when uttered behind someone’s back.

Imagine a long week without news, dramatized further by the delightful rumor that the bus had broken down...”
dispensing medical treatments over the counter, under which lay the suicide victim, as if there were nothing to it. He only asked now and again if we didn’t smell, perhaps, a “strange faint odor.” While he pretended to sniff—with the mischievous twitch of his nose and that white mustache—something unnameable wafted up from behind the aroma of sage and common rue.

There was nothing the discreet protests of the Spanish Association could do to prevail upon the health authorities or even Mayor Mamani (who had his own score to settle with them). Nor did their regret suffice to improve the situation: their delayed offer to put the unknown man in the Spanish Association’s section of the cemetery, “even though he may not have been Spanish,” was in vain. Barrales junior, son of that harsh father, indulging his spite, let it be known that the Association could rest assured, that he, as honorary consul, would ensure that the unknown Spaniard received “a dignified burial befitting of your charity.”

“...they say, but this might just be a legend, that the sun was rising the next morning when certain drunken women were still laughing...”

Try to imagine, as well, the malicious humor of the rest of us, the most dignified and yet no less curious, in our small crowd gathered on the terrace of the Hotel Nacional, where we made sure, ever so discreetly, not to miss the spectacle of Barrales junior directing the lowering of the coffin, calling for the utmost carefulness. Only later for his gray hair to drip with sweat and for his face to flush in the sun like a tomato, while he loosened with a hammer the gnarled cover that splintered with a terrible groan—long and dry—that reverberated in the nerves of our teeth as it screeched through the square.

Try to listen, finally, for that suppressed guffaw, the continuous and snide gloating with which we saw, and now remember, the big fish they pulled out of the coffin. A dried-out swordfish, smoked, the crusty gold of its scales, the marble, wide-open eye, together with the chili peppers and seaweed garnish. All that was needed to prepare a cured jerky ceviche, of fish, the delight of the Tacnian coast; to cut it up and marinate it with lemons from our oasis, to organize a banquet for the public benefit in the middle of the square, where Barrales junior sold plates of ceviche and little cups of pisco sour by the hundreds. More than enough to pay for him, that Spaniard lost in America, and for what the charity of his countrymen had not permitted: a proper hearse and a permanent plot at the cemetery. And even a strident little band, still drunk from the night before, that accompanied the retinue of revelers to the cemetery.

They say, but this might just be a legend, that the sun was rising the next morning when certain drunken women were still laughing and shouting at the pharmacy, poking at the rigidity of the corpse; although these ladies, for their part, disagree and swear not to remember a thing. But what we all do remember is the elegant brooch with which Barrales junior confected his revenge. The corpse of the unknown man had barely been laid in its luxurious plot, from where it continues to reproach our Spanish community, when Barrales junior left for the Residents’ Association and handed an envelope over to the doorman. It contained the check from a bar and a note commemorating the fact that the tips gathered by the charity of our Spaniards had managed, although just barely, to cover the cost of a round of beers for the gravediggers.
La Belle Hermaphrodite
by Margo Berdeshevsky

“There dwelt a Nymph, not skilled for the chase, or used to flexing the bow, or the effort of running, the only Naiad not known by swift-footed Diana. / Often her sisters would say: “Pick up a javelin, or / bristling quiver, interrupt your leisure for the chase!” / But she would not pick up a javelin or arrows, / nor trade her leisure for the hunt. / Instead she would bathe her beautiful limbs and tend to her hair, / with her waters as a mirror.”

Hermaphroditus: Two-sexed child of Hermes and Aphrodite, according to Ovid, he was born a remarkably handsome boy, he was transformed into an androgynous being by union with the vain water nymph Salmacis. It is said that she raped him.

I.

. . . In another land, I’d seen the kapok tree, nature’s devil’s castle, dervish skirts spread in wide layers like an open vulva, buttresses like giant buttocks—who wouldn’t stroke those, until sunrise. I lusted, and loved, with my haunted woman’s eye . . . .

. . . Is it true that Queen Elizabeth was a hermaphrodite? As was indicated by diary notations from her personal physician that suggest that ‘she was not an ordinary woman’ and by her finger length which is one symptom of the genetic disorder?

. . . I don’t know. How could I know? But here, you are an angel . . .

ii.

You rest in the dim here as the sculpted winter sun sets. Sleeping hermaphrodite, head on your pillows from Greece to the Borghese to Paris to me—un-tongued, but tongue-wagged by all, yes, including me.

Could I curl beside her/him/me?—Draw seed from the eye of that quiet penis, staring softly as any morning’s angel dreamed? Nesting in my desire even if only on a mattress of marble, even if only a myth’s hermaphrodita—who would I be, under x’s and y’s? Is design of a body a gift or an invite—to terrify an open body at her side?

One leg akimbo, its toe pointing to heaven’s eye as bravely as the same body’s circumcised organ of someone—one’s delight. The other foot hidden in its Carrera marble sheet as though “discreet” were a word only used for feet, not for a body that breaks all breaths of who am I and who, and who is and why. Such an eloquent repose of God’s confusion. Such polished elegance of line my hand wants to stroke to some passion I’ve not known yet, museum lover of mystery and strange orgasm though I might be—

Then am I a woman or am I another, man or some god’s naked brother? Am I man or say demon’s mother, or wife, or improvised lover—Hermaphrodita: stretched in stone for me—say: enter, be you, and be me, or be me—

But here—monster or lover, a man, or femme unspoken—Where is the he of you who is the she of you, carved love-monster, silk marble mounds, veined as a breathing stone. Carved he or carved she, or who would I be? Head soft on your pillow, hearing sky or your maker’s hard sex-breaths, you sleep for any to love without touching, for any to pass in late, stark dark. Where is the he of you who is the she of you, resting in your marble ambiguity? Phallus and breasts, the twist of a hip and the breath that says woman or not a man, says Sybil or Lilith, or haunter of sleeps, dear hermaphrodite—sphinx with no other riddle: whisper at least one truth—to me.

The moon is in doubt over whether to be a man or a woman.
—Rita Dove

footnote:

Be yourself, everyone else is already taken. —Oscar Wilde

But skin a human and we are bone and blood. Period. Small exclamation. Cut off our genitals or paste them on, and we are a mere human, still, who may have paid a purse of gold to some surgeon. Or . . . was simply a child of love. And . . . there was or will be one who belongs to no single body or genre, or hybrid . . . la belle hermaphrodite . . .
Blason
For W.S. Merwin
By Margo Berdeshevsky

If I’d known you when the island
first scraped at my foot soles its sheer
thumbs, hungry fishes—known you
when its thin stones first fell to my hands
under waterfalls and the wide winged
black frigate’s flight watched
if I was learning—if I knew you then
knew how to listen it was as syllables
of a road I hadn’t pronounced yet
but I would
fell—it has taken small
houses, roads you lived beyond one
one noon while winter fell in your garden
you sent me on to this one
this rim of a water that knows there are islands
in the long clouds that know the herds of lost
poets their harsh songs of desire and
how it hurts to not sing them
In the silence of rooms you built with
syllables, and fires, and vixens, and nights,
my steps listen
to winds and the bats guiding light
to your garden’s wet growing, even without
eyes—in such a quiet, elder,—celadon roads
that have no names I can learn except a scent
of hawk, a carol of orioles bows—I bow
to one who has parted weeds for me even
at a distance, parted hours, let me walk slowly
hands
open behind you
BEIRUT by Ben Stoltzfus

July and August in Beirut. Hot, muggy nights. Tennis in the morning. After lunch, a swim in the turquoise waters of Pigeon Rocks. BBC news before supper and a book before bed. Every morning from his tall minaret on Marie Curie Street the muezzin wakes us up, the goats eat the leftover food and the boy milks his animals for the residents of the quarter. My mother is happy to have a house and a kitchen. We visit the souq downtown and she buys three carved elephant tusks from an Indian merchant.

My father buys three carved olivewood camels. The elephants are now on the windowsill overlooking the sea, and the camels are on the sideboard in the dining room. The two Kazaks and the Shiraz are on the floor in the living room where we like to sit when we read. My parents read, I read, time passes and no loose tile has fallen on my head. I'm alive, and Mireille is in the mountains. There is a war on, the Allies and Axis powers are fighting and each week some pins on the map move to new locations in Sicily and Ukraine. It's early September. My father gets a call from a former Sofia College student. He says: I'm in Beirut, at Saint George's Hotel. On my way to Jerusalem. Are you free this afternoon? Could I see you? Carl Misrahi is a man in his mid twenties, medium build, dark brown hair, and in his eyes a somewhat furtive look. He is wearing a suit and tie, despite the heat. My father suggests he take his jacket off, and he does so. He is wearing a light blue shirt. He loosens his tie. My mother serves tea on the veranda. A slight breeze is blowing in from the sea. Carl and my parents reminisce about the good old days at the Sofia College and the people we know. My father asks how he was able to leave the country and he says Jews are being allowed to do so if they pay heavy bribes. My father inquires about the alleged deportations, and Carl says that King Boris intervened to stop them. My mother says: Do you mean to say that Bulgarian Jews are not being sent to concentration camps? Carl says: Yes, that's true...My parents express relief and pump our guest for more details. He says: You remember the anti-Jewish law, the zacon that was passed in December 1940, the so-called law for the protection of the nation?...My parents nod their heads...Carl continues: The law that restricted Jewish rights, imposed new taxes and established a quota for Jews in the professions?...Again my parents nod...Carl says: What you may not know is that in early 1943, Theodor Dannecker, one of Eichmann's associates, the one who guided the campaign for the deportation of French Jews to death camps, arrived in Bulgaria. In February he met with Alexander Belev, the Commissar for Jewish Affairs. At that meeting they signed an agreement for the deportation of twenty thousand Jews from Aegean Thrace and Vardar Macedonia. My father says: Yes, these were the territories Hitler promised Boris if he joined the Axis powers. Carl says: That's right. But legally, they would not be under Bulgarian jurisdiction until after the war. That meant that the Jews of these lands, more than eleven thousand of them, were still citizens of Greece and Yugoslavia. And the quota called for the deportation of all of them. Plus another eight thousand from Bulgaria proper. All remaining Bulgarian Jews, some forty-two thousand, would be deported later. My mother says: Then what happened? Carl says: Roundups were to begin in March and, in Kyustendil, the boxcars were already lined up and waiting. But when news of the deportations leaked, protests spread throughout Bulgaria. A delegation from Kyustendil met with Interior Minister Petur Gabroski and, under pressure, he relented, canceling the deportations. My mother says: That was brave of him. Carl says: True enough, but what is not generally known is that Gabroski's orders came directly from King Boris. It was a close call because the cancellation order came only four hours before the deadline. My father says: That was a close call. Carl says: Although the King saved all fifty thousand Bulgarian Jews, he couldn't save the ones from Vardar Macedonia and Thrace because they were still under Hitler's direct jurisdiction. They were deported to the death camps of Treblinka and Majdanek. My mother says: How awful. What a tragic turn of events. I say: I heard rumors about the deportation of Gypsies. Carl says: As far as I know, none have been deported. Unless some were rounded up in Macedonia.

My mother offers Carl more tea and he stands up to stretch his legs. She pours. My father has a pained look on his face. Carl sits down and says: But Nazi pressure on the King never abated. In March, Hitler invited him to Germany, ostensibly for a visit. What he wanted, however, was the deportation of the Jews. So, after returning to Bulgaria, the king ordered all able-bodied Jewish men to join hard labor units. They were assigned the task of building roads and it was widely rumored that it was the King's effort to thwart deportation. Nonetheless, in May, Belev and Dannecker drafted another plan for the deportation of all fifty thousand Bulgarian Jews. King Boris opposed them saying he needed these men to build roads and railway lines. Nazi officials, however, wanted them deported immediately to German-occupied Poland. Again, the King refused, this time with the backing of Dimitar Peshev, the parliamentary vice-chair, and Archbishop Stefan, head of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria. Their help was crucial.

My father says: The King is a brave man. Carl says: Yes, but it may have cost him his life. Last March, just before I left Bulgaria, Hitler summoned him to Rastenburg, East Prussia. Once again, despite Hitler's insistence, Boris refused to send Bulgarian Jews to death camps. Not only that, he also refused to declare war on the Soviet Union or send Bulgarian troops to the Eastern Front. It is said that Hitler had a fit. My father says: I can believe it. Carl says: Shortly after returning to Sofia, King Boris died of apparent heart failure. On August 28th. But it was rumored that Hitler had him poisoned. I left the country two days later. My father says: Who would have thought it would end like this? I remember his wedding day as though it were yesterday. It was the promise of a new beginning. And I can see him walking down the steps of Alexander Nevsky Cathedral with his bride, Princess Galiyma of Italy. She all in white, and he in black. My mother says: Despite everything, we are so relieved you could get out...She looks at her watch saying: It's almost suppertime. Can you stay? Carl says: Thank you but I'm meeting a friend at the hotel. My father says: It's so good to see you again.
Carl. Good luck on your ventures in Palestine...We shake hands, say goodbye and our guest leaves. We look at each other dumbfounded.

My mother prepares supper while my father and I listen to the BBC. The announcer says: Today, September 3, 1943, after the successful occupation of Sicily, the Allies have invaded Italy. The North African campaign is over, and the fight for Europe has begun. The announcer talks about Harold Alexander's 15th Army Group, Lieutenant General Mark Clark's U.S. 5th Army and General Bernard Montgomery's British 8th Army. My father says: Less than a year ago Churchill said Italy was the soft underbelly of the Axis, and he wanted to open the Mediterranean to Allied traffic. Now that Mussolini has been deposed, if Italy surrenders, maybe next year we'll be able to book passage back to America. My mother says: I hope so...On the map, my father moves a red pin from Sicily to the toe of Italy.

Meanwhile I have been thinking about Mirka. Wondering what might have happened to the Gypsies of Gorna Djumaya or those of Macedonia. Suppose she was visiting family and found herself caught in a roundup. That would be hell. Far worse than what I endure. Going to a death camp would truly be hell on earth. Not hell in the afterlife.

Will the Jews go to heaven if they suffer? That’s what the Bible says. The meek shall inherit the earth. Meanwhile they're herded into cattle cars and sent north. How can Hitler believe these people are vermin when friends of mine are Jews? Maybe I’m part of the infection. Archangel seems to think so. Why else would he pursue me? He tells me I’m in a state of mortal sin. Are all Jews in a state of mortal sin? Original sin? Is that why Hitler, Himmler and their gang are after them? It’s an absurd notion.

“Mireille greets me with a peck on each cheek and I do the same. I say: Fresh, mountain air agrees with you. You are looking very beautiful.”

The Jews think of themselves as the chosen people, yet Hitler has chosen to exterminate them. What irony. He seems to think that their disappearance will enhance the glory of Germany. He says: All power to the Aryans. Meanwhile the Nordics are business whereas ours were mountain air agrees with you. You are looking very beautiful.

