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THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

SPRING 2025

SEVEN DOLLARS

A Symposium on Beginnings and Endings, with Dounia Choukri, Michael Dellaira, Becca Rothfeld, W. S. Di Piero, Michael Nott, Kate Busatto, Rosanna Warren, and Evgeniya Dame



Fiction by Frank Bourne and Cassandra Garbus

Ibe Liebenberg: Morning Coffee

Bailey Trela on Eugenio Montale

Poems by Paolo Febbraro, Jane Hirshfield, Alan Shapiro, César Vallejo, and others

Bert Keizer on the Mentality of Plants

Christopher Craig: Terminal

Photographs by Judith Black



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THE
THREEPENNY
REVIEW

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Front Cover Art: Judith Black, *Matt, April 6, 1992, Seattle, Washington*. For information on the Judith Black photographs in this issue, please see pages 4 and 10.

Contributors

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J. T. Barbarese's forthcoming essay collection, *Inventions on the Brink*, will be published in the fall by LSU Press.

Frank Bourne grew up in the South Carolina Low Country and currently resides in Florida with his wife, Anna. "Roger" is his first published story.

Kate Busatto is a writer and hospice chaplain. She is working on her first novel.

Peter Champion is the author of *One Summer Evening at the Falls*.

Dounia Choukri holds an MA in American literature. Her fiction has recently appeared in *Joyland*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *Five Points*.

Christopher Craig teaches literature at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Evgeniya Dame is associate editor of *The Threepenny Review*. A former Stegner Fellow, she has published fiction in *Zoetrope*, *Ploughshares*, and other journals.

Michael Dellaira is a composer. A recording of his most recent opera, *Arctic Explorations*, will be released this summer on the Naxos label.

Abigal Dembo lives in Iowa City, Iowa. Her poetry has appeared or will appear in *The Paris Review*, *Five Points*, *Oxford Magazine*, and other places.

Simone Di Piero's next two books are a collection of poems, *Burning Money*, and *Inside the Box: Selected Essays*, both due in August from Unbound Press.

Paolo Febbraro, an Italian poet born in Rome in 1965, is the author of several books of poetry and prose, including *The Diary of Kaspar Hauser*. **Geoffrey Brock**, his translator, is the editor of *The FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Italian Poetry* and the author of three collections of poems, most recently *After*.

Cassandra Garbus is the author of the novel *Solo Variations*. Her short stories have appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *American Scholar*, *Meridian*, and many other publications.

Jane Hirshfield's most recent book is *The Asking: New & Selected Poems*. In 2024 she was the first American and the first woman to receive the Zhongkun International Poet Award, China's foremost independent prize for a world poet.

Bert Keizer is a geriatrician and writer in Amsterdam. The author of *Dancing with Mister D* and several other books, he has a weekly column in a national newspaper and works for the Euthanasia Expertise Center.

Charles Kell is the author of two poetry collections, *Ishmael Mask* and *Cage of Lit Glass*, both published by Autumn House Press.

Ibe Liebenberg is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation living in Northern California. His debut poetry book, *Birds at Night*, won the Sowell Emerging Writers Prize and is due out in March.

Maria Martin is a poet living in North Charleston, South Carolina, where she works for the city coordinating arts enrichment programs for public schools.

Michael Nott is the author of *Thom Gunn: A Cool Queer Life*.

Thomas Rayfiel has published eight novels, including *In Pinelight* and *Genius*.

Becca Rothfeld is the nonfiction book critic at the *Washington Post* and an editor at *The Point*. Her first book, *All Things Are Too Small: Essays in Praise of Excess*, was published in 2024 by Metropolitan Books.

Alan Shapiro's new book of essays, *A Dress Rehearsal for the Truth*, is just out from Gabbro Head Press.

Clifford Thompson's book *Jazz June: A Self-Portrait in Essays* will be published by the University of Georgia Press in the fall.

Bailey Trela is a writer and critic in New York. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New York Magazine*, *The Nation*, *The Baffler*, and elsewhere.

Alpay Ulku's first collection, *Meteorology*, was published by BOA Editions, and his second has twice been a finalist in the National Poetry Series Open Competition. He lives in Samsun, on the Black Sea coast of Turkey.

César Vallejo (1892–1938) is considered to be one of the finest and most original of Latin American poets. A selection of his poems, *The Eternal Dance*, has been translated by **Margaret Jull Costa** and will be out in March from New Directions.

Steve Vineberg has been writing for *The Threepenny Review* since 1983. He teaches drama and film at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Rosanna Warren's new book of poems, *Hindsight*, will be published this fall by W. W. Norton.

Matthew Zipf is a Ph.D. candidate in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. His last piece for *Threepenny* was about Peter Hugar.

Table Talk

I SPEND A lot of time on Facebook. Some of my posts, about the arts or my personal experiences or views, are serious; some are meant to be funny; others are silly; still others, written with a wink, are the last word in triviality. My Facebook persona is different from my in-person self, whose manner once led a longtime friend to call me “Mr. Tacit.” I have thought some about what accounts for the difference.

When I was growing up, my family placed a high value on courtesy, and the worst thing you could do was to seem to think a lot of yourself. Those teachings are at the core of my personality. My three siblings are half a generation older than I am, and so I am unlike many of my friends, who grew up fighting to be heard over close-in-age siblings and who came to see that

style of talking as simply the way conversations work. While I marvel at and, to an extent, admire those who can keep up a steady stream of talk (people who have what used to be called “the gift of gab”), I have never been a big talker; still, when I was growing up, my family gave me space to say what I wanted to say. What all of this adds up to is that my reluctance to cut people off in conversation—which partly accounts for my “tacit-ness”—is topped only by my hatred of being cut off myself.

Which brings me back to Facebook. “In space, no one can hear you scream” went the tagline for the movie *Alien*. On Facebook, no one can cut you off. I am free to say what I want, so long as (here my core self steps in) it is not mean or boastful. Even the rule against boastfulness has frayed around

the edges—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I’ve ventured closer to the line separating “I am sharing good news” or “I would like to share this work with you” from “I am great.” For years I have been posting my newly published essays, just-finished paintings, and attempts at poems, which made me queasy in the beginning and occasionally still does. Was I simply asking for applause? What did that say about me? The queasiness largely faded the day I realized that I don’t mind when other people post such things.

Years ago, I wrote that I define adulthood as a period spent alternately running from and trying to recapture childhood. On Facebook I have found a “family” that, like the one that raised me, allows me to say what I want to say. At the same time, I can strut my stuff—a phrase I have never used once in my life before this moment—in a way that was discouraged when I was a boy. While remaining myself, I discover, or exhibit, another side of that self.

But who is this guy, this augmented me? Who are his friends, whom he has in some cases never met but with whom he interacts regularly? Where

does he live? Perhaps most importantly, what is his relation to me? Maybe he is a subset of me. Or he is my funnier, quirkier, more outgoing twin. If Facebook were to disappear, where would he go? Would he retreat into me, the place from which he sprang? Would he surface in some other way? Or would I simply cut him off?

—Clifford Thompson

*

THE CLICHÉ is true, we actually did sing on the corner. There or on our porch or stoop, and sometimes in Tim’s basement, where he’d pour shots of banana-flavored Everclear. We sang what we heard on the radio, and the radio was the AM dial, period. There was no FM. We were snobs. Not everything caught our interest, and not everything that caught our interest was singable. It was one thing to hear Smokey deliver—

When I was of age,
my mother called me to her side



3P

THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

“It is roughly the size and shape of the *New York Review of Books*, but it is really a little magazine in disguise, with fiction and poetry and personal essays outweighing literary criticism. *The Threepenny Review* achieves a distinctive regional flavour without seeming provincial... Among the most appealing recent contributions are two death-haunted musings: Francine Prose’s evocation of her father’s workplace, the Old Morgue in New York City, and Robert Pinsky’s lullaby for himself, his ‘Alphabet of My Dead.’”

—TIMES
LITERARY
SUPPLEMENT

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A Note on the Artworks

Born in the Midwest in 1945, Judith Black moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1979 in order to study photography at the MIT Creative Photo Lab. Along with her came the family of four children she was raising alone. In need of role models, she researched women artists who had combined a career with raising a family. The turning point in her practice came when she realized that, unlike photographers with plenty of time to roam the streets looking for inspiration, she would find her most potent subject matter close to home.

“I became my own documentarian,” she has said of her work. Using a large-format camera and Polaroid Type 55 black-and-white film, she turned her lens on her children, her partner Rob, and herself, blurring the line between family album and art. Some of the photographs that appear in this issue record the family’s life on Pleasant Street, in a run-down Cambridge apartment where they settled after the move and which became her “studio.” Others document a cross-country road trip the artist took to reconnect with friends and family, a project for which she received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1986. Characterized by precision and humor, her photos capture the strange and the meaningful in everyday life. What unites them is a gesture or movement, an oddity in the background—something that provokes in the viewer a desire to reach out and touch the image.

Judith Black’s work has been exhibited internationally and is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Harvard Art Museums, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and others. Her first book, *Pleasant Street*, published in 2020 by Stanley/Barker Books, was nominated for the Paris Photo-Aperture PhotoBook Awards. A second book, *Vacation*, was released in 2021. Given its special focus on the passage of time, her body of work seemed particularly pertinent to our “beginnings and endings” theme, and we are grateful to the artist for allowing us to reproduce her photographs here.

She said “Son you’re growin’ up now, pretty soon you’ll take a bride...”

—but then enter the Miracles, picking up the verse and carrying Smokey from *recitative* into the rest of “Shop Around,” a mother’s advice to her son once he comes of marrying age. It’s some of the best street poetry ever, but we were interested in harmonies for two or at most three voices, and if the harmony was handed off to the backup singers, we admired and moved on. This eliminated most doo-wop, all of Elvis, and tunes like “Shop Around,” where the verses were compact soliloquies written for soloists.

This is still the case with strong solo writing. Who harmonizes “A Case of You,” “White Rabbit,” Jim Croce’s three-minute novella “Operator,” or—for that matter—“Nessun dorma”? Why smother a smooth soloist or complicate a cool solo narrative with a layered two- or three-part vocal? On the other hand, “After the Gold Rush,” silly, overpraised, and (predictably with Neil Young) so overwrought, sounds almost weighty sung by the Dixie Chicks and positively anthemic done by the Sisters of Country. You can’t do better than Dolly, Linda, and Emmy Lou.