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The Jews think of themselves as the chosen people, yet Hitler has chosen to exterminate them. What irony. He seems to think that their disappearance will enhance the glory of Germany. He says: All power to the Aryans. Meanwhile the Nordics are business whereas ours were roundabout way: from Los Angeles to Mombasa, Kenia, then Djibouti and finally Cairo. By train from Cairo to Beirut. My mother says: That is roundabout. When will he arrive? My father says: Sometimes next year, if he’s lucky. Depends on the connections. He expects delays in many ports. Crossing the North Atlantic is too dangerous, and civilians aren’t doing it...I go over my uncle’s itinerary and compare it to my trips around the world. Mirka and I took the northern and equatorial routes, whereas he is following the southern one. I like ours better but I understand that his trip is business whereas ours were pleasure. Although, on second thought, cities with names such as Lima, Valparaiso, Buenos Aires—Lime Tree, Paradise, Fresh Air—have a certain appeal. I also like the ring of Zanzibar, Mombasa and Djibouti, and hope some day to incorporate all of them into my travels. I know already that Satan and Archangel will say, but I’m beginning not to care.

Mireille greets me with a peck on each cheek and I do the same. I say: Fresh, mountain air agrees with you. You are looking very beautiful. She says: T’est gentil...
We pedal over dry grass and around a bend in the road we see the crowns tremble, casting shadows on the grass. Light and shadow define their crests and sloping surfaces. We pedal over dry grass and bumpy ground toward the dunes. The tree trunks have been marked by time, blackened by age, pocked and hollowed by the elements. The crowned treachery, casting umbrellas of shade. We set our bicycles aside and Mireille unfolds the blanket next to a perforated branch. She says: Don't say sat, Sees how the surrealists coined the word volupité. But it 'elps my English. I say: Yes, they will also ban the poem. We were meant to be. It's more than just love. I say: I was intrigued by the poem's first line, and listening to you read it. I imagined you writing it and saying my child, my sister. That way, it would be incest. She says: I suppose so. I say: Whichever it is, it's pretty daring. She says: Ah, oui, sat's 'wy suh book was banned. If you sink s's poem is daring, listen to suh next one...She leafs through the pages, finds A Celle qui est trop gale—To One Who Is Too Cheerful, and reads. When finished, she says: 'Wat do you sink? I say: I see why the book was banned. Let's see if the sensors will ban it in English. I read the last three stanzas:

So, some night, when the sensuous hour strikes, I would crawl stealthily toward you. To mortify your joyful flesh.

To bruise your pardoned breast. An injury both deep and wide.

The sensuous hour strikes, and loving as we like it, The treasures of your body.

Ah, such dizzy sweetness! In these new lips that are so shiny and so new, to install my venom into you, my sister! I say: Yes, they will also ban it. Besides, English sensors are much stricter than French ones, particularly when it comes to sex. In some quarters, even the word sex is taboo...Mireille laughs: Did you like suh poem? I say: Yes, very much. She says: I knew you would like Baudelaire. I say: What venom is he talking about? She says: It's not as bad as you might sink. Some people said it was syphilis. But Baudelaire himself explained to sub court sat it referred to 'ees splenetic temperament. 'Ee's 'as many spleen poems. I say: How do you know all this? She says: Luc told me. You know, Luc, my professor at suh Lycée. The one who died. We read Baudelaire in class. I say: You read this poem in class? She says: Non. It was after. Remember? 'Ee taught me everything I know. If you sink sis is daring, you should read Le Marquis de Sade. He takes evil to a new dimension. I say: Really? She says: Really...then suddenly raises her arm and points to a branch on an adjoining olive tree...Look, over there. A uncaméleon...Sure enough, a green chameleon, maybe ten inches long, is advancing, clinging to a branch. He sways back and forth, slowly extending one foot forward to clasp the thin branch with a pincer paw. One eye next to the horns on his head swivels, and the tail curls around itself into a neat spiral. We watch fascinated by the interminably slow swaying motion of this animal.

I say: The other day I met your friend Jaffar. She says: Ah, oui, Jaffar. He's a classmate at the lycée. I continue: He says he's going to marry you. She says: Quoi? Marry me? Sat's nonsense. No respectable French girl would marry an Arab. I say:
Perhaps you're not a respectable girl. She says: You are trying to provoke me. I say: Are you also too cheerful?...She looks at me sideways: Now you are provoking me. I say: Maybe so. She says: If you must know, I am 'appy. But Londres. I say: You mean, London? Perhaps you're not a respectable Mantissa Journal Volume II Issue I too cheerful?...She looks at me treasures of her body and squeeze tongue round and round, pausing I say: A hard on. And in French? She says: Oui, sa's 'wat we call 'er. I say: Maybe just BB for short, mon Big Ben. Like suh clock tower in Oui, sa's 'wat we call 'er. I say: Bite. Ta bite. 'Ow you say eet in English? I say: Cock. She says: Cock? As in rooster. I say: Yes. She says happily: We 'ave 'ad two good lessons today. Poetry and language. Don't you sink? I say: Indubitably, but it's not over. She says: 'Ow's sat? I say: You gave me the generic word chatte. We need a private epithet. Suppose we were in public and I said I love chatte. People might wonder, don't you think? She says: I see 'at you mean. We need to find a name for 'er. 'Ave you ideas? I say: I haven't seen her yet, but I'm sure she's marvelous. I know. We'll call her Merville, and she can rhyme with Marelle. She says: Okay. One day you may visit Merville. I say: Why not now? She says: I can't now. I weesh I could, but I'm not ready. Luc is still too much wis me...While pedaling back into town by walls and gardens of purple hougan and red hibiscus, Mireille sidles her bicycle up to mine and says sweetly; Your rooster makes me want to sing. Like a bird...I marvel at her spontaneity and hope she gets over Luc.

“They (the Jews) were assigned the task of building roads and it was widely rumored that it was the King’s effort to thwart deportation.”

That night, once again, Archangel visits me. I’m accustomed to the glow of his wings but they seem to be gleaming more than usual. He says: You are playing a dangerous game, my boy? Up to now you were destined for one of hell’s outer circles, but with incest, you are moving closer to the fiery center. Where the damned endure even greater suffering. I say: I have not committed incest. He says: No, but you will. You and Marelle are getting awfully close? I say: She’s not my sister. This is only a game we play when reading Baudelaire. He says: Even thinking about incest is a sin. I say: How can that be a sin? Baudelaire is a great writer. He says: That’s what you think. In any case, he’s already in hell. And the courts were right to condemn Les Fleurs du mal. But they didn’t go far enough. All copies of the book should have been burned. I say: Now you sound like the Nazis. Burning books...Satan appears. I see his heart beating in his chest and red blood coursing through veins and arteries. A lacerwork of tiny capillaries shapes his folded wings, and their intricate tissues define his body outline. I had no idea his scales were transparent. He says: They are the Nazis, and it’s time somebody said so. Hell and Auschwitz are the same. I should know. And don’t let Archangel tell you what you can and cannot think. You can think anything you want to. It’s a free universe and everything is possible. Archangel says: Don’t you believe him. That’s the venom Baudelaire infuses in his readers. The venom of free thought. The court was barking up the wrong tree when it accused him of transmitting syphilis. Disease of the flesh is nothing. It is weak to begin with. What matters is the soul, and Baudelaire was tampering with eternal life. He infused poetry with evil, and that’s why he entitled his book The Flowers of Evil. For that, he deserves to burn. I say: I’m glad you mentioned the soul. I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, and I can’t seem to find it. Can you tell me where it is? He says: The soul is the presence of God in all men and women. It is the Holy Spirit. It is the flame of life eternal. I say: Yes, but I would like to touch my soul. I know I can feel it because I’m afraid of going to hell, but I wish I could identify it better. It’s so elusive. He says: It’s meant to be elusive. That’s why heaven and hell exist. So you can choose. Each act of yours is a step closer to one or the other. And lately, actually for some time now, you have been moving in hell’s direction. I say: You may say so, but it doesn’t feel like it to me. The more I explore the ideas of writers like Goethe, Milton, Molière and Baudelaire, the freer I feel. After your first visits, and thanks to Brother Ignatius, I was truly fearful, but now I’m less so. Somehow your certainties seem less certain than they once were. I’ll still get baptized, just to be on the safe side, but I no longer see the world in black and white. There are so many colors to choose from, and your vision feels like a straitjacket, like the ones they use at the mental hospital on Mount Sannine. Satan says: Sure, get baptized if you want to. You’re a free man. Well, almost a man. All I ask is that you keep an open mind. That you remain an inquisitive soul, ready to explore the world, question dogma and challenge authority. No one has a monopoly on the truth, not even God. Archangel says: Blasphemy. That’s why you fell from grace, and now you’re paying the price. And you’re trying to lead impressionable souls astray. I say: No one led me astray. Mirka offered me love and you said it was a sin. And, what I find strange, is that you, the Catechism, Brother Ignatius and my father all think alike. Nonetheless, I’ll go along, play it safe and get baptized. Archangel says: Smart move. Are you familiar with Pascal’s bet? I say: No. He says: You wager on God because you have nothing to lose. Whereas, if you don’t wager on Him and die, and there is a hell, you lose the beatitude of eternal life. I say: Makes sense to me. I’ll get baptized. Archangel says: Now you’re thinking. Satan says: You know what Pascal also said? I say: No...The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me...I say: Why was he afraid of the cosmos? Satan says: Good question. But my guess is that he wanted to scare you. So you would believe in God. I say: Does it work? He says: You tell me. I say: It’s not the infinite spaces I’m afraid of. It’s going to hell.
The Still Hunt
(Excerpt)
by David Matlin

Wesley’s last note before arriving in New York; an iron worker picked him up outside Akron, headed to a wedding in Bayonne, New Jersey. Took two days to get over the Appalachians and their distant small valleys. Tony Horn, millwright by trade, union man by instinct, and a second generation Hungarian who yearned for a Mexican mother? “Jewish Farmer, Jewish Farmer and mixed Miwok/Miwok. What’re them?” Wesley used his good manners to answer their questions and one woman, raised in those coal bearing mountains and hollows called her younger sister; yes, the one trying to start a bakery who drove twenty miles with a fresh baked black cap pie and home-made ice-cream, to ask about California and Jews who farmed roses. It was as if they and Wesley were tasting beautiful, never known before water.

He thought the hill country of eastern New Jersey and the mists rising from its forests and meadows, its glaciated valleys and quick running streams, the way the canopy held the mysterious smell of wild flowers subtly weighing a breeze, held depths of emptiness he could not explain whether of mid-day light beams, a deer whistling its warning, a hawk’s shadow slicing a jack in the pupil—the dark soft footed stirrings were blood whet, full of endurances belonging to flocks of shade and fragile drippings of slanted twilight that close instantly into concealments, multi-legged as a spider weaving her night web. And at the other end of it, the New Jersey of semi-abandoned factories leaking mercury, cyanide enough to feast on the eggs of every woman born and unborn, estuaries spewing their dioxins, and a people who called their raw vapors home, and who envying no one, had a kind of wind shear about them Wesley loved.

Tony Horn, turned out had walked down Elvis’s “Lonely Street” so often that “Heart Break Hotel” had as many seasons as Uranus “where you can get burned, turned to shit, froze, turned to shit’s younger cousin, get your ears squished real pretty by Jesus’s third girlfriend, Uranus got it all, Wesley.” Time and whatever dimensions Time possessed, began that day when he heard the “45” between Akron and Youngstown after finding out he’d knocked up his original girl friend whose father, a long haul trucker who’d hit the beach at Anzio, went directly with his daughter to Tony Horn’s parents, told them he was ready to set up a duplicate beach landing on their front porch for a year if necessary. The girl, she was a delicious child of Croatia and he’d taken her for a country ride in a ’32 Deuce he was transforming and hoped ardently to get on the cover of Hot Rod Magazine. “Just dropped a big Chrysler into it when the girl come along, already sanded the roadster, heard Elvis at the same time I knew I’d lose the car and so took it out for a last ride thinkin about them ‘bellhops’ and “desk clerks” the “room” I’d have to pay for and eat every pebble of “Lonely Street” without benefit of salt, pepper, pig’s ears and beer. Goddamned, couldn’t figure out which tasted better, the car or the girl.”

Tony Horn asked Wesley if he wanted to go to the wedding. Wesley said he hoped someday to return the beautiful favor. The millwright listened, asked if anything was wrong, and if there was he’d “front the bill.”

“Running to something, not away,” Wesley told him.

“Let me drop you off at a place I saw for the first time last year, if that’s OK?”

“Anything. Anything you’d like, Tony.”

“He thought the hill country of eastern New Jersey and the mists rising from its forests and meadows, its glaciated valleys and quick running streams...”

The streets with their bakeries, men’s clubs, beauty parlors, bars, restaurants, hardware stores, and cars blaring out stuff from the Ronettes, Leslie Gore and her “Jonny’s” arrival at a party of bewildermens and misery. Arethea Franklin telling all the males who ever have been, who are, and who lie beyond known jurisdictions of the wronged, the cheated, the sweet talked to smoldering love fatigues they better “think think think.” The stink of beer and grease, dreams...
and anguish piled thick and alive, agitated and as easily brought to violence as shallow rooted tolerance, no one sure exactly about the tides as they drove down a hill toward the Bayonne Bay.

“Suppose it’ll take four, five hours to get from here to New York, Wesley. Gonna leave you my address. Bay’s about ten blocks away. Let me know. Some day you might hear me yelling one of Atilla Jozsef’s poems at a rose field. Tony Horn then sang the first passages of his favorite poem:

If you start out in this world
Better be born seven times.
Once in a house on fire
Once in a freezing flood
Once in a field of ripe wheat
Once in an empty cloister
And once, among pigs in a sty …

“Won’t do the seventh, Wesley. Keep it a secret.”

Tony Horn sat in his leather Cadillac seat, twisted a fancy dash board knob, watched in delight as the convertible top rose like the wing of “sexy Hungarian bat” and advised, as he drove away laughing, to “learn how to swim by drowning.”

Wesley watched the Caddy do three circles in an intersection before disappearing in to the adjacent neighborhoods. He stood for a second wondering if he should head back, pulled out a fifty cent piece and left it up to the change. “Heads” the coin said. “Didn’t guess it’d be that simple,” he muttered to himself walking the ten blocks as Tony Horn suggested, toward the Bayonne Bay.

The afternoon was hot, and what he thought to be a strange haze stuck over the water became increasingly a speechless noise. The place in its huge solitariness, starved the sounds around it. It was the remnant hulks of World War II Navy fleets—battered destroyers, aircraft carriers suffocating in motionless rot, LSTs splattered with machine gun holes, troop ships with hanging ladders still reeking of the Marines who climbed down them, submarines so peculiar in the fracturing hostility of their silhouettes, a couple of frigates twisted by artillery hits (was it the Coral Sea, Omaha Beach?), heavy cruisers partially melted from battle holocaust, guarding the fogs peeling them to nothing in a thousand years. He knew immediately it was what his mother most feared, talked of rarely. Her feelings about a Mexican/Miwok heritage, the refusal of certain California tribes “to embrace the riches of war” as she fearfully mentioned it, the horrible vice and the way it possessed worlds, the ones in her mind, the truest, no longer in hibernation under the mounds of Etowa, Cahokia, a purer squander than what he was seeing here, prisons and their gas chambers, the missions with their regimentations of cruelty and sorrow—the calculable collapse of this most pustulent of the war riches empires and their “nourishments”—her word in reference to the murder and imprisonment of her People, her husband’s People. He remembered a childhood night, his mother nearly stabbing his father in an enraged anguish and here he was, standing on the shore of this sea full of its gobbling stalks about to go to prison himself.
**Twisted in Arrears**

**Excerpt**

**by Lon Rowan**

An intelligent woman is a provocation few men can surmount. Alina was a therapist, a specialist in addiction whose violent Armenian family loomed behind her like the Turks of 1915. A family that sold tires in the San Joaquin Valley, the proud round University of Washington: that they think they are Jewish and the entry to Fresno's car gulch.

I met her at a reception for patrons of the Henry Gallery and afterwards went to dinner with her and her handsome, athletic companion in the University District. She appreciated the opportunity, as she was kind enough to put it, of talking with a writer. After learning that I had prepared for business by studying history and English, for writing by avoiding writing programs, she gushed gaily into what she'd learned at the University of Washington: that sororities eschew Armenians, partly because they don't know what they are. That college boys pursue Armenian girls because they think they are Jewish and therefore passionate lovers. That literature carried her to places her imagination had longed for, but her mother beating her. Years later she noticed the rich leaping from his prominent box at Benaroya Hall next to his well-turned-out wife, and when she passed the couple in the long hall adorned with portraits of the biggest donors, including his mother and father, he blushed and cut into the men's room while she chuckled her way to the ladies. He'd whined that unless she gave it to him he'd develop "blue balls"—and stomped off when she giggled imagining his penis flashing a color-spectrum.

What her brothers did to each other, her father to her mother, her mother to her, and what the young heir attempted on her was unforgivable.

But her reports on these cases were written with such acute factual observation, with such elaborate and creative reference to the literature, that it was impossible for professors itching to bring her down a peg to avoid decorating her work with the highest honors. She was the valedictorian on graduation-day, giving the shortest speech in the history of the school:

*Thank you President Oldstein, and thank you to all the professionals at the Graduate School of Social Work who have made this day the cherished goal of a challenging and creative course of work. Thanks to my fellow-graduates, whose dedication to a field that, though its financial rewards are but a fraction for professors itching to bring her down a peg to avoid decorating her work with the highest honors. She was the valedictorian on graduation-day, giving the shortest speech in the history of the school:*

*Thank you President Oldstein, and thank you to all the professionals at the Graduate School of Social Work who have made this day the cherished goal of a challenging and creative course of work. Thanks to my fellow-graduates, whose dedication to a field that, though its financial rewards are but a fraction of the rewards offered graduates of lesser fields, offers many multiples of the human fulfillment: the prospect of changing lives and even whole areas of society for the better. Let's get to work!*  

**Professor Jason Stern dreamed Alina would cook and greet him winsomely with a sprightly local vintage. Late evenings as she asked him quietly about his day, he fastened his dark eyes on her.**

Instinctively she called her male colleagues in college and graduate school boys, and was relieved when attached to the talented therapist finally to be with a man. Her broadcast tolerance, her serenity afforded her mentors in The School of Social Work no opening to create dependency in her, and they assigned her the supposed dregs of field-work: hospices, senior centers, and lock-ups for psychotic criminals whose officials delighted in relegating to our diminutive heroine cases they would not touch unprotected by straightjackets, mega-sedatives, and muscular orderlies. Her star—she could find no other word for her—was a fat woman who seduced dogs, beheading any who failed to meet her requirements: she worked for the Merry Maids, which allowed her to case homes for the most attractive prey.

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She was crossing Death Valley in her small sedan. It was unluckier why she was crossing Death Valley; maybe she was driving from Seattle to Fresno to visit her parents and call on her younger brother in the privatized prison near Lemoore. She seldom used the AC, but there was a sandstorm and hot blasts threatened her eyesight. Her head throbbed and her eyes were sore from overwork, so why had she decided to do something so stressful, so galling to her inner scars on her very first week of vacation? Why had she taken this roundabout road through Nevada, wasted time with the insane noise, the carved, gel-crammed bodies of the carved, gel-crammed bodies of Las Vegas, the ghost towns whose service stations sold food so pumped with additives and artificial colors it reminded her of a barium enema? The flywheel scraped and clanked; the engine shook and bucked and quit the recking impervious addicted psyche repelling her every sally.

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John Fowles Center for Creative Writing, Chapman University
Something was burning. It was 6:00 PM, and already the sun was forming streaks like molten rainbows over the shadowy mountains. Tarantulas and scorpions scuttled along the highway, disappearing under her car. She remembered the mice that had nested in her rear seat-pocket and ingested her air-hoses back in the cool of Seattle. She wondered if poisonous insects could smell the perspiration dripping from her forehead and down her T-shirt, on which phrases from her valedictory were printed in mirror-letters.

The sun through the grimy window of her office was hot on her face as her next client’s knock on the glass startled her awake. She reminded herself to learn more about automobile mechanics and western geography.

The client, the hulking Ronnie, proved the merit of her decision to wear baggy trousers and loose-fitting tops at work. Like many of the borderline helpless, he paraded his canny insights, convinced he was wearing baggy trousers and loose-fitting tops at work. Unlike many of the clients who lived, what turned her on.

“Hold on, Ronnie, you’re violating your parole. You tell me you’re smart, you are. But what you’re telling me about hardly qualifies as smart. Now we’ve got 5 minutes left, and let’s not waste it. Are you drinking?”

“No way. You think I’m stupid?”

“Is that the truth?”

“I swear that’s the truth. I drink diet coke, even if it’s that shit from a pump.”

“OK, tell me about your schedule for the next week. You’ve got at least 5 AA meetings and what else?”

“Hey, we never got to what I came here to talk about.”

“Call me for an extra session. Tell me about your schedule. I want you to stay sober and stay out of trouble. What does your week look like?”

“It looks like shit. No bars, no babes.”

“Tell me what you’re doing next week.”

“I’m not doing dick.”

“Ronnie, you know about self-pity. Tell me what you’re doing. I’m thinking you’ve been released from rehab too soon.”

“OK, OK, I have a job interview on Monday with the fucking Big Nurse at….”

“Ronnie, you know about initiatice with a woman?”

“Tell me why you were in a bar, and why you felt you could initiate contact with a woman?”

“Because bars are where it’s at.”

“Where what’s at, Ronnie?”

“You know, action, life.”

“Ronnie, my impression of bars is they’re pretty much all alike and half the customers don’t know what they’re doing. And as for action, unless you mean yelling, falling down or fighting, I don’t know that bars are particularly active.”

“Oh come on, bars are cool.”

“Bars are full of people regurgitating the same stupid things and thinking they’re interesting because they’re inebriated. Tell me one real friend you’ve made in a bar.”

“Yeah, I knew what made her tick, I knew right where she lived, what turned her on.”

“And what was that?”

“That was me, Alina, what else?”

“Ronnie, haven’t all your counselors in the corrections facility and in all the rehabs told you to stay away from bars and to avoid personal relationships for at least a year?”

“They don’t go through what I do.”

“But you know I agree with them. It’s too early in your parole for anything more than superficial, friendly contact with women, and I know you need to avoid bars.”

“You know. What do you know? Do you have a boyfriend?”

“We’re not talking about me here.”

“That means you don’t have a boyfriend. Have you ever gotten it on with a client?”

“Ronnie, if you say or do anything leading in that direction with me, I’ll have you restrained.”

“Hold on, don’t you have a sense of humor?”

“Tell me why you were in a bar, and why you felt you could initiate contact with a woman?”

“Because bars are where it’s at.”

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“Be clear, Ronnie. You have an interview where?”

“With the woman who runs food services here to clean up nights.”

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Roses are Red / Violets are Blue

By Yuriy Tarnawsky

ROSE ONE
spring’s warm words
penetrate to your heart
and waves of sadness o rose
spread through your body

and a grief you don’t understand
grabs you by your throat
and you start writhing from it
and whisper you’re tired of living

foaming blood then comes gushing
out of your thorny veins
and on the swollen stigmata of buds
it congeals in fragrant scabs

ROSE TWO
a love
letter crump
led up in a cramp
ed hand a
bloody little
rag stink
ing of the
gasoline flow
ers run o
n a tempo
rary name th
at ultimate
ly turns to
fell like a
ll that ris
es in the e
nd it f
all
s

ROSE THREE
christ of pl
ants sacrifi
ced on the pl
ane gol
gothas of gard
en nailed to th
e cross of it
s shape crow
n of t
horns over a
ll of its ho
dy your frag
rance ell e
li la
ma sabach
than
i

ROSE FOUR
filling in s
quares color r
ed odor a
greeable shape ye
s compo
nett parts pe
tals stamens pist
il leaves stem
s branches r
oots a decon
structured ro
ze is a sta
tistic not a tra
gedy

ROSE FIVE
incomprehensible rose
mona lisa of flowers
your fragrance—
the mysterious smile
on her impassive face

ROSE SIX
blood sister
of slender renaissance ladies
draped in fine silks
how gracefully you don’t move
in your still dance!

ROSE SEVEN
that shape color
scent can
co-exist have a
meaning matter
a theorem
forever busy
proving itself
VIOLET ONE
poor little barefoot orphan flower the faded blue worn dress crooked on its naked skin and bones white body lost in the woods goes looking for a way out to where it doesn’t know

VIOLET TWO
in the middle of a stormy night in dark dark woods lightning flashes sporadically illuminate its bare white heels

VIOLET THREE
nearly toppled over its beautiful white skeleton already showing through

VIOLET FOUR
poor little criminal condemned to death for its peaceful violence

VIOLETS ONE
on pitch-dark stormy nights vicious dragons of lightning flashes hunt all over the landscape for violets to reflect themselves in their pure white heels

VIOLETS TWO
tiny blue crosses needing things to be put on both sides of them to create something bigger

VIOLETS THREE
violets also have a life a name for a passport filled with an abyss stomachs that digest what’s left over from souls guts whose form fingers copy nerves that love to dig themselves deep into the flesh violets also put up the tallest buildings so that it’d be harder for bodies to live they love with their teeth clenched tight they dream about violet seas they go to war under violet flags and they die on violet bayonets
Red Line
by Tatiana Servin

The streetlights tapped on as Ino walked past her driveway. Concrete sediment scraped underneath the rough balls of her feet. This texture and the lack of warmth on her skin sanctioned her initial feelings of freedom. Outside, without the gaze of others, she watched the neighborhood, and maybe the neighborhood watched her too. She was only five or six the first time she felt that grainy texture skim the small of her feet. She was only five or six the first time she felt that grainy texture skim the small of her feet, even now.

At only ten or eleven, Ino would casually slip out of the house to sit in the middle of the stairway in order to forget the noise awaiting her inside. She was only five or six the first time she felt that grainy texture skim the small of her feet, even now.

Claiming spaces that were her own by virtue of no one else being there when she occupied them fascinated Ino. She might have easily walked out the front door without anyone noticing but she refused to exist in the way that others had entered. She sought her own threshold.

Ino’s mom had named her after the word “innocence,” and no one knew exactly whose innocence it was. People whispered about her mother and by default about herself, but no one asked if Ino perceived her name as an idea that she could change with the narrative of her life. People didn’t ask questions worth asking anymore. Instead they stared or half-smirked the way people do when they don’t say what they are really thinking.

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Ino sat on the stairs staring at the streetlights tapped on. Another few years would pass before she’d use that escape to climb down and sneak out though it never felt like sneaking out since she had no place to go. She only wanted to be away, and found it enough of an excuse to combat accusations of sneaking out should it come down to excuse-making time.

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Ino supposed each house represented a thought or a group of thoughts connected to ideas that could light up should someone decide to walk up to the door and ask for an invitation inside. She wondered if her mind thought like this like an awaited party with guests nearby. Most of all, she felt comfortable in a space where she was in mutual submission with her surroundings with only intentions of being near one another and never for the act of entire consumption.

Ino situates her bony fingers, ones just like her mother’s, behind her back before hoisting herself up in standing position. She steps outside, without the streetlight, and looks at her forearms in absolute familiarity. The water falling down her cheeks seems to take some of the heaviness away. She drains and melts into a puddle that slips down the curb into a gutter, and the gutter is a cemetery for other lost liquid selves who felt comfortable in a space where she was in mutual submission with her surroundings with only intentions of being near one another and never for the act of entire consumption.

Ino sits on the stairs staring at the adjacent street, which illuminated more of the fog billowing in the street than the street itself. The lights in the houses were turned off, not even a porch light flickered on. She thought about how perfectly the cul-de-sac matched the interior space of her mind. Even the buzzing sounds of telephones wires swinging over her head conjured up parallels to the curved wires of her mind to her heart to her feet and hands.

Ino supposed each house represented a thought or a group of thoughts connected to ideas that could light up should someone decide to walk up to the door and ask for an invitation inside. She wondered if her mind thought like this like an awaited party with guests nearby. Most of all, she felt comfortable in a space where she was in mutual submission with her surroundings with only intentions of being near one another and never for the act of entire consumption.

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into ashes. A liquid lines the streets of future drifters who are slipping down the rusty fixtures themselves. And what to make of beautiful, promising Ino who is now but a globule possessing reflection? She travels down the pipes collecting soot, gooey-goo, grime, dirt.

He sweeps the dirt from underneath his fingernails pinching it into piles. He blares music in ear buds as a line of defense against chatty passengers. Passages of lives he wants to avoid. Instead, he stares. Styrofoam pieces from a Dunkin Donuts cup fall from his mouth while sediments stir deep in his belly. Within the same song, a woman with eyes like humidity and hair the color of the sun rises with her protruding bones while waving a tube of toothpaste and a bottle of dove soap in the air like she’s chasing someone. She exits at the KFC nearby, calmly, as if the person on the bus and the person off the bus are two separate people. Maybe they are, but she or they are gone, and more people who look at each other as if they have nothing in common enter onto the bus.

She finds a corner in the front of the bus because red slurpy vomit is on her regular seat. She asks the bus driver about her kids, fishing. She tells the driver she will email her some information on FAFSA for her son getting ready to go to college, and she does before the next stop. No one sits next to nor acknowledges the red, slary vomit, but the smell wafts through the air into her nostrils and on the faces of the other patrons. The conversation before she left work has trailed with her since she first stepped onto the platform. Half-finished sentences about “those people” or “this neighborhood” take place in whispers, and yet nothing is quiet about what is perceived and acknowledged or blasted from car windows. She considers the now trending phrase “gang violence” when a black and yellow car approaches the entrance of the stop. He sweeps the dirt from underneath his fingernails pinching it into piles. He blares music in ear buds as a line of defense against the chatty passengers.”

The man bites off the “D” from the Dunkin Donuts cup and it may as well be pieces of her. Her bones ache and she vomits her old self, because she dies with every new bout of awareness, keenness, ignorance, reflection. hot belly breath, and exhale. She notices the trash in the grass and wonders if cynicism has programmed her to see only trash. Until, she doesn’t. She eyes a man on a lawn mower cart trimming what is left of a lawn while his son sits on his lap holding tightly and laughing. Water drips from his chin. They’re happy. It is not a show. It is not based on any props but the buzzing of a motor beneath them and the movement in purpose and task. She connects this course of events like a constellation that gives way to what is larger than individual stars.