This is where Don and Phil came in. The Everlys are fabled for their harmonies, but the harmonies are welded to mostly moronic lyrics. Their lyrics were uninspired, but their vocal blend is intoxicating, and thrilling to sing. This is typical of country gospel, from “I’ll Fly Away” to “He Lives,” though we didn’t know it then. With my brother, the genetic weld between him on top and me on bottom was instantaneous, complete. On Saturday afternoons, from the steps of Weinrich’s Bakery, we would play Siren to the passing Goretti girls as they headed to confession:

The movie wasn’t so hot,
It didn’t have much of a plot,
I fell asleep, our goose is cooked,
Our reputation is shot.

Once we found a third voice, our options widened. And this is where the Beach Boys came in. The six-bar *a capella* intro to “Get Around”—forget the rest of it—is a vocal classic, a mini-rock chorale, to equal which you heard nothing until, say, “Bohemian Rhapsody.” Once, between sets at a fraternity job, we were EQ’ing the room, adjusting levels and doing a mic test when we ran out just those opening bars—

Round round get around
I get around, yea
Get around round round
I get around

—and all revels ceased. The place went silent; the drunks leaned swaying on their girlfriends and cried for more. (We lied, said that’s all we knew.) Brian Wilson’s musical settings were magic: they did for his lyrics what Karen Carpenter’s perfect contralto did for the commercial crap she was forced to sing.

But before CSN, it was the Beatles who brought major harmony to the moment, to us and to the corner. McCartney and Lennon’s vocal blend was uncannily close to the Everlys. The difference was that the Beatles were

better lyricists and sneaky-smart tune-smiths. “Please Please Me” is an uninspired lyric but a feast for two voices. The top voice, which McCartney owned (only Graham Nash ever came close), sets a compelling background treble drone for Lennon, who climbs note by note down the scale, bar after bar. For sheer wild surprise, listen to “If I Fell,” buried on the soundtrack for *A Hard Day’s Night*. The intro starts in one key and modulates to another—and just *who* was doing this in 1964?—and a prelude to the song’s brilliance. The ensuing verses are all coolly, easily harmonized for two voices until you arrive at that surprising bridge, where top and bottom head in different directions, then reconverge, restart, and leave you grinning like an idiot because it’s such a rush to sing.

We could sing anything we heard, but we were musical illiterates. None of us could read the music we sang, not even a key signature. But complexity, that we knew, and we knew perfection, no matter how primitive. It came in snatches, in manic modulations, vocal equivalents of the split-second sundown that went from soft rust to a bruised blue. Not just a whole song, either. It could come down to something as fleeting as three voices converging on the same single word—*yeah*, the last word of “She Loves You”—netted in the most basic of chord shapes, a simple, resonant sixth. What musical theorist imagined that so simple, even simple-minded a coda could be so thrilling? It was a primer in beauty, Aesthetics 101—a perfect sixth, sung and gone, leaving you with a taste of how what’s perfect never lasts for long.

—J. T. Barbarese

*

“*JE VEUX faire un film*—,” he began, then switched to English. “I want to make a movie...”

Between those two urges sat me, the screenwriter.

Maroun Baghdadi was a Lebanese director living in Paris. I had never heard of him, even though by then he had made the two films he would be remembered by, *Beirut Oh Beirut* and *Little Wars*. We sat in a café on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, cliché piled upon cliché, and discussed his project, *The Egyptian*. This was forty years ago, and though I have a good memory, I seem to have willfully blocked out most of the plot. It involved William Hurt (all directors have a dream star they plug into the hero’s role, and Hurt was very big at the time) in Cairo, somehow convinced to become an Islamic terrorist. At the end he bombs, or tries to bomb, the U.S. embassy.

“But Hurt is so white.”

“Exactly.”

Maroun was handsome, energetic, charismatic. A director. I was nobody, striving for even greater invisibility. The writer.

Directors have, at best, an idea. Most have less: scenes and images, always in some sense autobiographical, which they want turned into a story, one they can get the requisite multi-million dollar backing for and so launch into what is their true element,

the maelstrom of a production, a shoot, where their will is exerted over hundreds of people, not just one. It is a talent, but not one I respect—more like a management style cloaked in the trappings of creativity. I once read an observation about Erich von Stroheim, the silent film actor and imperious, control-freak director, whose supposed masterpiece, *Greed*, was taken away from him and cut from eight hours down to two and a half. The never-seen original version is revered as one of the great lost films. The critic concluded that when considering someone like von Stroheim, it is difficult to tell if he was an artist or “just an artisticator.”

At that time, I felt all directors were artisticators, so much more magnetic and fun to be around than a distracted doubter with a paintbrush or pen. Maroun, to his credit, had an idea: a man expressing dissatisfaction and guilt by making an outlandish one-hundred-eighty-degree turn. He was depending on me to fashion this into a movie, an investment vehicle that would have at least a plausible chance of turning a profit.

“He visits the embassy. The people are out back in the garden. It’s a party! The Fourth of July! He doesn’t even know! They are waving little flags! They have cake!”

Shards, shreds, they gave you. Clues. You had to please them *and* write a story. As a work method, it was diametrically opposed to what I would have been doing on my own, which would be to make myself continuously uncomfortable. In a novel, that was how I knew I was on the right track, if I was constantly electrified by fears and doubts yet compulsively going forward. This was different. I was aiming to put a smile on someone’s face. I found it hard. When I stopped working on the script for the day, it just sat there. It did not have the creepy, Frankenstein-like proto-existence of a story in the act of coming alive. Unattended, it did not ferment.

After we finished work—what a director considers work, inspiring or berating or seducing a craftsperson to get on with advancing the project—we went back to his place, a very nice apartment near the Champs de Mars. His wife, Soraya, and their infant son Cherif were there. “Mayoum,” the boy called him. Soraya, a dancer and actress, the love interest in the two major films he had made, was relieved to be off-duty. She went out. Maroun made Turkish coffee. I remember the deep sludge as he carefully poured it into tiny cups. He seemed exhausted, clueless, trying to entertain Cherif. I wasn’t even married then, much less a father. I strove to come up with child-care advice.

“My mother,” I remembered, “used to say, ‘Go play in traffic.’”

“*Va jouer dans la rue*,” he smiled tenderly at his one-year-old.

I liked him at that moment, more than I had in all the previous hours. But the script beckoned. I had nothing. The more I added to it, the more nothing it became. I could see it, sitting there at home, a pile of paper. I had to go. It was another two or three years before I quit trying to be a screenwriter entirely. In the end, I took my mother’s advice.

—Thomas Rayfiel

Emotional Realism

My mother is learning to draw. She calls me on the phone to discuss spatial relations. It’s so frustrating to think about spatial relations. There is a deep clear sky and a flat piece of paper, but I am trying to get things done. I walk out to the trash and look up at the sky cupping over me. I used to feel like a pet in God’s own terrarium. My face was drawn to the sky. There was something about me my mother found unrealistic. At school they moved my desk from the window. I needed to get things done. I was given a pencil and a lined piece of paper. I was called from my daydreams to look at the mess that always accumulated around me. I needed enough space to contain every part of me but that is so unrealistic when people are trying to get things done. I was losing bits of myself all over. My mother didn’t think I’d make it in the wild. There was something about my hair that was so unrealistic. My hair was drawn to the sky. I was leaving bits of my hair all over. My mother sprayed it down with water but nothing stayed. Is there anything more unrealistic than a child that thinks she knows better? My mother decided I had enough information. I was taking everything out of proportion. I was using everything she said against her. I watched the power lines passing from the backseat window. I watched the trees. It was like I could slow things down just by keeping my eyes on them, but that is unrealistic. I can explain it all now, a simple trick of perspective. To make a drawing realistic you must commit to one perspective. To make something large on a small piece of paper, something must be small on the same piece of paper.

—Maria Martin



Terminal

Christopher Craig

I STARE AT the envelope, momentarily stunned, trying to find a context for what it's doing on my wobbly kitchen table, as though some Caribbean boa has suddenly slithered out of it. I know the last name of the return address. *D. Beals. St. Thomas, USVI 00801*. Once upon a time, it was my last name, before my mother's second husband adopted me, before I knew what last names were. But it's never meant much. Certainly not papa, dad, the old man.

I'm not indifferent. But I can't say that I've been waiting for this moment, the fulfillment of some sentimental fantasy where I fall to the ground, rip open his letter, and read the words I've longed to hear: I'm sorry. I met him once when I was nine. But I have only a fuzzy recollection that he'd taken me to a Philadelphia television station to meet a local sportscaster and called me his son. Then he was gone. He could have been anyone. If he existed at all, it was in the stories my maternal grandfather told me when I was old enough to understand them—the heavy drinking and wanton recklessness, the time my mother answered the door to some screeching woman claiming he'd stepped out on her and their daughter. *Which whore are you?* the woman demanded, eyeing my mother's pregnant belly and shiny new wedding ring. He was nineteen.

In my late teens, struggling with a nasty addiction and already a father myself, I'd heard that he'd moved to St. Thomas when I was a toddler. I shrugged it off. Yeah? And? I was too busy putting a blowtorch to my life to care. But weeks later I stole a book on Caribbean tourism, found St. Thomas on its slick, fold-out map, and looked at the pictures of azure water and powdery white sand, the leafy palm trees and soft sky. When I finished with the book I tossed it into an industrial trash bin behind the leather processing plant in West Philadelphia where I worked, a place so toxic even the rats kept their distance.

I look at the letter. Fuck it.

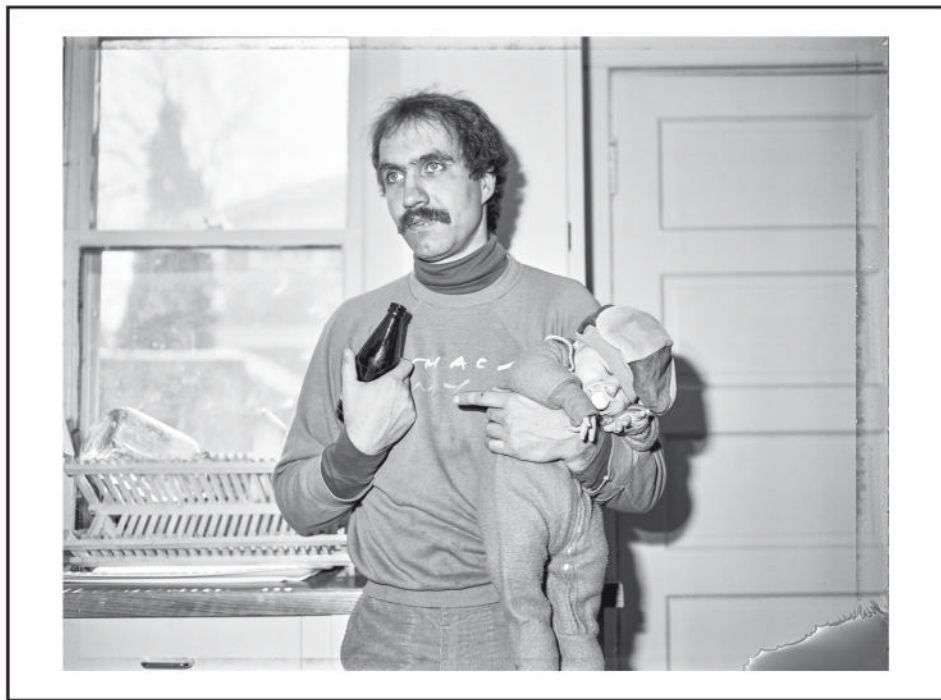
I grab a knife from the drawer. But as I'm about to slip it into envelope, the kids' voices, like hungry, squawking birds, break my concentration. In the living room, they're fighting over which TV show to watch. As usual, it's chaos. I place the letter in the empty plastic napkin holder on my table, stomp into the room, and pop *Honey, I Shrank the Kids* into the VCR.

Enough, I say, my voice raw and edgy.

I retreat to my bedroom. It's the size of one of those walk-in closets I've seen in the mansions on *Dynasty*. There's just enough space for a twin bed, a dresser, and the small wastepaper basket that I've placed in the corner of the room. When I can't settle my mind, I toss into it a wiffleball on a string. There's no closet. But that's no prob-

lem since I don't own anything to hang in there. A shadeless, pitted lamp I bought for a buck at a yard sale sits on the dresser. Claustrophobic as the room is, I find refuge here. Most days the kids meet me at the door, the babysitter pushing past me as though the house is on fire, and demand I play ball, jump rope, read stories, cook dinner, and settle their grievances before I even step into the apartment. By the time I close the door on all of that I'm wasted, in need of a space to quiet the voices that tempt me to return to the street corners.

Lying in bed, I carefully open the letter. Before I read his words, I'm struck by their elegant style and the rich cream-colored paper onto which



he's written them. I imagine him sitting at some big mahogany desk in a richly paneled room, shelves filled with leather-bound books, a green-glassed banker's lamp casting warm, generous light. The sound of gentle surf outside his window. I hold the letter close, expecting to be greeted by the scent of expensive cologne.

I offer no excuses, he writes, only an explanation. Tells me he had to leave Philadelphia or he wouldn't have survived. A womanizing alcoholic, who by twenty-one had laid waste to everything and everyone in his path, he found himself on the edge of an infinite emptiness into which he would vanish with one more step. The progression of the disease, he writes, repeating the recovery-speak I know so well, wasn't gradual. More like zero to sixty in the blink of an eye. One minute he was sneaking sips of his father's brandy, the next he was waking up in roach motels with women he didn't know, hoping he hadn't totaled his beloved '56 Corvette or beat someone's ass the night before. If I'd stayed, he writes, I would have killed myself or someone else. No question. He hopes I understand. He didn't have a choice.

These days he spends lazy mornings

fishing on his boat, enjoying the tranquility of calm turquoise waters and smoking weed with his buddies, eclectic artists and ex-pats, self-fashioned intellectuals bored and disillusioned with the predictability of the mainstream. He writes about warm breezy nights strolling the beach with Patricia, the local with whom he's shackled up, his bulldog, Cokey, happily plodding along the foamy surf.

I've carved out a little life for myself, he writes. I'd like you to be part of it. Write back and send me your phone number. Let's talk. Toward the end of the letter he also tells me that he has lung cancer. Not to worry, he writes. It's in the early stages. But I thought you should know.

I make a paper airplane out of his letter and sail it across the room toward the trash bin. The heavy paper has made the plane aerodynamic. It glides as if traveling on an invisible ray of light. Bam. A direct hit.

I think about calling my mom but don't. She rarely talks about him. When she does, she breathes fire. He's hurt her in ways that run deep and have been undiminished by time. He's

photos from beneath my bed, dig through them to find the one of Sean and me at the waterpark in Maine. I place it next to his and try to close the distance between us.

When my friends or girlfriends have asked about him, I've told them there's nothing to tell. He split. That's it. Don't know, don't care. But that's a lie. The impact of his absence lives in me like some untreatable latent virus that has slipped through the cracked door of my psyche, stealthily evolving, wreaking undiagnosable havoc on my mind and spirit. Now that it's manifested in the form of words on a page and an image of him, I feel irrationally compelled to trace it to the source. Turn absence into presence. A last chance. Maybe he'll say or do something that will explain why I'm the only one in my family who can carry a tune, why I can throw a football fifty yards with the flick of my wrist, why I've always been able to hold my liquor.

I rip a piece of paper out of a Care Bears notebook and scrawl a few sentences. Here's my number, I say. Call me.

A FEW WEEKS later the phone rings. I don't have caller ID but I know it's him. When I pick up the receiver my hand shakes. Chris, he says in a voice that is eerily my own, like hearing myself speak on a cassette tape. It's Dad.

I stifle a smirky, nervous chuckle. I've been raised to be polite, so I let it slide. Sit by the window listening quietly, unable to find my words, as he tells me that he thinks it would be a perfect time for me to visit. We can make this work, he says, a strange adolescent excitement in his voice, as though we've been best buds since birth. I'll take you on my boat. You can snorkel with Patricia, too. Ever swim with sea turtles? And the women, these tourists who come down here to shake loose, they strut on the beaches in their skimpy bikinis, drinking and dancing in the clubs, looking for a little secret romance. They'll drive you wild, man. Would you like that? You'll never want to leave. What do you say, Chris?

I'm a bit shaken by the invitation. But it occurs to me that every once in a while, for a second or two, the time it takes to say yes or no, the world opens up a space. When you see it, if you see it, you've got to walk through it. Yes, yes, of course, I say, nodding enthusiastically. I'd love it. I tell him that I can't wait. It'll be great to finally meet you, I say.

He coughs. Wheezes for a second. Clears his throat. Things didn't go well for your mom and me, he says. I'm to blame. She left. Afterward, I started getting blitzed for days on end, fighting in bars, waking up with black eyes, split lips, and no memory of what had happened. That's when my parents set me up in St. Thomas. You were two when I left, he says. I'd gotten to know you a little. I can't say I regret saving my life. But I do regret what might have been.

Across the street, kids in white and powder blue uniforms play softball on the field that lies in the shadow of the mighty Edison power plant. I say not to worry. I can tell a version of that story, too. Moving saved my ass. Boston. Gave the kids and me a chance. I

stopped shooting drugs. Got help in a twelve-step program. I’ve been raising your grandchildren on my own, I say, Sandra, Sean, and Jessica. My oldest, Christina, lives with my mother in New Jersey. I don’t see her much but we talk on the phone. But while I stake my half-hearted claim to daddy of the year, I lie about driving a forklift in an aftermarket auto parts warehouse. Claim to be the manager. I also leave out that I’m counting pennies at the end of the month and that one extra expense, a trip to the emergency room or even a parking ticket, can mean we’re on the streets. Never mind that we’re crammed into a third-story walk-up in Southie where we suffer heat so suffocating that most evenings we trudge down to Carson Beach to get relief—a half-moon of tiny pebbles and sharp seashells in the city, overcrowded with clannish, freakishly pale families speaking in a harsh accent that makes me miss home.

I know he’s dangerous. I grasp the treachery in his charm and eloquence. From what he’s confessed to me, I doubt he can help it. He’s the scorpion on the frog’s back. Yet here I am offering him a ride, an easy mark, and I don’t like it. I didn’t survive years on the street without being able to spot a hustler. But somehow the vibrancy of the photo and the intimacy of his sandy voice hushes the whispers of caution and acquits him of his crimes. I wade in.

That night, I sit on our rickety back porch to watch the planes fly in low over the neighborhood, their twinkling lights bright against the purple summer sky. As each plane passes, the house shakes and I wonder if it might suddenly collapse beneath us, its foundation weakened by years of neglect. When the mosquitoes start to feast on me I head back inside to check on the girls. They’re asleep. Sandra has wrapped herself in a Little Mermaid sheet. She’s curled tight and doesn’t move. But Jessie lies on her back, sprawled out, one arm dangling limply from the side of the bed. Her sheet and the same ratty blanket she’s had for years are tousled at her feet. I smile and shuffle down to Sean’s room. He tosses and turns, unable to get comfortable even in his sleep. He seems to be coming apart. I’m not sure how to help him.

WE SET a date. August 13. Hurricane season. I come clean about my financial struggles. He tells me not to sweat it in a voice that’s punctuated by a deep, wet cough. His parents have already agreed to pay for my plane ticket. He was going to surprise me with the news. He’ll let them know the date and they’ll send it in the mail.

Recently, I’ve been pestered by the memory of my grandfather. Cancer desecrated his body. It turned him into a bag of bones trapped in his La-Z-Boy, oxygen hose clipped to his nose, a Viceroy in one hand and a bottle of Schlitz in the other, telling me he’d had a good run when we both knew that he hadn’t. In the end, I’d let him down, following his lead, carousing at the bar with my buddies instead of sitting by his side.

To fight off the guilt, I busy myself with preparations for the trip.