She sees a man pushing the brown paper bag down away from his bottle as he sits on the steps of a boarded up building. His feet stick out from his shoes onto the steps. She hears the conversation of earlier and washes it down with the image of that father and son plowing through the weeds, or was it a pair of brothers, or an uncle and nephew, or none of these at all because it’s not that simple and she’s wondering whatever is.
Borges & I
by Karen Tei Yamashita

The other one, the one called María Kodama, is the one things happen to. Over the years, I have watched her through our looking glass, her dark straight hair—cut precisely at shoulder length—turn white, her youthful features mature. And yet I believe her to contain the same dewy innocence and singularity of elegant strangeness in a sea of sameness as on the day she first met, in Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges in the musty confines of the university. For María, perhaps that was a moment of complete clarity, the center of the infinite garden, at which she made a choice or the beginning of a choice. I am not sure how one at the young age of sixteen, as sure of ourselves as we felt, can make such choices. For myself, I cannot say it was the attraction of youth to age, but rather youth for knowledge, a hunger planted behind. Perhaps she had paused behind. Perhaps she had paused. And what of the postwars that

Borges marked
this mythic center calling upon
the gods in a swirl of cherry

syllables. What is the garden's

divine meaning from fascination,

and ally, survival by cunning

and happenstance. It would

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followed him only two months later. But the border’s paths are mysterious, and Amelia and I took the bus out of Austin, headed down the obligatory border, and tossed cherry blossoms into the Rio Grande all the way to Brownsville, pursued by corridos, haunted by Américo’s serenade, fierce and tender. Japonesa, Japonesa, the song crooned after us. Que sonriés tu dolor, en tus brazos orientales mitigaré mi destierro. And from Brownsville, we caught a boat to New Orleans. On a dappled spring morning several Wednesdays after the turmoil of Mardi Gras, we met María with Borges at the Café du Monde, sipping café and chicory, teeth tearing the doughy skin of sweet beignets, lips and chins dusted in powdered sugar. Not until that moment was Américo’s Tokio guitar replaced by the insistent sax interlude of King Curtis, John Lennon driving his lyrics, you gotta live, you gotta love, you gotta be somebody, you gotta shove, it’s really hard.

Amelia’s tender eyes then turned to me, smiled old pain. A la otra, she began, la otra called Yoko Ono, is the one things happen to. Our minds wander back to Tokyo, precisely firebombed; we emerged from shelter and rural escape and remember the bewildered face of a young girl, yet a child of twelve years, following her belongings in a wheelbarrow, the precarious future to be forged out of rubble and defeat. Twenty years—prestigious schooling, two marriages, and an artistic career attached variously to John Cage and Andy Warhol—later, I stood with her at the foot of a ladder in a gallery in London, watching a wealthy Beatle from Liverpool climb its rungs, awkwardly balanced at the top to decipher a message through our magnifying glass: YES. I suppose that privilege comes back from war with fierce defiance, grabs a fistful of burnt earth, an act of reclamation, but in Yoko’s fist, a declaration of freedom. Still, that earth could be churned back eight centuries; thus a grapefruit could have the acidic taste and shape of a pillow book of instructions. The conceptual MAP PIECE read, Draw a map to get lost. And so we did. And then, WALK PIECE: Stir inside your brains with a penis until things are mixed well. Take a walk. And so we did. I followed Yoko into her world made famous by John Lennon, their conceptual country of peace: Nutopia, without land, boundaries, or passports, and if laws, only cosmic. I hung around like one more groupie in their New York embassy in the Dakota, claiming diplomatic immunity. I lived inside the looking glass ballad of John and Yoko for there was nothing about the intimacy of their lives that was not made public. Two virgins displayed in full frontal nudity. Honeymoon bed in a sea of white sheets to give peace a chance. Among the guests: Timothy Leary, Tommy Smothers, Hari Krishnas, a delegation of the blind. West met East in the Plastic Ono Band, the oriental riff chasing the revelatory experience of first sight: oh my love, everything is clearer in our world. Thus John Lennon would call her name. Oh Yoko, oh Yoko, my love will turn you on.

In the public’s mania recycling their every movement, Lennon’s attachment to Yoko would seem an obsessive submission to his oriental soul mate, his continuing pursuit of answers, fascinations eventually abandoned at the foot of Sergeant Pepper, Maharishi, and primal screaming. And perhaps it was true that he had met his match, the knowledge of fatherhood and feminism in which he re-created himself as househusband, bread-maker, caretaker. This was his enlightenment, his peaceful revolution. Who then had submitted to whom? Meanwhile, I accompanied Yoko daily from the Dakota to work, to run the business of being John Lennon and Yoko Ono, unknowingly preparing for the burden of legacy, money and memory.

And in opposing seasons in Buenos Aires, María finally opened Borges’s library to Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, but having embraced order for so many years, perhaps it was too late. With his pistol in my hand, I pulled the trigger. I do not know if the man who fell was an elderly man in his eighties or a younger man half that age. I do not know if he was a learned sinologist or a Mexican folklorist or a lyricist of Jabberwocky. I do not know if he could finally see me through his blindness, through the borders, the utopia of his mind. It was his pistol and his pop. The myopic splinter of spectacles. My primal scream caged and yellowed by a judgmental media.

I do not know which of us has written this page.
Poems
By Zulfikar Ghose

NO MORE BOHÈME, PLEASE
Let’s not have La Bohème again for another two hundred years. Ditto for the Eroica symphony and ditto for Swan Lake and ditto, ditto, ditto for Holst’s Planets and Handel’s Messiah.

I really, really, don’t want to hear about Mimi’s candle going out again.

Let collective amnesia overtake humanity and work with satellites to jam the tunes still held dear by diehard fanatics from reaching the earth, it’s the least digital technology can do.

I really, really, don’t want to hear about Mimi dropping her key again.

Let’s pray to God that he blows his breath upon fundamentalists everywhere and in one miraculous moment converts them all to sheep—let them, Lord, be shepherded to where they are their own and only audience with no one to listen to their bleating.

I really, really, don’t want to hear about Mimi’s frozen hands again.

A WOMAN BATHING
Renoir, Degas, Bonnard, all painted her—an arm raised, a towel in her hand, an uplifted breast glowing abundant, her flesh radiant as if flush with desire:

her image, observed from an adjoining bedroom, a recurring fantasy in the male eye, the mistress of elaborate charms serenely meditative in that still and seemingly vulnerable moment, her newly cleansed body lustrous as if she performed a ritual ablution prior to a ceremonious surrender:

but her pensive, coldly self-absorbed look holds in fierce tension nature’s determined design: let the male dream of conquest, she will fill the washed womb of creation with his blood.
SINGING BIRDS
I’ve never seen a bird struck by lightning,
nor a sparrow hit on the head by hail,
nor an eagle tumbling in a flash flood,
ever seen a kestrel or a hawk buffeted
by a wind of such damaging force it
uproots flourishing sycamores and elms.

But then
I’ve seen pelicans and seagulls half-drowned
in the obsidian colored sea of an oil spill,
the pulse at their throat an imperceptible throb,
their glazed eyes petrified like those of starved
children who’ve witnessed the murder of their
parents in a genocide, staring in silent
accusation at all their blue world turned black,
caught in the net of a wide-angle lens.

But then God
knows what other afflictions birds endure
and yet all day long they whistle and sing.

BURGOS
Down from Bordeaux and past Biarritz, crossing
into northern Spain to proceed to those
customary destinations—
Córdoba, Granada—I stopped in Burgos
much as migratory birds break their flight
for a night among sycamores and oaks
in some unknown forest
or in the back yards of suburban homes.

There was a cathedral in Burgos, of course,
but what else that’s erased from memory?
Even the cathedral that I remember
is a generic form, a structure that appears
programmed with default settings to sustain
a sure ecclesiastical illusion
like a vague idea of God retained by an unbelieving
mind from its earlier credulous years.

But what else?
O there must have been parks there, flowering
gardens and apple orchards where lovers met
and in the anguish of desire
drank sweet innocence from one another’s eyes.

Yes, of course, but what else?

No use mentioning schools with their bullies
and prize days, no use mentioning the hospitals
famous for pulmonary care or where some
eminent oncologist or cardiologist worked,

attracting patients like pilgrims to a shrine, no use mentioning the secret
abortion clinics
or the local football team that almost once
beat Real Madrid, no use mentioning the poor
state of the roads and the broken social services,
conditions common to countless cities
that must have prevailed in Burgos as well;
and there must have been in Burgos gorgeous
women equal to any in a California
beauty pageant and statues in public squares
that honoured the city’s famous native sons,
among them a general and a poet.

Yes, yes, but what else?

Ah, Burgos! I once arrived in Burgos
after a long and exhausting drive across France
through vineyards and small towns where men played
boules under pollarded chestnut trees in the squares,
a long sunlit day in a convertible car
across France, in a former century,
I came at night to the cathedral in Burgos
and can never forget my arrival there.
PRAYER
O Lord, let me just once in my life fuck
a fat woman, one so large that when she lies in bed
the gap between her breasts is like a hammock
in which I can curl up for a snooze when exhausted;

let her pick me up by my toes, delicately,
and hold me dangling before her mouth like asparagus,
my thin body buttered with sweat and lately
spent, let her swallow me whole into the juices

of her mouth, roll my head on her tongue
like a little lozenge, snap her teeth on my thighs
playfully with tiny bites, and suddenly probing
the parting with the tip of her tongue let her prise

open my buttocks like two cloves on a garlic head;
let a bubble of her spit bathe my cock, then let her ease
me out of her mouth and sit me on the wide
cushion of her lip and dry me with the warm breeze

of her breath, O Lord, the divine breath you created
within her inexhaustible body; thus washed and dried
let her insert me into her cunt so I’m penetrated
wholly, O Lord, from head to toe, disappeared

completely from your world of light, though
from time to time I could pop out from a sweaty pore
on her inner thigh, take a quick look, and go
right back inside, and, amen, stay there for evermore.
We leave early. Dad has a recently purchased maroon Peugeot 404. I climb up into the space next to the rear windshield and lie down lengthwise. I’m comfortable there. I like to be up against the back window since I can sleep. I’m always happy when we spend the week-end at the villa, because at the apartment in town, all I do all week is kick a tennis ball around with soot from the incinerators.

When I look up, the patio feels like it’s inside a chimney; when I yell, the noise barely rises and does not touch the square of sky. The trip to the villa takes me out of that well. I look at the front ends of cars with my mouth and teeth. Some cars have mustaches and the grills are protective corner formed by the rear window, next to the sporting goods store decal. Along the way, I look at the front ends of cars because they look like faces; the headlights are eyes, the fenders are mustaches and the grills are mouths and teeth. Some cars have kind faces, others have evil ones. My brother and sister like me to ride up near the rear window since this leaves more room for them.

I don’t ride in the seat until further along the way, when it is too hot or later when I’ve grown a little and don’t fit in the rear window anymore. We drive down a long avenue. I don’t know if it’s because of the many stoplights, but we go slowly. After some years of use, the Peugeot is a little rickety; the exhaust pipe hangs loose and you have to shout to be heard; also, one of the rear doors sags and Mom tied it with string from Miguel’s kite.

The trip is really long, especially since the stoplights are not synchronized. We fight over the window; no one of us three wants to go in the middle. Along General Paz Avenue we take turns sticking our heads out the window while wearing Vicky’s goggles so the wind doesn’t make our eyes water. Mom and Dad don’t say anything, except when we pass by the police, and then we have to sit up straight and be quiet. When we’ve moved on to the Renault 12, a bunch of Miguel’s figures of professional wrestlers flights out the window and Dad stops on the shoulder of the road to pick them up because Miguel is screaming like a maniac. I see two soldiers suddenly approach, pointing their machine guns at us and saying that we are in a military zone. They ask Dad questions, pat him down for weapons, check his papers and make us go on, leaving the scattered figures behind, including the one signed by Martín Karadagíán.

Dad looks for classical music on the radio and sometimes he manages to tune in the Sodre station. We are kicking each other in the back seat when suddenly Dad turns up the volume and says, “Listen to this,” and we have to be quiet and stop in the middle of a judo hold to listen to part of an aria or an adagio. When cars come equipped with tape players, Mozart rules the trip to the villa. We watch the long road unfurl behind us as we see the pruned trees with white-painted trunks, and we listen to string quintets, symphonies, piano concertos and operas.

Vicky leads the revolt, using our favorite chant to drown out the sopranos singing the Wedding of Figaro or Don Giovanni: “We wanna eat, we wanna eat, dried blood and rotten meat...” But later Vicky begins to bring books on the trip and she reads them in silence, paying no attention to anyone. She gets angrier and angrier about having to come. In the end, she gets permission to stay in town on the weekends to go to the movies with her friends, who already go out with boys. Miguel and I are each guaranteed a row of palm trees visible from the house. Inside the car stuck in mid-morning traffic, I look at Miguel’s friends and I savor evil for the first time. I prefer the arrogant and conceded ones, because I know they will be even more humiliated by the traps in which, in a vague and sideways fashion, I help to make them fall.

When they finish the first stretch of the highway and start to charge tolls, traffic improves. Vicky travels on her own with friends who have cars. Dad rarely comes anymore. While Mom drives the rattletrap Rural, Miguel uses my drawing pad to scribble plans and invent schemes for spying on Vicky’s friends when they change clothes. Miguel begins to come less often, and I have the whole back seat to sleep in. Mom stops and wakes me up to put water in the radiator, which leaks and overheats the engine. We buy a watermelon along the way.

There used to be just one or two street vendors at the train crossing gates; now there are amputees and disabled people begging and other people selling magazines, balls, pens, tools and dolls. People also ask for spare change or sell flowers and cans of soft drinks at the stoplights in the town we pass through. Dad’s Ford Sierra is a company car that has power locks, and since Miguel was robbed not long ago, Mom makes me lock the doors and close the windows at the stoplights since she is afraid of the vendors. She says they press in on her, and besides, Duque might bite them. Later on, air conditioning gives us an excuse to travel with the windows closed. The car becomes a safety capsule with its own microclimate. Outside, there is more and more trash, more and more political graffiti. Inside, the music sounds cleanly in the new stereo and Mom patiently puts up with my tapes of Soda Stereo or The Police.

The car is faster and it always seems like we are just about to arrive, especially when I start to drive...”

Miguel invites along a succession of friends. I watch with astonishment and a perverse anxiety because I know that when we arrive, they will fall into the traps that Miguel always prepares: the dead rat in the guest’s rubber boots, the ghost in the shed, the fake killer pigs, the pit hidden by leaves and branches next to the row of palm trees visible from the house. Inside the car stuck in mid-morning traffic, I look at Miguel’s friends and I savor evil for the first time. I prefer the arrogant and conceded ones, because I know they will be even more humiliated by the traps in which, in a vague and sideways fashion, I help to make them fall.

Mantasía Journal Volume II Issue I
backward as if it was an effect of the acceleration. After Dad’s death, Mom prefers Miguel to drive; he has returned like the prodigal son because Vicky is living in Boston. The route fades as I drive the yellow Taurus belonging to Chino’s father. We close the windows, not because we’re afraid of being robbed, but so as not to dilute the marijuana smoke.

We listen to “Wild Horses” and there are moments that achieve an almost spiritual quality when the fast road slows into serenity across the vast, flat landscape. Later, I drive Gabriela’s mother’s car, which luckily runs on diesel, so the outings we take during the week to be alone for a while don’t cost too much. There is already talk of expropriation, but it is just a hint. Two more governments will come and go. Gabriela wears short dresses that make me drive with one hand and caress her thighs with the other, running my hand slowly up from her knees. I leave the engine in high gear. Gabriela whispers in my ear to take it easy, we can wait until we arrive. The trip has never seemed so long. The villa is far away, out of reach.

Gabriela’s belly begins to swell and we travel together seeking a semblance of family life. We take the Volkswagen her brother lends us. Nowadays we use seat belts. We begin to fear for death—there are only a few more miles to go. The years race by even faster. There are many more cars on the road and more tolls. They are finishing the highway. We stop at a service station, and we argue. Gabriela cries in the bathroom. I have to ask her to come out. Afterwards, we buy a car seat for Violeta, and tiny and sleepy, she rides in the back seat, also wearing a seat belt. The three of us tied down.

“They come closer and I come closer, closer, until the first palm tree hides the other two...”

I step on the gas because I want to make it in time for lunch. Gabriela says it doesn’t matter; we can stop at a McDonald’s. We argue. Gabriela sneers at me. I put on my dark glasses and accelerate. I use the trip to listen to demos of radio and jingles. I grip the steering wheel of the Escort. Almost there.

Gabriela asks me to slow down, then she stops coming; she takes Violeta to her mother’s on the weekends. I drive by myself and listen to Mozart piano concertos on CDs with perfect sound. The engine of the 4x4 makes no noise. The highway is finished and there are wire fences along the sides to prevent people from crossing.

I drive in the fast lane. I look at the speedometer: 100 miles an hour. Soon I will come to the exact spot. From the distance, I see the three palm trees and I wait until they line up. They come closer and I come closer, closer, until the first palm tree hides the other two and I say “here.” I feel like I’m shouting, but I’m actually speaking softly. I say it at the exact point where the house stood before the expropriation, before it was demolished and they built the highway over it.

For a millisecond, I feel like I’m inside the rooms, on the bed where Miguel and I played at pro wrestling. I pass by the graves of Tania and Duque among Mom’s plants; I pass through a damp metallic smell, through a taste of green plums tossed in the bottom of the pool for me to dive for later. I feel the fear of seeing the snake that emerged when we turned over a piece of metal. I feel the rainy night when we tried to aim a ball through the only broken pane of the window in order to force ourselves to search for it by flashlight among the toads and puddles.

Now there is only the incessant roar of cars passing over the ghost of the house. It is exactly twelve noon and the sun glitters on the asphalt. I am a divorced man, a publicist going for the first time to his brother’s house in a gated community, a man who doesn’t know how to stop and continues traveling in a car that left early this morning, a long time ago, when he was small enough to lie down in the back window.
Forgotten Night (Excerpt)  
by Rebecca Goodman

What happened last night? Accidents and meanderings led me to the point of refusal.

In this room. In the dark. The night filters images—faint—phosphorescent. The dark rejects blackness—something absolute. I need to piece together moments—perhaps hours. All thoughts have disappeared. The dark light plays tricks. My eyes do not focus. It is not so much a question of what I can see—but what I cannot.

What happened: what I’ve forgotten, what I lost as I experienced it—is a question I cannot escape.

Why, he asked, do you need to know? Are you afraid of what you’ve done?

I couldn’t answer. She said, but you remember when we sat at the table and spoke.

The question follows me. I lie on the bed. The rough blanket. The sounds which drift through me throughout the night. Doors slam shut. Laughter in the hallway.

Women who sound like girls.

The room felt dark. Obscured by darkness. The inconceivable sense that life had been lived without feeling without experience. The room exists. It was the words of what seemed to be a poem—he couldn’t quite recall—the language similar to Latin—a Latin alphabet—and the words faintly familiar—the sounds—familiar—but he couldn’t place them. Though he didn’t understand that language—the poem left an impression.

He spoke about the food of the region. The specialty bakeries. And the dinner they would have in the hotel tonight.

The light was bright in the crisp air. Shoppers filled the streets.

How did our words articulate the space around us? The boundaries of presence—of what is seen—of what is not. Place as the coherence of being. Where we are—where we could be. The sense that the space we inhabit is only part of the experience. Had my grandfather walked this path, perhaps. Most likely he did. He must have. Slowly, the day fills the fullness of dark.

The movement towards evening is the recognition of sounds—blatant in the view of morning.

You cannot remember everything. As the mistake of time regenerates the touch of your hand. The register changes key as the movement towards landlocked water. Canals which sound the flow of water. My grandfather—he’d left in his diary obscure notes. Poems he’d copied from an anonymous poet.

Red banners and bright flags string from the buildings and light posts invigorate the streets with color, reflect the movement of the river. Feast day. The colors of spring. Yellow. Green. Bridge tone, fusing into summer.

We found ourselves drifting, unaware of the world around us. Lost in the moment. Yellow color absent of sound. Soundless. We hadn’t noticed the square filling with strollers and shoppers and groups of cyclists. Their forward momentum. Chaos that enables the day to begin.

Did he know something about last night? Details, perhaps? About that which I’ve lost, that which I can’t remember. Where I’d gone, where I had been. He seemed to hold something back, to know something that he didn’t want to reveal. I felt it in his presence in the way he smiled, as though he held the secret that would bind me to him.

I told him that I planned to spend the day at the museum, to see the altarpiece.

He said he would accompany me there. Ines would be busy all day.

Yet I wanted him to leave my side. For he would not reveal what happened—even as I was certain he knew. The uncertainty look on his face. The certainty with which he described the surroundings. The way he led me down the street—walking, turned half-toward me, anxious to hold me near him. He asked me to come to his studio. To see his birds—to see his sculptures. He persisted. He continued to talk about the village, about its traditions, the rituals of the day. How he would show me the woods outside the village. The streams we could hike along. The wildflowers that were in full bloom.

It occurred to me that perhaps he could not leave my side. That what I could not remember, held power over him.

Feast day brings us out, he says. It’s a religious village. He pulled me to a bakery towards the sweet yeasty smell. Two, he motioned to the case.

These are the specialty here, he handed me a pastry. My mother used to bake these for us when we were children. It’s an odd altarpiece, he said. You’ll be shocked by its beauty and its horror. Painted to heal the sick.

Groups of children rode past us. Laughing, ringing bells, wearing yellow shirts and red scarves.

He said. Do you remember when we were young—when we did those things.

“We found ourselves drifting, unaware of the world around us. Lost in the moment. Yellow color absent of sound. Soundless.”

He spoke about his life—and his childhood, reminiscing about weekends in the countryside, rides in the park. How he had met Ines when he was seventeen.

Yet, the more he spoke, the less further concealed his being. His intentions obscured. Endless chatter—that couldn’t be broken. Yet when ambient cries broke our isolation, we had to consider how we had abandoned ourselves to the motives that took us over.
So lost it seemed — had we heard the crying, yet didn’t turn around. Perhaps we had, yet couldn’t integrate those sounds into the sounds we desired to hear. We ignored them, I believe. We continued to walk and talk until at some point the crying which grew stronger finally distracted us. We both turned back — only to see a father and son riding together on a bicycle. The son crying. The father pedaling.

We ran to them. The father stopped. His child’s foot had become caught in the spokes of the bicycle wheel.

“They had never had a plum taste so flavorful — so dense — picking up the scents of the countryside — anise and thyme.”

Frozen to what was happening. The father looked behind him, watching the child scream, blood bleeding through the sock on his son’s twisted foot. He said to the father, the boy’s hurt. He’s hurt badly.

Constraint of images. Wordless. The vase on the table. The old woman in the square. The old man and son on the bicycle. The boy in a seat behind the father. The boy screaming. The father focused on sounds beyond, on the forward movement. Why does he fail to hear his son? Forgetting his place. Waves of light that generate blue and red.

The image persists. The child’s foot. Crushed by the spokes of the wheel.

If all is forgotten then all is possible. The memories that hinder you are replaced by the mask that guides you. The red satin box is the box that contains the history that proves to carry with it both truths and falsehoods, so that the box contains the eye the I that contains all the history that the I who is lost tries to remember. So that perhaps to lose yourself is to benefit all.

What led me to this place — this village. Accident or dilemma. A crack in the earth. Plucked on the string. Each moment braced for danger and the earshot sound of music that you watch in the concert hall. Sitting there you see the fingers pluck the sound that breaks in the earth below you. And you think that the music is the dilemma. That the earth covered in vast stretches of water sounds blurry — indistinguishable from those sounds meant to be clear. That water that flows through the city streets. Why did we stop here. The city now flooded with water as it did every winter. The concert only a memory. Were we there last night. Did I imagine it. Did I watch as the conductor entered the stage, knocking on the door then laughing at his arrival. The string broke. The violinist tore the loose end. Did I sit with him, with them. With the woman who painted her eyes and lips and told me that you need to have some distance from the music, or you can’t see or hear. Dampness permeates the city. It lingers. Canals risk the image of symbolism. Fraught with a meaning rife with dilemma. As if… if I knew what happened then what? You could understand the Schubert after the Mendelssohn. You could follow the rats in the street, imagine the carriages. The Jews taken to the city’s gates. The dilemma of being here. The concert hall as a venue for dilemma. The question of the music. The silence that followed the crack in the music that time when the water covered the city streets. Flooding the shops and houses and the belongings that could be thrown out beyond the city gates. Would I could change things. If I could know what it had really meant to be there — in the village square — as it had happened — that knowing an impossibility — the sallow persistence of the dream that fades as I attempt to revive it.

Why did I dream that after the quake we felt the end of the world. That I sat by the phone and, as each caller asked me for help, I shouted back at them without using words. I could know something that I need to know? Or don’t need to know at all? Why my grandfather had sat on a pile of manure and wrote to his mother. Because the President asked him to. That I dream in words but can’t speak them. That when I speak I can’t dream. That he watches me as I sleep, wondering if I am dreaming. That I can’t remember. Dates, birthdays, phone numbers, history, names of flowers and trees, birds and insects, the stages of man, the stages of dinosaurs, animal breeds and dictators, poems and people. The difference between gems and minerals. Conquering nations shifting borders. Ancient temples, the wonders of the world. Constellations. City streets. The teachings of the Vilna Gaon. The music of Schubert and Mendelssohn. That if you brought me to know the history of my people — if I searched for them in this village along these canals, if I looked for them on these cobblestone streets, I would search for them without remembering their names. I could wander this village, this city, this country. How could I find them. Taken from their homes, vanished. Burned beyond
Walking by the side of the orange grove they each picked an orange, peeled it and ate it right there. They said that if they were homeless they would live by this orange grove and wait until the owners had left. And feast on oranges. The way they had feasted when they had gone to the south and found the cherry tree. The two of them. And the tree was full of cherries and no one around to enjoy them. Picking each cherry from the abandoned tree at the seemingly abandoned house they had found in the hills. Each of them—separate—and together began to eat. So delicious, they said. What is it—I’ve never had anything so sweet. They had rummaged around outside the house. Who had lived there? Had someone died there? Perhaps someone still lived there—a recluse. And at that very moment that recluse was peering out the dusty window at them. Watching them as they picked cherry after cherry off of the old tree. And they couldn’t tell if it was a cherry tree or a plum tree. But plums aren’t that small are they? They had never had a plum taste so flavorful—so dense—picking up the scents of the countryside—anise and thyme. And the dry southern air that surrounded them. As they had driven through the countryside. She behind him—on that moped he had rented for the summer. The scents that seemed to flavor their every action so that every action they took seemed somehow unreal seemed somehow as if someone else—had committed it. So that even this—standing under the plum tree—they came to believe that characters they had created were eating the plums that they picked. And even the recluse who had stood crouching by the window watching them was a character they had invented. But they grew dizzy eating those plums. Climbing the branches of the tree. Acting out the part of their childhood they dreamed they had lost. So that for every fruit they ate, they believed they were saving something that had once been stored in the cedar chest that was now locked.

He said, You might be disappointed once you see the altar. It’s taken out of context. What remains is a museum piece.

The child’s foot. The stunned father. The birds at 5 am.
Poems
by Douglas Messerli

MELLOW DRAMA WITHOUT A PROPER VILLIAN

The slow bore
into a least poet's
taking worms now
to run the wager
made to open up exclusively
the string of moderated hisses.

A sermon can if properly
curtained of emphasizing
slip the trick back into curry.

Adore crumbles some when
it opens to let out Elijah.

I mean if only we could leave
the captain's address in its
bourse.

We were about to
move before it sailed off without
a proper mourning, leaving us
ashore to wash our ankles in.

Even
psychology occasionally needs
a blue rinse.

In the cellar
there's always a buyer willing
to exchange the message for its
bearing.

My mother
lives in a blouse full of crow's
feet, insisting all along she would
never dye, although her hair
has been golden for a century almost.

Boo says pistol, shooting up
with methadone.

Help cries
for a smaller house or a horse
in a voice without a rasp.

And
in the end the princess is still
tied up to a track.

REFUGEE

after Arseny Tarkovsky

It’s finished, a hound hanging,
a jab, a rifle, a fall upon the side with horns,
a blade stuck, the legs close to the bind.

Flying from some shadow, he is light.
He swears to keep the word never on his tongue,
only two counts behind the alphabet of knowing,
the mirror from which some invisible moth
keeps fluttering away from.

Before the war—which
one I wonder—he was killed for peace.
Let them dig the trenches! I am a prisoner
of their comfort, swallowing the mica
upon a silver spoon with which I was always fed.
Give me my tongue, please, the green mask
of the lichen trees!

Even snow eventually melts!

Your hands are not yet bound, so give me those
eyes through which you have cast your sound.
Be like Buddha, perfume my window,
thrust your trust into my open door,
that zone of estrangement from which I
dream about the sleepless cities every night.

One hears, only hazily, a train traveling
along its tracks. The iron smells so sweet,
drop by drop, as the wolf howls across
the bullet of its trajectory. My neck is
stretched against the birch of its bending,
my mind blessed by the silent miracle
of its gone. Run along, child,
to echo the dry joy of its passage.
PLEAT

_for Bernadette Mayer_

To alternates and averages let us put in the actual space of how, entering with awe into what the fantasy excludes. An abstraction in the end is an owl to put holes in leather, like arms at the shore, waving back and forth into the paradise of foam that leaves the course of intention like a dictionary buried in goal. Actually it’s a catalogue to make new silence, eaten away by the works that executed that little oak, or an egg without its intention, proving that we left the horse all night out of the cart. But we’re hungry so we need the quadrants to canvass their borders, edging into questions that come forward from the untold.

To alternates and averages leave a permission to build a too erect stature, running toward the wrest with a current of events. Repeatedly, some feast upon questioning, others respecting the redress with neglect. As for the joke, it’s turned too yellow to square off the qualms of our hands. Heavenly form opens what color binds to compound eyes. The encyclopedia is not nearly as edible as it might seem. An owl screeches into the night, beating us up in a series of numbers that continue to suffocate the staves of our faith. The strings carry the chords away with the boat, traveling towards the end of their stroke. The voyager stumbles into starvation, turning into a mass of untold unanimous folds.
Per vendetta, Ferdinando Camon replied in a 1985 interview published in a special issue of the Parisian newspaper, Liberation, in which four hundred writers responded to the same question: Pourquoi écrivez-vous? Scritto per vendetta, non per giustizia, non per santità, non per gloria, ma per vendetta, answered the Italian writer born in Padua in 1935, whose work has been translated into 21 languages.

Although she always prayed at midnight or an end. I can hear those scenes from our origins and those first sounds. It is likely that those experiences have become entangled in our daily teaching practices. Understanding this doesn’t simply mean combining poetics and pedagogy in the classroom. Linking poetics and teaching also means rejecting the logic of forgetting and the mechanisms that cause us to deny the past. This also implies valuing teachers as the subject of the history of teaching and learning.

There is an art to teaching and learning that sometimes is buried under the weight of pedagogy and impersonal handbooks. To ask ourselves about poiesis in our classes is a way to begin this inquiry and to become involved, body and soul, in the art of constructing a class.