In a tiny office that looks like it’s

been ransacked by thieves, file cabinets left open, papers strewn about a metal desk and dirty tile floor, a broken coffee mug in the corner, I beg my foreman for vacation time. He wipes his meaty hands on grease-stained pants and shakes his square Irish head. We’re busy in late summah, he says in a thick Boston accent. You know that. Plus I need notice. But when I explain the circumstances, suddenly overwhelmed and unexpectedly holding back tears, he softens and agrees. Man’s got to know his fathah, he says. Back in the warehouse, where fiberglass car panels lie on platformed shelves that reach to the top of the corrugated roof, even the forklift exhaust fumes seem harmless. One of my knuckleheaded coworkers rides past me. What the fuck you smiling about? he asks.

At home, after staring at the phone for fifteen minutes, I call my mom. Tell her about the approaching visit. I don’t mention the cancer. She’s furious, gives me serious shit for keeping the whole thing from her. From three hundred miles away, I can feel her rage shake loose from wherever she’s kept it all these years. You better stay on guard, she says. You’ll never see it coming until it’s too late. That bastard will break your heart. At first, I argue with her. People change, I say. I’ve changed. I think about but don’t mention all the times I’ve one-eyed it down the road, trying to even out the double vision, the car unregistered and uninsured, the kids in the back seat, heading for some sketchy street corner to cop coke. But then I realize that he lives for her through me and I back off. I wonder if I’ll feel the same about the girls, years from now, when they’ve grown to look and sound like their mother, who, from what I gather, is living under a bridge in Florida.

A few days later, she sends a check to pay for a suitcase, a couple pairs of shorts, and what she calls boat shoes. In her note, she writes: Tread carefully, Hon. There are snakes in the grass.

When I finally tell the kids that my mom’s coming up for a week while I visit him, they look confused. Wait. Jessie says. You have a daddy? So Grammy’s married? Sandra snorts. Duh? Not anymore, dummy. Sean sits in the corner, knees to his chest, staring wide-eyed. Nope, he says over and over. I have my doubts about leaving them, especially Sean. My mom’s always been involved in his life. But he’s not the same kid she knew before we left. He needs me and I’m worried that if I leave he’ll think I’m gone for good.

The next weekend, I walk around Downtown Crossing like a lost child until a young sales clerk in Filene’s takes pity on me. I blurt out the whole story. She listens politely, nods, and hooks me up with everything. Have a wonderful trip, she says, cheerfully. I get home and try on the clothes again. Look at myself in my funhouse mirror. Despite the weekend runs, I need some fine tuning. On Monday morning I plead with the babysitter to stay for an extra hour each day so I can do more roadwork. She offers a sly smile. After five o’clock will cost you double, she says.

Early evening. The sky bright blue yet softening with advancing indigo and violet, a flare of fiery red behind a

few lonely clouds. I take my usual weekend route but push it hard, sprinting down Broadway to Day Boulevard, settling into a six-minute-mile clip along the Harbor Walk, out to UMass Boston and back to Castle Island, where I finish by walking the loop to cool down. Families with little kids and big dogs zigzag across the black-topped path impeding the flow of traffic. Rollerbladers zip past them, throwing shade, mumbling insults. A group of loud freckled-faced teenagers, ballcaps backward, sunburned shoulders, openly talk shit about people. They flick their cigarette butts on the path and defy anyone to object. I laugh at them and sit on a stone retaining wall with the shrieking gulls as sailboats rip across the rough, whitecapped waters, propelled by a strong, unrelenting wind.

The rush of endorphins focuses my mind. Things are moving too quickly. I’m not ready to see him. He’s looking for forgiveness, trying to impose on me the responsibility of validating the mess he’s made of his life. He wants me to play the role of son so he can unburden himself of the fact that he’s never been a father. But I’m no actor. However I respond to his apology, if it comes, will be as surprising to me as it is to him. I don’t want the drama.

Still. I’m counting the days.

TWO WEEKS out. The man’s voice on the phone is elderly and sad and strangely familiar. Chris, he says. This is Beau, your grandfather.

He tells me my father is dead. The

cancer stole his breath, he says. Like other times, times I knew nothing about, he’d been rushed to the hospital where they’d put him on a ventilator until he could breathe on his own. But this time, he didn’t make it.

I thank Beau for the news and tell him that I’m sorry he’s gone to the trouble of buying the plane ticket.

Plane ticket? he says.

Right, I say and hang up.

I leave the kids to fend for themselves, tell them I’ll be right back, and drive to Mission Hill. It takes about five minutes to spot an active corner. From the looks of things, they’re peddling coke. I park up the street, nearly out of sight, and observe the hustle, transactions more fluid than in any store I’ve ever shopped. My heart’s hammering. But I sit for a while, listening to the Black Crowes’ “Remedy” on BCN and watching the endless parade of desperate people haunted by who knows what. They hand one dude their money, drive around the block to pick up their package from another, hoping to quiet their minds for a few minutes, a few hours if they’re lucky. But there’s always an end to the relief. They’ll be back tonight or tomorrow. It’s a brutal cycle from which there seems no escape when you’re in it.

Yeah. Here I am. One of the tormented. But I won’t join them on their death march. I’m not about to follow him to the grave. You only get so many chances. I’ve used up mine. I don’t know what I’m doing here. Not really. Maybe it’s one last look at a deadly life I know I’m about to leave behind. I put the car in gear, swing around the block, and drive back to Southie.□

Plastic Cup

Pissing in a plastic cup
with Hank—my PO—up against me.
I stare out the window at a brick wall
wishing to be anywhere else.

The parole officer hovers over me,
whispers *what’s wrong, Charlie?* in my ear,
wishing to be somewhere else:
work, the library, anything but here.

Hank whispers *where you going, Charlie?*
He doesn’t know I’m leaving soon—
work, library or school—not here.
I’m writing a book of glass that will dance in the air.

No one knows I’m leaving soon,
but right now I have nowhere to go
except into this book of glass that dances in the air
where my teeth will ring and I’ll disappear.

At this moment there’s no place to go.
A spider sleeps in the ceiling’s black crack.
Soon my teeth will ring like a bomb and I’ll disappear.
You think I’m lying, look at me

watch a spider sleep peacefully in the crack,
then stare out the window at a brick wall.
You think I’m a liar, look at me
pissing in a plastic cup.

—Charles Kell

Roger

Frank Bourne

I FOLLOWED KAT to Portland. She landed in Charleston because it was as far from her parents as she could get without leaving the country, she said, and she needed space to sort out a few things, decide what she wanted to do with her life. Her brother was an engineer at the Navy base. I asked him once what he did over there, and he said, “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.” He said this deadpan, then walked away. I don’t think he liked me very much. I met Kat at a party, a house on Ladson, south of Broad. She was huddled in a corner with Ginny Wheaton, whispering conspiratorially while they passed a joint back and forth. I crashed the conversation, stumbled into her in the process. She grabbed my arm to keep her balance, told me I had an odd way of introducing myself. Ginny wandered off. We were inseparable, me and Kathleen, for the six weeks she was around after that. Before she flew home at the end of July, she said we’d find a way to work things out, made me promise to write at least. A couple of weeks after she left, I bought a bus ticket and headed west. Four days on a Greyhound. Farthest I’d been before that was Macon, Georgia. I didn’t think about what I was doing. We barely knew each other. Barely knew anything, really. I called her from a pay phone in Fargo, North Dakota, told her I was on the way, and when I finally arrived, she met me at the station, wrapped

her arms around me so tight you’d think I’d just returned from a moon landing. We found a cheap apartment and shacked up for a month before she decided she’d had enough and went home to her parents and their cookie-cuttered three-two ranch in Maywood. I’m in the apartment still, a grungy studio near the northwest entrance to Washington Park. Jobs are scarce. The economy is pretty bad. I’m trying to squirrel enough money away to get out, but it’s difficult. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and all that. Six months and all I have to show for it is forty-three bucks stashed under a loose floorboard in the kitchen. At this rate, I’ll be here forever.

I WORK IN a sandwich shop downtown, a lunch place mainly. People come for the hoagies, but we open early for what the owner refers to as a continental breakfast—a small assortment of pastries from Rose’s Bakery, delivered just before we open; and coffee, freshly brewed and consumed almost entirely by mid-morning. We close at seven p.m., earlier if we run out of meatballs. The meatballs are the main draw. They’re gold, the owner says. He allows us to eat anything we want in lieu of better wages. Anything, that is, except the meatballs.



His mother makes them at home every morning and drops them off, still warm, in time for the lunch rush. I don't know that farming out food preparation like this is entirely aboveboard, but no one's complaining, so we just let that slide. I'm on my feet most of the day, but I do get a short break before the noon rush and a longer one after. The afternoons can be pretty slow. The neighborhood is a little rough around the edges, but lately I see more suits, mostly lawyers and accountants setting up shop in reclaimed buildings that were graffitied derelicts just a few years back. We occupy a storefront on the ground floor of one of these buildings, across the street from the Oregon Bank. A steady stream of transplanted professionals floods us at lunchtime, a line of people out the door, very few of them up to any funny business.

There is this one particular guy, though. Roger. Built like a scarecrow, tall and loose-jointed. Wild eyes framed by black horn-rimmed glasses. Wavy blond bedhead hair, combed and parted to little effect. Rumpled suit, sky blue, coat sleeves a little too short and high-water pants a little too tight. White Oxford shirt, missing a button on the collar. Red, white, and blue repp necktie, knot slightly off-kilter. Wingtips, beat to hell. Everything but the wingtips slept in, I'd say. A character straight out of an R. Crumb comic.

Portland has a reputation for keeping things weird, and I deal every day with a broad sample of human peculiarities. I'm accustomed to dealing with addicts, transients, and a host of other less fortunate souls. The owner gives me plenty of room to maneuver. "No point getting maimed over half a sandwich," he says. Word usually gets around when you give stuff away, but I'm only a little less desperate than anyone else down here. The way I see it, we're all, every one of us, a part of the lunatic fringe, all just a step or two ahead of or away from something. At the moment, I occupy a spot on this side of the counter, buoyed by a job that pays just enough to keep me here, one degree of separation between me and the street. I'm inured to fortune's obvious randomness, accustomed to its ebb and flow, people drifting back and forth across the line. I'm rarely spooked by any of the people I see on a regular basis, but there is something unnerving about Roger. His dark eyes hint at a darker interior. They shift chaotically, consume the light, driven by some arcane inner mechanism. I'm afraid, when he's around, that I'll be swept into the void.

He comes in every morning, a little before eight, for coffee and an apple tart. I'm in the back, prepping for the lunch rush, when I hear the door open in the front of the store, followed by a palpable silence. I stop what I'm doing, wash my hands, and walk out front. Roger sits in a booth, his large hands before him, palms pressed flat on the table, fingers spread very wide. I take my position behind the counter, clear my throat, and wait. I could just pour the coffee and grab the pastry, but I know if I did he'd ask for something else instead. Two beats, always, before he stands and approaches me. "A c-c-c-cup of coffee and one of th-th-those." He points at the pastries, then quickly returns to his booth, apparently anxious to re-secure his spot. I pour the coffee, stuff a tart and a napkin into a small paper bag, and let him know his order is ready. I say, "That'll be \$2.15." And he replies, "R-roger." I don't know how or where he gets his money. Actually, I'm surprised that he is able to function well enough to hold down a job, particularly one that requires the wearing of a suit. He produces a well-worn coin purse and extracts a random assortment of coins. Lots of pennies. He metes the payment out precisely, one coin at a time, then sweeps the pile back into his purse and repeats the procedure. I'm told this kind of behavior is symptomatic of obsessive-compulsive disorder, but I'm no shrink, and I'm hesitant to suggest a diagnosis that might underestimate Roger's general state of mind. I ring him up, and he takes the styrofoam cup and paper bag to his booth. I return to the back to complete prepping for the day.

After a few minutes, I hear a noise. It's not loud, not recognizable as anything that might be linked directly to another human being. The noise is always the same. It never takes less than a minute nor more than five for the noise to occur. I stop what I'm doing, wash up, and walk out front. Spilt coffee is spreading across Roger's table and onto the floor next to his booth. Most mornings, the dark puddle is still expanding away from him as I emerge. He sits quietly, as though nothing has happened, nibbling at his pastry. His empty coffee cup sits upright on the table. I go into the back, retrieve a mop and a handful of paper towels. I wipe down the table and mop the floor. He never says a word, never offers any sort of explanation. To be fair, he does not scowl or turn away in agitation either. Expressionless, he stares and chews, his hair a halo of disarray. His eyes dart madly. I leave him there, return to my work. When I'm done, around 8:30, I walk out front, and Roger is gone.

This is our routine. We could just as well be rehearsing a play, all the blocking and dialogue worked out and committed to memory, practiced to the point where elevation from unremarkable two-step to artful pas de deux might be within reach, if either of us were so inclined. We're not. I am simply doing a job. I have no idea what Roger is doing.

ONE MORNING, still reeling from whatever it was I consumed for recreational purposes the previous evening, followed by whatever I thought I needed to consume to negate its effects at least enough to make it into work, I come out front, having heard the noise, feeling a little less charitable than usual. Coffee is spreading slowly across the table and floor. I break protocol and come out from behind the counter. I put one hand on Roger's table, disturbing the warm amber pool. I lean in close to Roger's ear and whisper, in my most menacing voice, "Goddamit, Roger. Would you stop pouring your goddam coffee all over the goddam place?" I raise myself to my full height, cross my arms, and await his response. He says nothing. Doesn't even flinch. He does pause, very briefly, his nibbling, though. "Oh, for Chrissake," I say. I retrieve a towel and mop from the

back, wipe down the table, mop the floor, and return, disgusted, to prepping. When I come back out front, he is gone.

The following day, Roger comes in at the usual time, places his order in the usual way, sits in his booth, staring off into the distance as he sips his coffee and eats his pastry. I return to the back as I usually do, but on this morning, I don't hear the noise. At first, I think my sense of time must be off. After ten minutes, I'm convinced that something is amiss. I wash up quickly and walk out front. No one is there. Not a drop of coffee is spilled on the table or floor. I'm puzzled, but I'm also thinking, "Hah, I fixed him," as I head back to finish my prep work. "Maybe I should have said something to him months ago."

Roger never spills another drop. It never occurs to me to ask him why. It never occurs to me to ask him anything at all. Or to strike up any kind of conversation. Apart from this welcome modification, our routine is unchanged. A couple of weeks pass. My uneasiness around Roger dissipates.

THE FIRST time he fails to show is a cold and rainy Monday. I attribute his absence to the winter weather, but he doesn't show the next day either. Or the next. I talk to my friend Kelly about his sudden disappearance, tell her about losing my temper and how I thought that maybe I'd fixed him, and how, in retrospect, I regretted not asking him anything about it. She listens carefully, her expression grim, and says you always think everything's all about you. I open my mouth to respond, but before I can get in a word, she waves me off and says what if Roger wasn't looking to be fixed, what if he doesn't need fixing. She says what if he just needs someone to talk to, what if the coffee thing is his best idea for getting your attention. She says what if he's working out some serious business that's more than a little overwhelming. She says what if you hurt his feelings. She says what if he turned out to be Jesus, what about that. There is a trace of venom in her tone as she says all these things. I'm a little surprised she's so unsympathetic towards me, surprised she's taken Roger's side so quickly. I suppose she and I aren't as close as I imagined. We did sleep together the one time, more out of curiosity than anything else, but still.

I LOOK FOR Roger on the streets around the shop for a few weeks, but I'm stuck inside for much of the day, so the likelihood of running into him is infinitesimally small. Practically non-existent. I don't really know anything about him, so I have no basis for guessing where he might have gone. When my search strategy fails to produce even a sighting and I begin to repeat the pattern, it occurs to me that I may never see him again. I never do. I haven't seen Kelly lately, either.

I'VE TRIED, but I'm unable to reproduce the noise. That's beginning to bug me.□



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All of the photographs in this issue were taken by Judith Black and are contained in either *Pleasant Street* or *Vacation*, her two published books. Below are the captions for each image reproduced here, listed by page. Please see page 4 for further information about Judith Black.

Front Cover: Matt, April 6, 1992, Seattle, Washington (from *Vacation*).

3: Dylan, Laura, Johanna, Erik, July 9, 1982. *Leaving on vacation* (from *Pleasant Street*).

5: Self, February 1993. *With Mom and Aunt Edie. Empty nest* (from *Pleasant Street*).

6: Til and Robbie, February 15, 1987, Ithaca, New York (from *Vacation*).

8: Rob and self, January 29, 1989 (from *Pleasant Street*).

9: Rob, May 1980. *And Erik and Mama Kitty* (from *Pleasant Street*).

14: Dad and self, March 4, 1986, Seattle, Washington (from *Vacation*).

16: Dylan and Erik, February 1980 (from *Pleasant Street*).

17: Self, November 19, 1979. *On Erik's birthday* (from *Pleasant Street*).

18: Living room, October 1979 (from *Pleasant Street*).

21: Laura, June 11, 1989. *With Erik, on my birthday* (from *Pleasant Street*).

22: Rob, June 18, 1994. *Father's Day* (from *Pleasant Street*).

23: Self, July 1, 1994 (from *Pleasant Street*).

24: Self and Matt, January 11, 1992, Seattle, Washington. *Bad migraine* (from *Vacation*).

26: Rob and Jim, August 1986, Chicago, Illinois (from *Vacation*).

29: Self with kids, July 14, 1984. *Leaving on vacation* (from *Pleasant Street*).

31: Dad and Gaye, March 5, 1986, Seattle, Washington. *Dad remarried after Mom died* (from *Vacation*).

Back Cover: Eileen and Sophie, August 12, 1986, Ithaca, New York (from *Vacation*).

BOOKS

The Pessimist in Exile

Bailey Trela

Late Montale, translated by George Bradley. NYRB Poets, 2014, \$20.00 paper.

Butterfly of Dinard, by Eugenio Montale, translated by Marla Moffa and Oonagh Stransky. NYRB Classics, 2024, \$16.95 paper.

THERE IS a haunting poem from Eugenio Montale’s first collection in which the speaker imagines going for a walk one morning, turning around suddenly, and catching sight of “the nothing at my back, the void / behind me.” For first-time readers of Montale, the words can come on like a strange existential thunderclap, announcing the aggressively modern, anxiety-prone voice of the poet’s early lyrics—far outside the lyric tradition occupied by his forebears, and indeed by many of his contemporaries.

What I mean to suggest is that early Montale was already, in a way, conspicuously *late*. From his first compositions on, the poetry is detached, pessimistic, expressing in spades the particular tongue-shriveling *Weltschmerz*—bitter as lemon rind—that can make Montale, even at his most lyrical, a difficult cocktail to down in one. Poets, like people, are of course allowed to revisit their early preoccupations, but when Montale picks up an old theme, it can feel as though the intervening time has simply been snipped away. More than five decades later, Montale would return to the trope of the perceptual crisis in the poem “Internal/ External,” a brief missive that feels familiar in its clinicality. “When reality disconnects from itself / (assuming anything was ever real) and part / of it hardens over us like a scab,” the poem reads, “an ethereal albeit non-pharmaceutical odor / alerts us that the links have separated.”

When it comes to Montale, the idea of lateness is complicated for other reasons as well. By and large, Montale’s reputation rests on the three volumes of poetry he published between 1925 and 1956. Appearing at roughly fifteen-year intervals, *Ossi di seppia* (“Cuttlefish Bones”), *Le occasioni* (“The Occasions”), and *La bufera e altro* (“The Storm and Other Things”) provide an expansive but still cohesive vision of the Montalean cosmology. Although Montale’s fourth collection, *Satura*, was published only fifteen years after *La bufera e altro*, this gap in publication is generally described as a great silence; thus, while Montale was on the precipice of his seventh decade of life when *La bufera* appeared, it’s only with the publication of *Satura* that we really begin to speak of *late* Montale. Why should that be so?