On those warm nights, both of us locked in her room, there were times when I confused my grandmother’s prayers with her breathing.

Perhaps teachers who transmit language to secondary school students are moving, consciously or not, towards an encounter with those first sounds. It is likely that we model our language classes on our own biographies, our traumas, failures and mistakes. Thus, we retrace our path to recover something that we never lost. The present moment in the classroom should be observed. We should look at our specific activities in order to observe ourselves in those scenes from our origins and recognize how the branches of those experiences have become entangled in our daily teaching practices. Understanding this doesn’t simply mean combining poetics and pedagogy in the classroom.

There is an art to teaching and learning. It penetrates the innermost part of our humanity while traveling outside us to meet others, to search in the depths of its disquiet for a listening God. That is what I learned on those nights when I heard my grandmother praying. Pronunciation was for her a journey into her own depths and at the same time, an offering of words to the highest heavens, where there would always be someone listening.

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As vulnerable people we sink, light and fragile, into swamps of gloom. At times uneasiness becomes flesh in us and we walk around restlessly.”

In what way do the events we have lived link our pedagogies with our students’ learning processes? In their explorations, those personal experiences, lies a bridge from the past to the present and from this present to our students. There is always energy from the past that produces gusts of wind. It’s true, the lapping of the waves is uninterrupted and the tide carries us back and forth. But there are always starting points, and walking with our students toward the future might be nothing more than going toward the future and building meanings that bring some light and comprehension to the shadows in which we move about. Native cultures claim that we carry the future on our backs. With that creative energy and not with the didactic guidelines of handbooks we build the most genuine essence of our classes. Therefore, in those verbal beginnings also lie our promises. In the scenes of our own initiation into the language we may unfold the symptoms and signs that direct our actions in the classroom.

I often return to the scene of my grandmother praying. And every time I do, I enter into the whisper of a language that is also mine but still not entirely understood. Language can partly allay anguish. I could not see it then but I see it today, that woman who had left her parents, her village and her friends in a country at war, was anguished. She was anguished because she knew she would not see them again... I return to that scene and try to listen. However, the voice of those prayers does not have the litanies of religious rites. It is a voice that seeks salvation, yes, but it is very close to the excitement of desire... A voice committed to moving forward and leaving pain behind. But why didn’t my Italian grandmother pray in her mother tongue? Why did she choose a new language for her prayers and therefore a different voice? She always switched to her mother tongue for talking about important issues, but she never prayed in Italian. I have returned to that scene many times, and I always ponder the issue of the two languages and her choice of one or the other in accordance to the nature of the conversation. Why did my grandmother, who used Italian, “her” language, for the most important speech of everyday life, pray in the language of a country where she was an immigrant? My grandmother got angry in her mother tongue, and Italian was also the language in which I heard her fighting, cursing, laughing, and telling secrets. That was the language for expressing her anguish and sadness. But doesn’t prayer our dialogue according to the commandments of God, document the most important aspect of the words we speak? It is true that language, which gives value to experience, rebuilds the past and invests it with meaning. But beyond the interpretations that we may attribute to the facts, it’s undeniable that these facts actually happened and the events we are talking about occurred at a given time and in a given place. Of course it is thanks to a linguistic operation that we can bring the past forward into our present, but that verbal reconstruction is something akin to archaeology and the discovery of ancient artefacts. The future, on the other hand (and prayer almost always involves talking about our future), does not exist except in language. It is only in words that what has not yet happened comes alive. Speech gives corporeality and thus existence to what does not yet exist. Language possesses the wonderful ability to express various verb tenses, and its inflections can bring to life that which does not exist anywhere except in words. Speech is the one and only space in which the future is born and can live. Simple future, future continuous, future perfect. The future, tomorrow: these dwell only in words. There is a net knitted by the threads of language and time. It is a mesh that, when its threads tighten, can hold us and allow us to be launched into the future. The future is a verb tense that calls for hope, and through it we can traverse illusion and faith with confidence. If we didn’t have words, we wouldn’t have a future, either. Without language there is no possibility of an ever-after. Dreams and futurity become concrete in our speech. But why did my grandmother abandon her mother tongue for Spanish when she prayed? why did she need a new language to speak of the future and the uncertainty of days to come as she recited her prayers in an unknown land? Was that an Italian woman prayed, she prayed for the future in a language that was not her own. Curses were uttered in Italian and prayers in Spanish. Perhaps she was looking for new discourses in her speech and probably by doing so she was getting away from the words that had documented a past of absence and loss. New accents for a life that my grandmother wished would be better? Did she hope that by using a new grammar for the first time, the new syntax would open up a panorama of new horizons? Maybe she thought that a different vocabulary would finally augur happiness. Perhaps my grandmother felt that praying in Spanish meant existing in the language of others and being recognized by them. Perhaps that was the path to becoming less of a foreigner. Perhaps that would allow her to forget—at least in those heartfelt discourses—the fish out of water existence from which she was confined. I can’t help associating that childhood scene with two fundamental axes of my life: writing and teaching. Because, in fact—and I am prepared to defend this emphatically—what more important role can secondary school language classes possibly have than the construction of a different future? A school that is open to various discourses, which can offer new meaning to words and give fresh air to the words that define us, would achieve the most important goal of all: the pronunciation of a world.

On certain summer afternoons, when it was too hot to stay inside the room, my grandmother took me to the stream. After midday we went walking down a dirt road beneath the shade of trees that bordered it on either side. It wasn’t only because of the coolness of the water that I liked to go to the stream. On those afternoons, the sound of the wind on the water or between the highest branches of the poplars sounded exactly like the murmur of the words exhaled from my grandmother’s mouth.

Every past is a wound. And every wound is a text whose inscriptions drain out toward new meanings. Its bleeding tells us that there are external tissues in the body that decompose to a certain degree. Any wound is also, and above all, internal, and like writing itself, protects against loneliness and preserves the tracery of lines and indices. Reading should take place in the light of these wounds. The ridges should be touched: fingers should pierce the sutures to delve into the shores of the wound until the marks are legible. Yes, that tactile reading always involves a rewriting. And in the act of rereading and rewriting the wound we are also recognizing its other nature: the wound is always a palimpsest.

Why don’t we read our first verbal encounters as signs of our teaching in the classroom? Those are experiences that cannot be denied. They have to be exhumed from the passage of time and censorship and bought to life in today’s language, examined under a new light, given meaning. This might also be a task of reading and writing. After all, in the foundation of our verba lie our own stimuli; and perhaps we can also find there, in the initiation, the serenity of the soul that can be at peace only when it can pronounce itself at last, mark its accents, and tell its truth. Language makes us understand the intensity of our feelings and allows us to investigate our own humanity. Without words this would be impossible. Precisely because language is also a revelation of the self, an awakening in which we are revealed unto ourselves.

My grandmother was not a writer, but as a person who prayed, she constructed her prayers with new words, with her own music and a unique voice that sought emphasis in enunciation while avoiding sturdiness. Without knowing it, she introduced
that music to my ears and left it playing there forever. Because of my grandmother, words became for me a rite of domestic liturgies. Because of her I understood that the sacred nature of words could be found in the intimacy of the rooms in the house. That woman's deepest faith was placed in language. Several years later I read a poem by Alejandra Pizarnik; it began by saying “waiting for a world to be unearthed by language, someone sings the place where silence is shaped...” I felt certain that each one of them in her own way, my grandmother and Pizarnik, were standing at the center of the same truth. 

As vulnerable people we sink, light and fragile, into swamps of gloom. At times uneasiness becomes flesh in us and we walk around restlessly. But always, around us, near and far, we have the words to give us air whenever the swamps seem to suffocate us. When my grandmother was almost 80 years old, the doctor recommended that she see a psychologist and begin therapy. At that moment I thought that the “talking cure” proposed by psychoanalysis would do her good. I had seen her so many times locked in her room, seeking relief in prayers. But she left analysis because of her perspiration, which, on warm nights I kept them forever. And sometimes when I’m writing I feel all this coming back.

She had very white skin and I loved to stroke the dampness of her naked arms. Every now and then, she cupped her hands and poured some water over her head.

Freshwater drops ran down the smooth, white skin of her face and trickled down her neck. She spent almost all afternoon in the river, with the water above her knees, and she didn’t mind if she had to go back home with her wet dress stuck to her legs.

At night, when everyone was asleep, I crossed the wide hallway that led to the bedrooms and entered my grandmother’s room. The hallway was dark, but I walked confidently, guided by the light that filtered from beneath the door of her room. My grandmother slept so little that sometimes she was still awake at dawn, but I never heard her complain about that. During the summer she left the window open all night and sometimes, when entering her room, I could see her with her arms on the varnished wooden windowsill. She wore a petticoat with delicate straps, which, on warm nights and because of her perspiration, adhered to her breasts and belly.

We used to spend our summers in Rio Negro, in my grandparents’ house. On Sundays I went to the river with my grandmother. Grandpa never wanted to go, but sometimes when the afternoon was almost over and the sun already down behind the sierras, he came to pick us up. No sooner did he get there, he perched on a tree trunk, but he couldn’t tolerate it for too long and wanted to return home with us. My grandmother, on the other hand, wanted to stay longer at the river. She loved being there, listening to the sound the wind made on the water or between the high branches of the poplars. As soon as we arrived, my grandmother took off her shoes, knotted the hem of her dress above her knees and waded into the river.

“Although I never found out everything about those secrets, I kept them forever. And sometimes when I’m writing I feel all this coming back.”

She wore a petticoat with delicate straps, which, on warm nights and because of her perspiration, adhered to her breasts and belly.

“What’s the matter?” she asked when I opened the door.

On other nights I found her sitting on the bed. It was such a high bed that her legs were left dangling and she wiggled her feet in a nearly undetectable rocking motion. My grandfather slept on his back, hugging the pillow, while my grandmother rummaged through a shoebox full of papers mostly written in Italian. She unfolded the letters and read them to me in a thick whisper so we wouldn’t wake my grandfather. She showed me some photographs that had a dedication on the back and Holy Communion cards from relatives in Italy. She read to me and a murmur grew in the heavy heat of the room. Afterwards, she put everything back in the box and hid it under the wardrobe. Grandpa doesn’t know about this, she said to me.

And although I never found out everything about those secrets, I kept them forever. And sometimes when I’m writing I feel all this coming back. The whisper of a language I half understood in an overheated room; just a handful of words to tell of what is hidden. Voices of people I don’t know, but who speak there, locked in a shoe box concealed under the wardrobe. And a light that on certain nights filters under the door and lights up the darkness as I walk along.
The Last Word (Psychological Comedy)

BY PABLO BALER

The librarian Marina Aguinaga de Humboldt still preserved the curves of her youth, although her flaccid flesh also showed the deteriorated bones that held it up. She had devoted thirty-two years to the library and boasted of the tranquility she had managed to create for the benefit of readers. Hence, whenever Ochoa appeared, dragging ladders, tools, and wires, she felt as if she were suffocating. Her hands, covered with spots and suffering from an incipient tremor, could do nothing but readjust the little sign: “Silence! Please!”

In any case, Ochoa didn’t know how to read, and she didn’t hesitate to describe his noises as malicious affronts. To get even, she made him feel the full weight of her concentrated ancestry or tried to humiliate him with the vestiges of her expired sensuality. Ochoa, of course, was not immune to those provocations and very soon felt himself both seduced and despised. Out of pure resentment, he made his shoes squeak on the parquet floor and banged his hammer unnecessarily from invisible corridors, a conduct which, as was to be expected, wounded the librarian’s sensibility even more. And that’s how they lived, between suffering from their respective grievances and constantly renewing promises of mutual revenge.

But the week when Marina Aguinaga de Humboldt decided to completely ignore Ochoa, even the tacit pacts of urbanity were broken. Fed up with being invisible in the librarian’s eyes, Ochoa decided to bang the elevator doors open and shut while she, startled by every slamming, felt obliged to conceive more sophisticated snubs than disdain. That’s how she came up with the idea of stopping up a toilet in the ladies’ room and going in just in time to catch the repairman on his knees among the pipes. Through the space below the door of the stall, Ochoa saw the librarian’s feet stuffed into those abysmally high heels. Although he wouldn’t have admitted it, those veiny insteps and bony toes with their polished nails aroused him. She went straight toward him and opened the door. Ochoa was paralyzed, with a dripping hairball in his hand, enchanted by those lightly varicose legs that disappeared under the shadow of her skirt. She studied him thoroughly as well, enjoying every centimeter of the scene. Without saying a word, she moved toward the mirrors, retouched her makeup, and sang an exaggeratedly gesticulated version of La Marsaillaise that accompanied her for the remainder of the day:

Allons enfants de la patrie, Le jour de gloire eest arrivé! Centre nous de la tyrannie L'étendard sanglant est levée...

The next morning, she arrived covered with a fur coat so natural that she appeared to be under assault by a herd of musk oxen. She spread the mat over her chair, and anticipating any noise the workman might make, put on some earphones, inserted a cassette on which she had recorded 60 minutes of silence, and turned the volume up to maximum. Thus amplified, the silence began to reveal the creaking of its most secret fibers, the strident reverberation of the vacuum, even the resounding of some anonymous footsteps in the distance. The librarian thought she would be able to avoid the imminent reprisal, but not five minutes went by before the first light bulb exploded. Ochoa was standing on a ladder on the gallery of the first floor and had dropped it on the desk. Like a bombardier, Ochoa went on throwing one after another, and in each of those detonations, the librarian was experiencing nuances of despair that she hadn’t even known existed. With her muscles strangled with rage, she stood still, pretending to ignore the attack until Ochoa disappeared. Right then, she started picking up all the scattered shards as if they were archival references. Marina Aguinaga’s composure confused Ochoa. Was she finally conceding victory, or was she perhaps sneakily dreaming up her next act of revenge? What was certain was that as the days went by, she seemed more and more seductive. She would bend over theatrically to the lower shelves, cross and uncross her legs whenever he went by, and swing her toes as if trying to give him a long distance caress. In his little room at Villa Tesei, Ochoa spent sleepless nights, but now his insomnia was burdened with erotic hallucinations in which Marina Aguinaga de Humboldt invariably played the eponymous heroine.

There was no place in the library where he hadn’t rehearsed one of his fantasies: in the toilet, on the stairs, against the boiler, on the desk, under the desk, even in the glassed in room where they kept Dr. Guillermo Rawson’s original manuscripts and a copy of a daguerreotype of Sarmiento, which stared at them with a puzzled frown. Hence, on the day she approached him, he didn’t know what time it was nor in which reality his life was unfolding.

The building had already closed. She waited for him to come down in the elevator and blocked his exit. The powdered part in Ochoa’s powdered tufts barely reached the librarian’s artificial breasts. Digging the long nail of her index finger into his chest, she pushed him against the mirror:

“I think, Ochoa, that deep down you’d like to make love to me.”

A single wave of heat charred all the resentment that had been gnawing at Ochoa’s guts. She went on lowering her hand to search between his legs. He could hardly stand up and surrendered to the movement of those fingers. When she got to the bulge of his crouching penis, she sized it up clinically and twisted it a little, indifferently:

“Oh, but what a tiny one you have, you lousy little nigger!”

And without waiting for him to reply, she put on her coat, turned off all the lights, and went out through the central vestibule, marking with her stiletto heels the rapid beat of her agitation. Still trembling, she walked fifteen blocks before stopping at a taxi at the corner of Teodoro Garcia and 3 de Febrero.