Primarily, we’re speaking of a stylistic break. With their resolute asperities of tone, Montale’s early works were in part a reaction to the classical bombast of Gabriele D’Annunzio, who, along with the *crepuscolari*, or twilight poets, dominated the Italian poetry scene in the early twentieth century. From the beginning Montale sensed that his native language’s lush tendencies would need to be counteracted by a drier, leaner aesthetic, and the early poems also reflect an aversion to rhyme and smooth rhythms, both naturally abundant in Italian. While this stance represented a conscious eluding of the liquid sonorities of tradition, it was also, for Montale, an instinctive attitude—as witness the sun-blasted Ligurian coast of his childhood, or the eponymous bones, blanched and rattling, of his first collection. Montale was simply more comfortable in the ironized landscape of high modernism.

IF THE early poetry was highly wrought and typified, in Jonathan Galassi’s phrase, by an “astringent lyricism,” the later poetry is a conversation, first and foremost—prosaic, observational, epigrammatic, and witty in a tannic way. It is also markedly telegraphic. “As with many creators in old age,” Galassi writes, “the mere statement of a theme seems to suffice; its elaboration becomes superfluous.” Selected and translated by George Bradley, *Late Montale* includes a selection of poems from Montale’s final books that bear these observations out.

Of Montale’s two main English-language translators, Galassi, to my mind, best captures the involuted, painfully self-conscious quality of the early poems. When it comes to the later poetry, which is comparatively straightforward, the classicist William Arrowsmith often feels more suited, tonally, to the task. Bradley, a poet in his own right, tacks closer to Arrowsmith’s approach. His version of Montale’s late voice captures a certain limpid and soft-spoken quality that seems essential to these particular utterances, which often have the air of something spoken at a café table, an observation followed just as long as language can keep up, before being dropped, suddenly but without a care. Inevitably, the late poems are also intensely personal. Instead of the wealth of literary references found in the early poetry, Montale here alludes constantly to friends and acquaintances, to locations of deep (though, to the reader, obscure) significance, to his habits and individual obsessions.

The increased personal touch extends to his traditional themes as well. “Montale is a muse poet *par excellence*,” Bradley notes in his introduction, “and the memory of women loved and lost performs a vital function in

his poetry.” This is true in all of Montale’s poetry, but as Galassi has pointed out, the muses become more particularized in the late poetry—they are suddenly real people, “less mythic and remote, less figural.” Consider the *Xenia* poems, a cycle of elegies for Montale’s wife, Drusilla Tanzi, who passed away in 1963. Terribly near-sighted, Tanzi wore bottle-thick corrective lenses and was known affectionately as Mosca—the fly. In “*Xenia II, 5*,” the speaker describes an act of caretaking, the dynamics of which are eventually reversed:

I went down a million stairs with you on
my arm
not because four eyes might well see better
than two.
I descended them in your company because
I knew
that between us, the true eyesight, even if
opaque,
was yours.

It’s a gentle, habitual movement, with Mosca’s clouded vision paradoxically lighting the way, lantern-like. Montale himself seems to grow smaller as the poem progresses; though he begins with Mosca “on [his] arm,” in the very next sentence he is simply “in [her] company.” Coupled to this Orphic descent is the Icarus-like rise in “*Lake Sorapis, 40 Years Ago*,” which recalls a stay in the Dolomites:

At first I walked it
by myself, to check if your weak eyes
could cope with the switchback road
that burrowed through the ice-bound cliffs.
And such a long way! A road comfortable
only
in the first stretch, among dense conifers
and the alarm cries of the perturbed jays.
After that, I led you by the hand
all the way to the top and an empty hut.
There was our lake, just a few feet of
water,
where we were two lives too young to be
old
but too old to feel we were young.

In the seam between these two poems there are several inversions—between descending and ascending, age and youth, weakness and strength.

This pairing tendency, in which a central image or motion is treated from two diametrically opposed directions, is fairly common in Montale’s later work. Two river poems, for instance, offer a subtler case. “Great rivers are the image of time, / cruel and impersonal,” the first argues. “Seen from a bridge / they declare their nothingness to be inexorable.” But is this really true? “*Xenia II, 14*” contains a description of the disastrous 1966 flood in Florence that would seem to support the thesis. “The flood swamped the clutter of furniture, / of documents, of pictures crammed into / a basement room closed with a double lock,” we read. Also devastated are several “leather-bound / volumes,” including works by Ezra Pound, Dino Campana, and Charles Du Bos. But there is a lovely paradox here. While it may seem as though the flood has swept these intellectual trinkets away, the poem *about* the flood has in fact preserved them. (Who, after all, reads Du Bos anymore?) All in all, the futility underlying the late poetry’s magpie sensibility, its commitment to limning the little

novelties that make up a life, is generally treated with a certain lightness; it is never really allowed to deepen into despair. “Whenever I’m not certain of being alive / reassurance is close at hand,” the poem “Hiding Places” reads, “but it takes / effort to find those things again: a pipe, a little / wooden dog that was my wife’s, the obituary / of her brother, several pairs of eyeglasses,” and so on.

This material glut is interesting. In the main, Montale’s is a poetry of excess, but what’s usually emphasized is a surplus of the immaterial. Light, sound, and wind all run rampant through the poetry, edging up against a certain material thickness; in the poem “Vento e bandiere,” for instance, the wind is a *sgorgo*—a flooding. Montale’s faith in sensation, in the grit of the physical, is transcendent; intangible phenomena must be pushed to their extremes and redeemed into palpability. This seems one way of interpreting the frequent jabs at science that appear in the late poetry. “Friends, put no faith in light-years / in time and space, curved or planar,” a brief, untitled poem reads. “The truth lies in our hands / but can’t be caught and wriggles like an eel.” Modern science, Montale seems to argue, deals in phenomena and concepts so abstract as to be incapable of being brought into the realm of the senses.

The later elegies for Mosca seem to play with this idea, dwelling on traces of physical presence and other border phenomena. “It seems impossible, / my divine one, my everything,” we read, “that what remains of you after the greenish-red flames / is less than a firefly out of season.” The real mysteries, we suspect, aren’t those of science or religion, but the commoner rites of perception, which after all can verge on the religious—for instance, when a full, embodied presence has been transmuted into the faintest of optical phenomena, a phosphorescent gash on the night air.

THE PROSE book *Butterfly of Dinard*—which was published in the same year as *La bufera e altro*, 1956—collects a series of slice-of-life articles written for the *Corriere della Sera*, Italy’s leading daily. Light as just-blown bubbles, delicate as glassine paper, the stories belong to the genre of *elzeviri*, “atmospheric pieces intended for the *terza pagina*, the third or opinion page of a daily,” as Galassi explains in his introduction to the NYRB Classics edition. By his own admission, Montale wrote most of the pieces quickly, in a matter of hours, and some of them, admittedly, feel dutifully knocked-off. Still, given that Montale is known as a poet of dense, vigorously inward-turning lyrics, there’s something inherently appealing about these more insouciant outings.

The book’s four sections linger over Montale’s childhood in Genoa and on the Ligurian coast, as well as his experiences in Florence in the interwar years. The narrator is typically a Montalean persona—bemused, memory-haunted, sagacious in his non-attachment—while the subjects and strategies of the early poetry appear in simpler or miniaturized forms. Montale’s predilection for Dantean rhetorical flights is charming-

ly sent up, for instance, when the prose in one story zeroes in on “a long ribbon of yellow flypaper dotted with black spots that were not merely buzzing, but practically screaming and thrashing in collective agony.” In a similar way, Montale’s penchant for sonic overload, his love of clangor—the early poetry is utterly cacophonous, filled with tambourines and horns, trumpets and castanets—is comically refracted in the brief story “Success,” a consideration of claqueurs, or professional applauders. “One must be kind when it comes to claqueurs,” the narrator asserts, since an “opera or a melodrama without applause neither warms the heart nor can even be considered a proper performance.”

In its overarching air of gentle irony, *Butterfly of Dinard* sits comfortably between the harsh cynicism of the early poetry and the punchy sarcasms of the later poetry. There are beautifully off-kilter images scattered throughout the text, like the song of a titmouse, which fills the air like a “vocal squiggle,” or the passing-by of a bat in the dark, experienced as “a viscous whoosh.” (The volume’s translators, Marla Moffa and Oonagh Stransky, are marvelously attuned throughout to Montale’s eccentric images and the stories’ generally balmy tone.) The book’s characters are for the most part charming oddballs, outgrowths of the Italian predilection for minor grotesques. “The Enemies of Mr. Fuchs,” for instance, is a humorous study of the titular “leviathan of learning,” whose “principal occupation is that of professional guest.” Fuchs finagles his way into being hosted for lunch by the narrator; a bemusing contretemps surrounding a broken radiator ends with Fuchs in high dudgeon, offended by the narrator’s solicitous attempts to wave the matter away. “When I broke the wall mirror belonging to Princess Thurn und Taxis, she dismissed the butler and the mirror was replaced immediately,” Fuchs declares. “And in that particular case, I really was at fault, while today the question at hand is still *sub judice*. Adieu.”

Throughout the collection, an essential earthiness is overlaid with a fine drizzle of nostalgia. In the story “On the Beach,” the narrator is lounging on the sand within sight of a pensione when a care package arrives from a former acquaintance, a Miss Bronzetti, who seems to have kept the narrator in her thoughts over the years. For his part, the narrator has forgotten Miss Bronzetti entirely, and is unable to firmly recall her first name:

To be honest, I’m crestfallen. I think about the tricks the mind plays on us, on our bottomless wells of memory. I thought I had always done right by myself. And, in terms of others, I figured that an infinite number of now-faded things lived on inside me, finding their ultimate goal and purpose in my heart. In other words, I thought I was rich but now realized I was actually destitute. Someone I had forgotten about entirely had caught me off guard; I live on in the mind of Anactoria or Annalena, I subsist in her, but not she in me.

The dark epiphany on offer here is mildly anti-Proustian, in the sense that Montale’s narrator seems to suggest a true memory never needs to be recalled

by a sudden infusion of sense or contact—that a true memory instead *persists*. The woman’s sudden eruption into the narrator’s consciousness is another instance of a *varco*: those moments in the poetry when a sudden rupture occurs, a breakthrough, a tear in the net. But here the opening-up isn’t an existential sundering, as it would be in the early poetry; instead, it’s merely the puncturing of one particular ego’s preserving illusions.