More humiliated than ever, Ochoa spent the night lying numbly on his cot, watching television. Convinced that he wouldn’t manage to recover from that degradation, he kept reconstructing that last fiasco from all angles. Luckily for him, at four in the morning, a twenty-second news item gave him hope for his whole life. Using archived images from municipal construction projects, the announcer stated: “A study by the department of acoustics at the University of Buenos Aires demonstrated today that pneumatic drills are our worst enemies. Identified as the source of the most harmful noise in the city, these machines go up to 140 decibels. Such levels can produce severe lesions in the ears of the workers and bystanders, stated Fabián Libedievich, who was responsible for the survey.”

“Ohchoa went on throwing one after another, and in each of those detonations, the librarian was experiencing nuances of despair that she hadn’t even known existed.”

When the next day he turned up in front of the librarian, holding on to the pneumatic drill with both hands, she didn’t even have time to react. Ochoa turned on the machine, and the racket made the walls vibrate and shook the books on the shelves. The librarian’s jaw dropped, and out of her open mouth popped a half chewed liquor-filled chocolate. The few people scattered around the room stole glimpses of the movements of that last battle. Without lifting their heads, they glanced up over their eyeglass frames and tried to return to their reading with a minimal gesture of resignation. In just an instant, the drill created a hole in the parquet floor, and, emancipated from Ochoa, advanced toward the librarian’s desk. Stung as if she were the victim of an uncontrollable allergic reaction, she felt her eyelids becoming increasingly inflamed and her heart choking in her throat. To keep hold of the vanishing world, she tried to read the titles of the books they were reading: Reptiles and Amphibians in Guerrero, Mexico, Manual for the Defense of the Freedom of Unions, Lolita, Mapuche Migration. But her vision quickly clouded over, and she saw only a black spot that grew and filled the whole space.
Her eardrums, already sclerotic, were perforated to a precipice of absolute silence. Her convulsions lasted a few seconds more until, as a result of the shaking, the chair leg broke and she fell to the floor, paralyzed. After two years, the municipality could no longer cover the costs of the breathing machine that was keeping her alive, and they had to pull the plug.

At first Ochoa was accused of first-degree murder, but over the course of two years, the indictment changed several times until finally a soft-hearted prosecutor reduced the charge to manslaughter, which only condemned the repairman to thirteen years in jail, later reduced to seven for good conduct.

The building, meanwhile, was kept closed by order of the judge, and by the time the sentence was handed down, the library's budget had been assigned to repaving Crisólogo Larralde. The whole corner remained boarded up till during the years of the military junta, they turned it into a medical insurance office. During the nineties, they demolished the building to build a bingo parlor, but the project never got beyond the vacant lot stage. Finally, a company built a little multiscreen movie theater which also failed, and it was used for a while as a meeting place for an experimental theater group. Today, recycled as a punk discotheque, it seems to attract all the young people from the suburbs. On Friday nights, above all, the corner fills up with those kids whose style seems to have been inspired by tropical insects with black eye makeup, green and red hair, tight clothing and belts studded with brass tacks. They pile up at the entrance waiting to be let in while they go crazy with the syncopated, raucous music that echoes off the walls and in the air of the street. The neighbors complain; they say it's nothing but noise; the kids, however, insist that it's not, it is music.
Meloon:
AN ANTI ALLEGORY

By Steve Katz

ILLUSTRATIONS BY Jim Johnson
TRANSCRIBED AND TRANSLATED FROM THE ENGLISH BY Mohaned Mrabet

Something drips onto my face and wakes me up. Eyes fly open as it splashes into my mouth. I snap up in bed. These are my only clothes, and I have no pajamas, so I wear these to sleep. I don’t want to soil them. Some day soon I’ll go to a laundromat and undress, but not now. This stuff drips from a rusty stain widening on the ceiling, the color of anyone’s fluids, like blood for instance. The stain spreads slowly pink then thickens to red concentrating into a viscous red drop that spot after spot falls at an interval of forty-three seconds give or take. Maybe something terrible has happened above me.

The bowl I set on the bed is glazed with flowers and sketched with the English by Mohaned Mrabet. (call me Mandy), his ex, wants him with flowers and sketched with New Zealand. Not unless, Mandolin Professor Crandall (call me Prof) lets me stay away from him. He still loves her but can’t let go of his anger. She left him for Asia (call me Asia) my favorite harista, bounces over, sexy in her tight jeans, her black sweater, her soft burgundy scarf wound around a slender neck. She lays my nonfat mocha on the counter even before I order.

Heaven, really. Heaven? Did you answer oblique and relevant. In fact, I am certain I have this need. And I’m willing to assume my watch over another. But I know I will frequently resent anyone spoaking my particulars.

That would be unacceptable. I’ll leave forever. I’ll run to Kabul and hide Afghanistan. I’m terrific, and how are you, Asia? I never heard him inquire about Asia, she’s gorgeous.

Tenderness, I’m drug free forever. I never liked drugs anyway, I just took ‘em. I ask her to call me Ten, but she likes to say my full name. It’s okay. My name has a sweaty ring to it. And this is something I love about Asia. Something vague and gorgeous. If I go I want you to come with me.

Massacre steps out of the door swinging an invisible scythe and thus he sings: Ich höre Engel schreien Ihre flugel stinken nach Benzín ihr Blut wir Regenfält!

I sit at my favorite table. Heaven comes into Big Cheeks followed by imaginary blue toads. The air fills with real warts.

They call his nail polish Blood Ruby.

Heaven’s been dancing at a club called Buttermilk. Asia always warns me to stay away from him. He is not a nice person, likes to hurt people, physically, emotionally, financially. Heaven sets his iced mocha down and sits at my table. He drops a couple of pills onto my saucer.

What if I want something else this time, like a cappuccino?

That would be unacceptable. I’ll leave forever. I’ll run to Kabul and hide Afghanistan. Perhaps I always say one thing too much.

I killed her. He grins like a chimp. Slit her throat is what I did.

That information crawls up my spine and lies on my shoulders like a seventy pound backpack.

I was staying with Uncle Dibs (they call me Mr. Dibs) down in Hudder Hollow. I go once a year to help him gig for frogs. At Xmas he likes the legs breaded and sautéed.

Heaven, really, Heaven? Did you stay with her, at her place, last night?

I was staying with Uncle Dibs (they call me Mr. Dibs) down in Hudder Hollow. I go once a year to help him gig for frogs. At Xmas he likes the legs breaded and sautéed. He’s an amateur Frenchman. Mandolin’s roommate, Meniscus (Emma, really), is back from Guyana. You should eat those pills. Tenderness. Great to be rid of her. She chain smokes and vomits cliches. These pills will make you feel great.

Big Cheeks crowds with well groomed businessmen cut loose from jobs and women stuck without offices. They settle in to the wireless nest. And students here research for papers with their phones and tablets. They play games. Some read online about Massacre. Wifi flows like the Tao around these guys and gals. They work to make Xmas dreary, and Hamukah communally blank.

He has never before inquired about my condition, nor have I ever heard him inquire about anyone else. I suddenly recall that his girlfriend Mandy lives in the apartment just above where I was sitting house. Could it be that...?

I’m terrific, and how are you, and how is Mandolin, your excellent girlfriend, and very intelligent too?

The bowl I set on the bed is glazed with flowers and sketched with rabbits. Slowly the drips will fill this bowl. Life is tedious, one thing I know.

I house sit here for my friend, Melancholy (call me Mel). Not exactly a friend, but a strong acquaintance, strong enough so I can house sit for him. He says he won’t ever come back from New Zealand. Not unless, Mandolin (call me Mandy), his ex, wants him back. He still loves her but can’t let go of his anger. She left him for Professor Crandall (call me Prof) or call me Crandall a mutual friend. I feel emotionally vacant, Mel says as he prepares to leave for New Zealand.

Vacant is better than empty, I tell Mel. New Zealand might be a good place to enjoy some suffering. I am lucky to have no such girlfriend.

I walk down to Big Cheeks the coffee house at the bottom of the hill, on the southwest corner. Everyone out here murmurs about Massacre (call me Massa, call me Cur, I don’t give a fuck.) Diversity (call me Dave), the manager, nods at me as I enter, and Asia (call me Asia) my favorite harista, bounces over, sexy in her tight jeans, her black sweater, her soft burgundy scarf wound around a slender neck. She lays my nonfat mocha on the counter even before I order.

Great! But before we go anywhere I need to walk around here a little. Walk, Tenderness, but don’t forget your mocha. I made it with a special plump thing in it, just for you.

Here’s the predicament. I need someone to watch over me. We all have this need. And I’m willing to assume my watch over another. But I know I will frequently resent anyone spoaking my particulars.

Asia, your eyes are deep green today, oceany and beautiful, but why so bloodshot?

It’s coming on Xmas.

I admire that about Asia, her answers oblique and relevant.

I sit at my favorite table.

Massacre steps out of the door swinging an invisible scythe and thus he sings: Ich höre Engel schreien Ihre flugel stinken nach Benzín ihr Blut wir Regenfält!

Vom Narbenhimmel auf mein Gesicht. Heaven comes into Big Cheeks followed by imaginary blue toads. The air fills with real warts.

They call his nail polish Blood Ruby.

Heaven’s been dancing at a club called Buttermilk. Asia always warns me to stay away from him. He is not a nice person, likes to hurt people, physically, emotionally, financially. Heaven sets his iced mocha down and sits at my table. He drops a couple of pills onto my saucer.

You good?

Have you tried it?

Tenderness, I’m drug free forever. I never liked drugs anyway, I just took ’em.

I ask her to call me Ten, but she likes to say my full name. It’s okay. My name has a sweaty ring to it. And this is something I love about Asia. Something vague and gorgeous.

If I go I want you to come with me.

Of course.

I also love this about Asia, she’s pushy, but gentle. And she wants me.
Heaven chugs his mocha. Blue toads stretch and yawn in the mind. Their wish is to fly.

We should go somewhere, fool. I don’t get high any more, Heaven. I’ve got too much to do.

You don’t have anything to do, Tenderness. But it’s sad to hear.

As they leave the toads tug all the blue out of the room. Heaven eats my two pills. I suddenly want the dose back, but what can I do now, swallow Heaven? I stand up to follow him. It’s risky. Asia stops me at the corner of the counter. She has a damp rag in one hand and a long knife in the other. She blocks me with her knife arm pressed against my chest and wipes my face with the rag.

Heaven is poison. Be careful Ten.

Her bloodshot eyes take on the flint of compassion. In a loud whisper she says, Think first, Tenderness. Go home. Talk to your Mom and Dad. Find a job. Even here we have an opening.

I can’t go home again.

Search within the seeds of your contemplation. This is my life, we say, though it could be another’s world.

Don’t be stupid. This could be your last chance.

The knife slips from her hand and sinks into the boards between her feet.

What does she mean by last chance, and what do I mean by my life?

Asia stabs me gently in my mind, a soft penetration. I run after Heaven, having thoughts. I don’t want to be a barista, not ever, not even in the afterlife. Perhaps I insulted her with my attitude, unspoken but always apparent. Running through the red haze around the traffic lights I need several blocks to catch up with Heaven.

We sit on a benchstone near the sandslit that stretches into the river. He hands me two pills which I gulp down. I know he is thinking about Massacre. I don’t need to think.

These are river pills.

Thank you, Heaven. Perhaps river pills will be the end of me.

Not likely. Relax here. Now I’ll tell you my story.

Setting sun drips a dim orange glow onto the icy water. The few leaves rattle in the wind through the willows.

Can, and then I splashed it onto a skillet with some powdered onion or garlic, and then I baked it right in the can. Each tastes a little different. Those are my recipes. My mouth waters when I think about those days. Himself, he liked to drink, and scavenged among young boys homeless on the streets. He was my father. Grits often brought one back to this very spot by the river and let me feed them from the cans. He never fed it. Orphans, runaways. Some he let live with us for a while. I heard him say. Thicker than boy juice. And he always seemed very jolly, and turned because he sensed I was there, and he motioned me to catch up with him. He threw an arm around my shoulder and sang “If the words sound queer, and funny to your ear...etc.” He tugged me down to the sand still singing “...A little bit jumbled and jivy...” He called out to him, “Dad...Dad.” That was when a whip of current tumbled him into the muscled turbulence that instantly carried him away. I watched him go under once ... twice... didn’t try to swim ... a third time under and Integity was gone. There must have been something a man could have done.

To this day I feel guilty. They found his body later, a couple of days, at the Blesswater, a few miles south of Pokah Springs. Grits was a fuck-up himself and often left me for days to survive on my own. I learned first to open one of the cans that filled the cupboard. Ravioli. I ate it cold, and then I learned to boil the whole glass bottles. Today the bottles are plastic, softer, might not have killed her so much. The blow was never investigated. I mean, who would want to kill my poor devastated Delicious mom?

Dad was more attached to her than he admitted. We buried Delia in the pauper’s cemetery in Pokah Springs and went back to Horsetail where Integrity sank into a long funk. I missed her too. For some weeks he wouldn’t leave the house. I had to feed him ravioli from the can. Then one day he started taking walks, every day longer and longer walks, singing songs of nonsense on the way, like Mairrezedoats and So Long Oolong...
yards from Pewter Falls. His right arm had been snapped off, people imagined, by Henry, the ancient catfish, the legend of Big Celery Pond a half mile from the falls, that catfish often seen, never hooked, eats everything, huge and dangerous. The fish grabs hold. With one twist of tail and spine, snap, dad’s arm goodbye. Did this fish cross the quarter mile of swamp grass over land to claim my dad’s left arm?

Maybe it was Massacre, herself. She looks like to practice.

That arm was just a nibble for Henry, damned catfish scavenger.

How gory this world can be, Henry, damned catfish scavenger.

Heaven rises. Easy world, easeful death, not over yet.

He pulls me to my feet, a salamandrine smile on his face. His lips almost brush mine and for a moment I think Heaven is going to kiss me, but no. He turns away and steps onto the sandspit. I feel the river’s appetite. The water soaking through his vintage green Keds seems to drench my Hush Puppies. A thought crosses my mind and I open my mouth to say something but no words come. He looks back at me.

Death is a river, Tenderness.

I have just one pair of shoes. Help me, Heaven.

These are the last words. A whip of current tumbles him into the muscled turbulence that instantly carries him away. I watch him go under once ... twice ... He doesn’t try to swim ... a third time and Heaven is gone. There must be something someone can do.

On my way back to the apartment I see Saphronia (call me Sappho), vending her body on the street. This is our so-called Street Of Emanations. She’s come from Philadelphia to escape an abusive pimp. She waves at me, and stumbles a little in her six inch spikes.

Hey Tenderskins, I’m about to close up shop. You want to come home with me? Cup of tea?


She is a street acquaintance, not for business. Sometimes I wonder what I’m doing in this story. I’ve never been to her lair before. It is not what I expected, but scrubbed down clean, everything in its place, great African masks and votive carvings. I forget she escaped from Rwanda. Is she Hutu or Tutsi. I can’t tell, and I’m too timid to ask. When she was thirteen she decided to walk away from Africa and head north into Spain. She was alone and raped pregnant. She got some rides but did plenty on foot. Lost the baby rowing to Gibraltar, then hitchhiked from Gibraltar through Spain to stow away on a ferry to Dover. How did she eat? She sometimes mentions a wealthy and kind Mr. Eloquence (call me Al). Did he feed her? O Saphronia, where are you now that I tell your story? Could Mr. Eloquence finally have carried you away to an easier world?