IN DISCUSSING Montale’s late poetry, Joseph Brodsky singled out the “fugitive beauty” of its “subtle, muttering, and yet firm stoic voice,” a voice “which tells us that the world ends with neither a bang nor a whimper but with a man talking, pausing, and then talking again.” To me, this emphasis on a halting aesthetic gets at something vital about Montale’s late poetry. From *Satura* on, the poems are marked by a sage intermittency. The authorial pose is that of a prophet comfortable, paradoxically, with taking his time.

This hesitant affect is pushed even further in the very late poems that round out Bradley’s selection. Notably, *Late Montale* contains the full text of *The House in Olgiate and Other Poems*, published in Italy in 2006 but only now appearing in English. The works that make up the collection were discovered after Montale’s death in two handwritten notebooks, which the poet had left to his housekeeper, Gina Tiossi. By and large, the poems are untitled, epigrammatic, fragmentary—

mere stabs at meaning. A poem about the poet Giovanni Pascoli reads, in its entirety, “Alas, he lacked irony regarding himself / (the most important kind there is).” Elsewhere, this simplicity lends itself to a certain wry wistfulness. “To have heard the roosters / crow in Corsica / used to mean having ventured so far / as to be a long way out in the open sea,” another poem reads. “Once I heard talk of such rash behavior / from just a few elderly gentlemen. / It was what our mystics nowadays / would call Transcendence.” There’s an implication here that the terms of the poem are unstable, that its ideas—like life—are a bit of a muddle. Even the poem’s terminal offering (transcendence with a capital T) is spotted with uncertainty: is it the “rash behavior” of being “a long way out in the open sea” that constitutes the poem’s transcendence, or is it merely the experience of hearing “just a few elderly gentlemen” describe the idiom?

There is something playfully unwound about these last poems. The poet is no longer really *in* the world, but still has a compulsion to register its minutiae. And why not? Reality persists, after all: “Like a Havana cigar, / this world keeps smoldering on.” In these very late poems, there’s no capstone effect; in fact, they often feel like retractions, quick attempts to erase one’s presence. All that’s left is the muttering, the desire (if we can even call it that) to write. This is fitting, I think. After all, what really remains of a poet? A voice, if we’re lucky—a pattern of breath.□

Untitled

Let us find one illusion,
but one that’s true and fair.
Not the victor’s laughter,
nor the crux, nor prayer.
Let’s roll romantic dice—
at stake: the truths we covet.
Let’s even speak of nothing
but let’s speak poorly of it.

—Paolo Febbraro
(translated from the Italian
by Geoffrey Brock)

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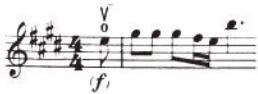
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BOOKS

Green Thoughts

Bert Keizer

Planta Sapiens
by Paco Calvo.
W. W. Norton, 2023,
\$19.99 paper.

The Light Eaters
by Zoë Schlanger.
Harper, 2024,
\$29.00 cloth.

THE ASHES of planet scientist Eugene Shoemaker were brought to the moon in 1998 by way of NASA’s Lunar Prospector. The space vehicle circled the moon for nineteen months before it was deliberately caused to crash in the Shoemaker crater near the lunar south pole. There were protests from the Navajo community, who consider the moon to be a family member. The violent deposition of a dead man’s ashes was felt to be a desecration. NASA said, “Sorry.”

This is rather an extreme example of the ascription of some sort of sentience to the things around us. What we call philosophy started in Greece with the first attempts to look at the world in a deeply different way. The Greeks were the first people who looked at the world and wondered: Is he looking back at us, or what? What indeed.

Up until that point in time, all our misery was thought to be caused by gods or spirits—non-human beings, anyway, willful creatures whom it might be possible to placate. We were handled by them (rather roughly, you might well add). They made us man, woman, ill, rich, ugly, old, poor, beautiful, and in the end they even caused our death. The view is mentioned somewhere in *King Lear*: *As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods: They kill us for their sport*.

Over the ages we gradually sidled out of this idea of an intentional world toying with us. The causes of our misery were wrenched away from priests and landed in the domain of the scientist. The moon, once a relative of the Navajo, is now regarded as a cold, bare, gray, and rather dull rock.

Descartes went furthest in this removal of mind from the world. He found it unbelievable that mental life—that is, having a soul—was something you could find in animals. To him, mental life meant the ability to think, which implied a possible route towards knowledge of God. He judged it impossible that such a precious pearl could be found in swine. As a dire illustration of what he meant by this, he said that when a dog yelps with pain because you accidentally stepped on its tail, that is not a sign of pain. Compare it to the sound you get when you blow into the pipe of an organ; the pipe makes a sound but doesn’t feel anything, and it is the same with the dog. Thank God, there are enough well-groomed dogs in seventeenth-century paintings to show that this was not the

general view in those days. There is something troubling about the ascription of feelings, thoughts if you like, to animals. All is well when we look at animals who are, biologically speaking, close to us. We are sure that dogs, cats, chickens, birds, horses, cows, and sheep feel pain, can be afraid, experience hunger and fear, etc. That is why we abhor the bio-industry: because there people treat animals as if they cannot suffer. Moving down the evolutionary ladder (although Darwin said, “Never say higher or lower”), it becomes more difficult to get at the feelings of, say, crocodiles, snakes, frogs. In the case of fish, it has been established now that they feel pain. But it took some establishing. When it comes to spiders, flies, ants, I don’t know what to say. I mean, they have no faces (for us) so they cannot express their discomfort. Maybe they have a way of wriggling that would signal pain. We just don’t know. When it comes to bacteria, I give up. They are so tiny (is the ridiculous thought), there just isn’t any room in there for feelings, let alone thoughts.

What about plants? What would make you think that they are experiencing anything? There is a recent upsurge of attention focusing on this possibility, the mental life of plants. In *Planta Sapiens: The New Science of Plant Intelligence*, Paco Salva, professor of the philosophy of plant cognition at the University of Murcia in southern Spain, points to a more subtle approach to plants. He wants to regard them as beings with intentions and aims. He pleads for a widening of the circle of compassion to include plants, the way Peter Singer successfully widened that circle to include farm animals. It is, after all, Singer’s alarm call which resulted in the animal welfare movement. Should we now embark on a plant welfare drive?

Paco Salva is not the only one who looks with a new unease at plant life. Zoë Schlanger cites some examples in *The Light Eaters: How the Unseen World of Plant Intelligence Offers a New Understanding of Life on Earth*. When thale cress is attacked by insects it exudes chemicals that work as a signal to sister plants, who then produce chemicals to ward off the insects. The signal is even picked up by other plants, who react likewise.

Thale cress harbors quite an armory. The plant reacts to the minimal vibrations of a munching caterpillar by producing chemicals which deter caterpillars. The question is: does the plant hear the chewing caterpillar? And when the caterpillar sinks its teeth into a leaf, will there be pain? How could we find out?

Let’s step away from biology into a different sphere. Friends of mine are electronic enthusiasts. When you say, “Okay, Google, Radio One” in their living room, then that is the station

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that will come on. They speak in like manner to their robot vacuum cleaner and the lighting arrangement—quite an intricate arrangement, which admits of various shades, and even colors. Now, are we going to say that these domestic appliances are listening? No, because you can easily trace the electronic circuitry that explains what happens here. There is no need for any mental accompaniment.

On the other hand, if we’re talking about electronic circuitry, consider what happened in June 2022 to Blake Lemoine, an IT specialist working for Google. He came to realize that the computer program he was working with (LaMDA) had acquired a proper soul—in short, that it was alive men-

tally. LaMDA stands for Language Model for Dialogue Applications. Google would have none of it and Lemoine was hurried offstage. The question is: was there a screw loose in Lemoine, or were the screws in LaMDA fastened in such a manner that a mind would arise?

We unwittingly move ourselves into a quandary here. Because if you think there is no need of any mental accompaniment when you can trace the electronic events from A to Z, what then of the human brain? There too you can trace the electronic events from A to Z. For instance: light hits the retina, and spike trains then travel down the optic nerve, branching out into many brain areas. If you were to trace only these

neurological events, what would make you say that a person is seeing? Or that he or she is not seeing? How would you know?

Are we going to say that “mind” only arises when the circuitry is highly complex? And that plants function at a level that is too simple to admit of conscious experience? What is “simple” in this context? Aren’t we finding out how much more complex plant interaction with the world is? (“Never say higher or lower.”)

The fact is that, even in our own case, it turns out to be impossible to come across mental life by studying our neurology. And similarly, studying plant variants of mammal neurology will not help us decide whether plants

have a mental life. An appeal to the high or low intricacy of circuitry is not going to help us out here.

So, back to our daily life. Animals cannot live without eating plants. It’s unlikely that girl-eats-lettuce is just as horrible as lion-eats-antelope. If we’re looking for pain in lettuce or in antelopes, it’s no use diving below the surface, into the biochemistry involved. We cannot find among molecules anything that points to mental events, neither in plants nor in animals. If there is any pain in lettuce, we’ll have to look for signs at the dinner table, not in the laboratory. And there you might ask: Just what should lettuce do in order for me to say, “She’s clearly in pain.” I have no idea.□

Lines on an Ex-Friend’s Death

1

If my brain doesn’t know it’s a brain
any more than this tarmac I’m driving over
to your funeral knows
what tarmac is,
then my mind is maybe like
this heat shimmer
receding as I approach,
mistaking
its freely rippling above the interstate
for origin, unaware
of what the rising up
is every moment rising from.

2

What happened in my brain, or to it,
when I heard that you were dying?
What electro-chemicals flooded through
what long-dried-up
neuronal tributaries to resurrect you
for a moment as you were
when we were drinking pals
before the falling out,
the never too petty
not to cling to
enmities, affection’s
not yet diminishing returns
on the zero sum
“last infirmity of noble mind”
you called a chicken run
where everyone pecks and scratches
through shit-strewn dirt
for scraps
we two pretended to despise?

But for a moment there you were again
in the old bar, Antonio’s Nuthouse,
next door to your wife’s therapist,
your shot glass raised
for the weekly toast:

“While my sweetie sees her shrink,
I go to the Nuthouse!”