I pause at the door, reluctant to smirch her pristine space with my blemishing presence. When I enter and cross the living room to join her in the kitchen for tea, her parakeet blocks my entrance, tiny chest thrust out as if he were a bouncer in a strip club. I can crush him with the sole of my shoe.

Wait a minute, the budgie says. Wait just a minute.

Wee critter talks.

It flies up to land on my nose. This bird can blind a man, extract an eye as if it were a nut in its shell.

I am the grim reaper, says the tiny bird.

The bird has trouble with r’s, makes them sound like w’s. Gymn weaper.

An image flashes for a moment of Heaven playing chess with a budgie.

That’s my budgie buddy, says Saphronia. Easeful death his name, but you can call him E.D.

I could mistake for the great jazz diva herself, except for the slight parakeet rasp. MY NAME IS PEACHES!

We settle down to the tea, a tea brewed from nettles and chamomile.

You know that Massacre is white? She stirs buckwheat honey into her tea. Many colors. Buckwheat Honey is too pharmacological for me.

Saphronia looks hard into my face and asks. What is it? Something wrong.

I take a deep breath and exhale softly with my words.

I never thought death could be so tiny.

The door to the apartment is open. I never leave it open. Melancholy sits on the easy chair. I immediately organize in my mind my exit from the place. He doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere, not New Zealand, not Cincinnati. This is his place, not mine. If anyone has to leave, I do. Everything in myself is as fragile the wings of mayflies.

Melancholy, I thought at least until the fifteenth. I thought I’d be here. I planned till the fifteenth at least.

Please, Mel is my name. I’m not back. I can never come back.

But are you...? Should I sleep on the couch? Maybe best I disappear.

Don’t trouble. I’m leaving. Did you see my grater, my mandolin grater? I can’t find her.

His ex’s name is Mandrake, an unlikely name for a woman (call me Mandy). She lives usually in the apartment above. There is a little confusion here.

I don’t think I ever used it, Mel. I never grate.

I can’t find her anywhere.

I’ll replace it. I never bought a grater before...but I ...

I look to the ceiling at the blotch that has coagulated there and hangs like a rusty chandelier.

Melancholy doesn’t look at the stain. He lifts the cushion of the easy chair as if hoping to find his grater between cushions and brushes out some crumbs. I’ll get you a new one if...

No need. I’ve lost track of my Mandolin. When I use her she cuts my fingertips. Now I don’t know where she is.

Melancholy turns abruptly and leaves as if propelled.

Melancholy, Melancholy. I whisper. He slams the door.

I come to rest here and stare at the wall for a few days, cannot move except for water, water in, water out.

Two cans of sardines open on the counter, small fish complete with eyes. One day I shower them with lemon.

Finally I gather energy to go down to Big Cheeks. Asia greets me with a hug, one of those clinches. You feel your molecules entangle. The embrace is as luscious as it is confusing.
Did you hear about Heaven?

she asks.

The name pierces, an arrow through my spleen. What about Heaven?

His body washed up at Passwater, just before Pewter Falls. The left arm was snapped off they say by Henry. You know Henry?

Of course. I love him; in fact. I hate him. That cruel catfish. Could be a hundred years old, and never even hooked. The creature ate a whole John Smith, the curling champion.

-

Heaven is dead. He drowned. Asia wiped a tear.

I know. So sad to lose Heaven.

I understood him. He wasn’t really gay, didn’t pursue those adventures, no bathhouses, no tough clubs like Sledge or The Anvil, no Harleys. He enjoyed the pretty boy children of diplomats and torturers. He just liked to fondle young male hominids.

Who can blame him? Particularly the young, fuzz bearded boys who wanted to bed with Heaven. The young and the curious. Heaven appreciated their little wickies. As do I.

The son falls, not so different from the dad.

How vast your empathy, Asia. Like the Mexico Gulf.

I sit down at my table. The beautiful woman perched on a stool behind me talks into her cell phone. Her long neck curves like the close of a parenthesis. The voice is nasal and unpleasant. Asia brings my latte, four shots, and a peanut butter cookie.

Tenderness, don’t you think we should get married? I think we should get married.

The words married, marriage, etc. lie in my mind like an idling locomotive. Marriage? With Asia? Though I find her an attractive, even sexy woman, and I love her company. But marriage. That locomotive won’t move. The rails are gone.

If we get married I will take care of you, you betcha. I’ll wait for you to come home from war. Like the wives of yore. I’ll wash your clothes and keep them neat. I can sew, you betcha. And if we are married I won’t have to work the streets. What streets? What work?

Yes. That...

Asia, you mean?

Sometimes I’m...

As I often do when I spend too much time reeling with Death, hitched to Confusion (and I don’t mean those surfing twins from Pinkney Shoals) I go to the farmer’s market and buy a melon. Nothing comforts like the giant melon. Heavy as a bomb. Bigger. Bends the tabletop in the apartment. This melon will drown my face in its flesh.

Asia walks right in to the apartment. She has never done that before, come right in. She is on the marriage trail. She carries a bouquet of asphodel, a greeny flower. These are flowers she brings for me.

Wow, what a huge melon. It’s a meloon.

She thumps the enormous fruit. So have you thought of a date?

Date? For what?

The date for our wedding.

From that day on everyone calls me Meloon. Hello. My name is Meloon.

The door swings open and two women step in. They wear tight knit dresses, one of them black, the other teal. The room is green. In the center of the room an enormous melon sits intact on the table. These slim women with long faces stare into the fruit. The one on the right has a blue tear tattooed under her right eye. The left woman has something, perhaps a hummingbird, inked behind her left ear. Both of them are missing their incisors and their eyeteeth, perhaps once, but not vampires now. They stand shoulder to shoulder and look at me, four eyes looking at me. Their name is Pebble.

Are you the person formerly known as Tenderness who now has the name of Meloon?

Now I think how sad that I have totally missed Xmas. Yes I am.
ABOUT THE WRITERS

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Ben Stoltzfus is Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature, Creative Writing and French at the University of California, Riverside. He is an internationally recognized inter-arts scholar who has published monographs on Robbe-Grillet, Chennevère, Gide, Hemingway, Jasper Johns, Magritte and Lacan. He has published four novels and one collection of short stories: The Eye of the Needle, Black Lazarus, Red White and Blue, Valley of Roses and Cat O’Nine Tails. Romoland, a pictonovel collaboration with the artist Judith Palmer, is being published in the fall of 2016.

Carlos Franz
Carlos Franz is the author of four prize-winning and internationally celebrated novels. In 2001 his novel Where Paradise Once Was, set in the Amazon jungle, was made into a film in Spain. In 2005, The Absent Sea was unanimously awarded the prestigious International Novel Prize of La Nación / Sudamericana. He has been awarded fellowships to Germany and two universities in England and has served as a cultural attaché of Chile. Most recently he has won the prestigious “Premio Bienal de Novela Mario Vargas Llosa”.

Margo Berdeshevsky
Margo Berdeshevsky’s poetry collections are Between Soul & Stone and But a Passage in Wilderness (Sheep Meadow Press.) Her illustrated stories, Beautiful Soon Enough, received FC2’s Innovative Fiction Award, (University of Alabama Press.) Her newest manuscript was a finalist for the National Poetry Series, 2015. Other honors include the Robert H. Winner Award from the Poetry Society of America.

Angela Pradelli
Angela Pradelli is a writer (poet, novelist, essayist) and literature professor. She has participated in many lectures and has directed workshops in Argentina, Switzerland, Cuba, Venezuela, and the United States. Her poetry and fiction have earned many awards. Her non-fiction book In Search of the Language was recognized by La Fundación El Libro/Buenos Aires as the best book on education published between 2010 and 2011. Her last book is El sol detrás del limonero (The sun behind the lemon tree).

Linda Kalaj
Linda Kalaj holds an MFA from Chapman University in southern California and a BA from St. John’s University in New York. She is the recipient of Chapman University’s Department of English Terri Brint Joseph Award for Outstanding MFA student and her short stories have been awarded 1st place by Simply Shorts Review and appeared in Sequoya Literary Magazine. In addition, her translations and essays have appeared with Aldus, a Journal of Translation and The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review.

Steve Katz
Steve Katz is a distinguished American novelist. He is considered an early post-modern or avant-garde writer for works such as The Exaggerations of Peter Prince (1968), and Saw (1972). His collection of stories, Creamy & Delicious (1970), was mentioned in Larry McCaffery’s list of the 100 greatest books of the 20th century where it was named “The most extreme and perfectly executed fictional work to emerge from the Pop Art scene of the late 60s.” He has written no fewer than 15 novels and has been the recipient of both National Endowment for the Arts Grants and Guggenheim Foundation Grants.
**Tatiana Servin**

Tatiana Servin is the recipient of the Tom Massey Award for Outstanding Dual Degree Student. Her MFA thesis Burdens & Babel won “Best Poetry Manuscript” for the John Fowles Arts Award at Chapman University. She currently teaches a writer’s workshop in Gage Park, a South Side neighborhood in the city of Chicago. Her work has been published in Calliope.

**James P. Blaylock**

James P. Blaylock, twice winner of the World Fantasy Award, is the author of 25 novels and collections of stories. His short story “Unidentified Objects” was published in Prize Stories, 1990, the O. Henry Awards. His work has been published in translation around the world. Mr. Blaylock is a Professor at Chapman University in Orange, California, where he has lived for the past 45 years.

**Pablo Baler**

Pablo Baler is a fiction writer, cultural critic, and Associate Professor of Latin-American literature and Visual Arts at California State University, Los Angeles. Originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina, Baler is the author of the award-winning novel Circa (Galerna, 1999) and the collection of short stories La burocracia mandarina (Lumme, 2013). Baler is also the editor of The Next Thing: Art in the Twenty-First Century (FDU Press, 2013). His essay on baroque/neo-baroque aesthetics (originally published in Spanish in 2009) recently came out as The Latin American Neo-baroque: Senses of Distortion (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

**Douglas Messerli**

Douglas Messerli was the publisher of Sun & Moon Press and Green Integer Press. He is the author of several books of poetry, most recently, Dark and, forthcoming, Stay; a book of fiction, written under the pseudonym Joshua Haigh, Letters from Hanusse; and of several dramas, written under the pseudonym of Kier Peters, most notably, The Confirmation, which was performed in New York and Los Angeles. His play, Past Present and Future Tense was transformed into an opera Still in Love performed in New York. His multi-volume My Year volumes (dating from 2000 to the present) have annually represented his cultural memoirs.

**Pedro Mairal**

Pedro Mairal was born in Buenos Aires in 1970. His first novel, One Night With Sabrina Love, was awarded the Clarín Prize in 1998 with a panel of judges comprising Roa Bastos, Bioy Casares and Cabrera Infante, and was adapted to the screen in the year 2000. His work has been translated and published in USA, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland and Germany. The Bogotá39 jury selected him among the 39 most notorious young Latin-American authors. His latest novels include: Salvatierra (The Missing Year of Juan Salvatierra), 2008 and La uruguaya (The Uruguayan girl), 2016.
About the Writers

Lou Rowan
Lou Rowan’s books include A Mystery’s No Problem, novel, 2016; Love’s, poetry, 2016; The Alphabet of Love Serial, stories, 2015; My Last Days, Superman’s autobiography, 2007; Sweet Potatoes, stories, 2008. He is eternally grateful to the English Department at Harvard University for making the academic study of literature repugnant to him.

Carlos Gamerro
Carlos Gamerro was born in Buenos Aires. He has published, amongst others, the novels Las Islas (1998), El secreto y las voces (2002) and La aventura de los bustos de Eva (2004), all three translated into English, and most recently Canto del (2016). In 2007 he was Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University and in 2008 he participated in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

Jim Johnson
Jim Johnson, Professor Emeritus, taught Painting and Drawing in the Department of Art & Art History at the University of Colorado at Boulder from 1970-2005. He developed the department’s Integrated Media and Computer Imaging programs and taught Principles of Color as well as seminars in contemporary art. He was instrumental in developing the Center for Arts, Media and Performance for the ATLAS Institute and served as its first Director. A graphic artist in the broadest sense of the word, Johnson makes paintings, drawings, constructions and prints, as well as artist’s books, typefaces, bumper stickers and T-shirts. Working in digital media, he has produced numerous animations, installations and interactive programs. He has a long-held interest in the relationship of words and images. His book/installation, A Thousand Words, is in the Denver Art Museum’s Permanent Collection. Other books are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Library and Archive, London, the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles and the archives of the Chicago, San Francisco and Otis Art Institutes.

Rebecca Goodman
Rebecca Goodman is the author of The Surface of Motion (Green Integer) and Aftersight (Spuyten Duyvil). She is the co-author of The Assignment (Fountainhead Press). Her writing has appeared in such places as the Denver Quarterly, Western Humanities Review, Madhatters’ Review, and American Book Review. She teaches creative writing at Chapman University.

Zulfikar Ghose
Zulfikar Ghose has published 6 volumes of poems, 11 novels, 6 books of criticism, and an autobiography. The Review of Contemporary Fiction featured him in its Summer 1989 issue. He lives in Austin, TX, where he taught literature and creative writing at the University of Texas of which he is now Professor Emeritus.

David Matlin
David Matlin is the author of novels, as well as collections of poetry and essays. He is presently working on the last novel of a trilogy. The first two novels are How the Night is Divided and A Half Man Dreaming—the third is The Still Hunt. His collections of poetry and prose include the books China Beach, Dressed In Protective Fashion, and Fontana’s Mirror. His first novel, How the Night is Divided, was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1993. He’s a professor of English at San Diego State University.
Michael Abbott

Michael Abbott has worked in publishing in various international roles for thirty years, primarily for Carcanet, Macmillan, Random House and Baker & Taylor. In his spare time, he writes articles on travel and literature and is a translator from French to English, specialising in contemporary art and culture. He has lived in France for twenty-five years.

Yuriy Tarnawsky

Yuriy Tarnawsky is one of the founding members of the New York Group, a Ukrainian émigré avant-garde group of writers, and co-founder and co-editor of the journal Novi Poeziyi (New Poetry; 1959–1972). He writes fiction, poetry, plays, translations, and criticism in both Ukrainian and English. His works have been translated into French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, and Russian. His best known works include: Like Blood in Water (2007), Short Tails (2011) Kvity Xvoromu (Flowers for the Patient, 2012) and his recent Claim to Oblivion selected essays and interviews (2016).

Karen Tei Yamashita

Karen Tei Yamashita is a Japanese American writer. Her works, several of which contain elements of magic realism, include novels I Hotel (2010), Circle K Cycles (2001), Tropic of Orange (1997), Brazil-Maru (1992), and Through the Arc of the Rain Forest (1990). She has co-written My Postwar Life: New Writings from Japan and Okinawa with Elizabeth McKenzie. Tei Yamashita’s novels emphasize the necessity of polyglot, multicultural communities in an increasingly globalized age, even as they destabilize orthodox notions of borders and national/ethnic identity. Yamashita was a Finalist for the 2010 National Book Award. She has also written a number of plays, including Hannah Kusoh, Noh Bozos and O-Meu which was produced by the Asian American theatre group, East West Players. She is an Associate Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she teaches creative writing and Asian American literature.
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