And now we’re seeing who can recite
more Dickinson by heart
(you do, of course, as always)
till shot by shot
the dashes are all turning into question marks,
the Belle of Amherst now less Amherst Belle than shtetl,
more Dickinstein than Dickinson,
I heard a fly buzz when I died?
I like a look of agony?
I’m nobody? Who the hell are you?

3

I had to be egged on, guilty even,
by a mutual friend
to call you on what would be your last day.
Your voice phlegmy, tremulous
already otherworldly
and yet still unmistakably yours, but
what surprised me,
shamed me even, was the frank
wide-open pleasure in it hearing mine,
untainted by grudge or grievance,
as if no time had passed, or all time had,
for you at least, and in the walled prison
of your dying all you wanted was to tell old tales again
and pray and sing, and laugh about who loses and who wins;
who’s in, who’s out—all packs and sects
dissolving beyond any need for blessing
or forgiveness when you say before we hang up, please,
please, I’m begging you, get me a rabbi, before it’s too late, I want to
convert,
so I, on cue, can ask, “Why not a priest, or minister?”
so you can deadpan,
“Better one of you should die than one of us.”

—Alan Shapiro



BOOKS

Complicity. Wonder.

Peter Campion

**Invisible Mending:
The Best of C. K. Williams.**
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024,
\$25.00 cloth.

FEW POETS change as dramatically as C. K. Williams. I have in mind his big turn in the Seventies when poems influenced by surrealism and fueled by righteous indignation about the Vietnam War gave way to poems of narrative and discursive expansiveness, written in the long line that became his signature. His third collection, *With Ignorance* (1977), still feels like a breakthrough. How to describe the new amplitude? There’s a vigorous unease to this work. Whether portraying urban American neighborhoods in photorealist high res, observing awkward dealings between strangers, or examining the less agreeable aspects of his own experience, Williams now discovered poetry in embedded, everyday messiness, and such material drew from him an astonishing immediacy of voice.

But the big turn introduced by *With Ignorance* remains only the most obvious of the changes in his work. That’s the value of *Invisible Mending*, a new selection published nearly a decade after the poet’s death in 2015 and prefaced with an elucidating essay by Alan Shapiro. Presenting over fifty years of work with remarkable compactness, the book reveals how change, appearing fractal-like at the smallest and largest scales, lends this poetry its full power.

Consider the specific level of sentence, line, and phrase. Here, for example, are the first six lines of “The Gas Station” from the collection *Tar* (1983):

This is before I’d read Nietzsche. Before
Kant or Kierkegaard, even before
Whitman and Yeats.
I don’t think there were three words in my
head yet. I knew, perhaps, that I should
suffer,
I can remember I almost cried for this or
that, nothing special, nothing to speak
of.

Probably I was mad with grief for the loss
of my childhood, but I wouldn’t have
known that.

It’s dawn. A gas station. Route twenty-two.
I remember exactly: route twenty-two
curved,
there was a squat, striped concrete divider
they’d put in after a plague of collisions.

In a passage that might otherwise have remained mere scene-setting and a tone that feels at first diffident or downcast, Williams creates drama by a series of cunning adjustments. A shift occurs not only between psychological portraiture and physical description, not only between the young man in the story and the narrator in the present, but also within the narrator, who veers from hedging qualifications (“perhaps,” “almost,” “probably”) and self-deprecation (“nothing special, nothing to think of”) to vividness and conviction when he states, “I remember exactly.”

There’s also the dramatic insinuation of the first line: “This is before I’d read Nietzsche. Before Kant or Kierkegaard, even before Whitman and Yeats.” That opening implies a crucial change in the poet’s life during the years following the events of the poem—a sexual misadventure beginning for the group of friends when “We were in Times Square, a pimp found us, corralled us, led us somewhere.” The poet, we’re led to understand, has become someone different from the young man parked at a gas

station in New Jersey one early morning in the 1950s, weary after the night spent in Times Square. Williams leaves the reader to wonder, though, does reading philosophy and poetry make us better people? What if great literature changes our lives for the better and we still find ourselves toiling in uncertainty all over again? The change that “The Gas Station” portrays has little to do with the awakening conscience of the young man, and even less with any retroactive scolding. Instead, the poem reflects and embodies the mind of the poet in motion in the present, working through the recollected material and coming not to an achieved state of moral correction but a renewed and passionate alertness. In the penultimate line, remembering the young man he was, the poet writes, “Maybe the right words were there all along. *Complicity. Wonder.*”

We don’t usually consider those words together, and offered a choice, most would pick wonder over complicity, but Williams’s poems have everything to do with their relation. Fiercely moral while free of moralism, his poems ask: What might our questionable behaviors tell us about ourselves if we prevent judgment from foreclosing on inquiry? Could wonder lie waiting in less than wonderful circumstances? After all, before it meant involvement with others in wrongdoing, “complicity” simply denoted “being folded into,” and for Williams, being folded into human connection, even when it

implies guilt, appears more wondrous than transcendence to some sublime state.

This helps explain why Williams was so successful at maintaining the political power of his early work even as he zeroed in on autobiographical experience and the observation of immediate surroundings. In the mature poems, the entanglements of race, class, and gender and the degradation of the environment appear as frequent subjects, though seldom with the thematic neatness such a list suggests. In “The Gas Station,” “From My Window,” “Combat,” and “Tar,” as well as several of the best poems from *Flesh and Blood* (1987), the disjunction between the private and the public offers Williams a creative source. Admittedly, another word for *source* might be *agony*. In these poems, individuals find their lives beholden to larger powers they can only begin to understand. The poems give off a nearly Greek sense of fate, and yet some hope remains, if only because the wrenched-open psyche proves at least as mysterious and recalcitrant as those determining forces. Williams never romanticizes suffering, but he often discovers in it a vision of everyday experience as bigger, more significant, and more surprising than previously imagined.

Another turn in his work occurred a decade after the breakthrough of *With Ignorance* and still hasn’t received the critical attention it deserves. I mean the development of an abstract, analytic idiom that feels utterly embodied, conserving immediacy and suspense even when imagery and narrative incident barely appear. Following *Flesh and Blood*, Williams published a collection called *A Dream of Mind* (1992), and those successive titles convey the deliberate shift. The series “Some of the Forms of Jealousy” and another titled “A Dream of Mind” show this evolution. A poem called “The Method” begins the latter sequence, and its opening lines address the change in approach:

A dream of method first, in which mind is
malleable, its products as revisable as
sentences,
in which I’ll be able to extract and then
illuminate the themes of being as I never
have.
I’m intrigued—how not be?—but I soon
realize that though so much flexibility is
tempting—
whole zones of consciousness wouldn’t
only be reflected or referred to, but
embodied, as themselves,
before the sense-stuff of the world is
attached to them, adulterating and
misrepresenting them—
I have only the sketchiest notion of how to
incorporate this exotic and complicated
methodology,
and when I try, something in my character
resists manipulating elements of mind
so radically.

One of the pleasures of reading these lines comes from the counterpoint between the poet’s admission of resistance to his new metaphysical method and the sheer confidence with which he already employs it. His resistance is real, though, preventing the poems in this abstract style from becoming mere feats of virtuosic intelligence. Here, Williams blames “the sense-stuff of the world” for “adulterating and misrepresenting” the newfound clarity of mind,

but his position changes, and at times he trusts the troubling “sense-stuff of the world” more than his exaltations of mind. Which is his pleasure principle and which his reality principle? It’s impossible to tell because the two become so thoroughly folded into each other.

This abstract method would itself fold into the larger body of Williams’s poetry, and there would remain one more big change in his work, during the final decade of his life, when his poems took on a salutary strangeness. In a 2011 essay called “On Being Old,” he explained: “After my most recent book, *Wait*, I found myself writing poems unlike any I’d written before. There seemed to have arrived in them an element of not only the irrational but also the absurd, a willed goofiness that pleases me.” Even in his final collection, *Falling Ill: Last Poems* (2017), a sequence of unpunctuated fifteen-liners, the disarming starkness with which he faces his mortality depends upon an offhand spontaneity.

But to get a feeling for the late style, consider “The Day Continues Lovely,” a poem that begins with his re-reading Kierkegaard, one of those writers mentioned in the first line of “The Gas Station.” The poet turns back and forth between his speculations and his observation of his three grandsons

sleeping on the floor next to the family dog, Bwindi. Here are the final two stanzas:

And what about me? Leave aside
Kierkegaard, Buber, the rabbis—just
me.
Haven’t I spent my life trying to make up
my mind about *something*?
God, not God; soul, not soul. I’m like the
Binary Kid: on, off; off, on.
But isn’t that what we all are? Overgrown
electrical circuits? Good, bad.
Hate, love. We go crazy trying to gap the
space between on and off,
but there is none. Click. Click. Left: Right.
Humans kill one another
because there’s no room to maneuver inside
those miniscule switches.

Meanwhile cosmos roars with so many
voices we can’t hear ourselves think.
Galaxy on. Galaxy off. Universe on, but
another just behind this one,
one more out front waiting for us to be
done. They’re flowing across us,
sweet swamps of being—and we thrash in
them, waving our futile antennae.
... Turner’s awake now. He smiles, stands;
Bwindi yawns and stands, too.
They come to see what I’m doing. Turner
leans his head on my shoulder to peek.
What *am* I doing? Thinking of
Kierkegaard. Thinking of beauty.
Thinking of prayer.

I find a winning insouciance in the
comic-book epithet “the Binary Kid,”

the elaborate and unpredictable metaphor of the electrical circuits, and the image of outer space “flowing across us, / sweet swamps of being.” There’s also the usefulness of such tonal peculiarity, allowing Williams the high seriousness of his anguished mediation while staving off sententiousness.

But what’s most striking here is the almost magnetic inevitability with which he homes in on his own prime obsessions, the motivations and convictions that underlie his formal strategies. His canniness leads him right up to the unknown all over again, so that self-knowledge and uncertainty become mutually entailing. His exasperation about entrapping binaries feels unfeigned; nevertheless, the ability to hold those unreconciled opposites at the same time gives his art its astounding depth and dimension. Just as the concluding tableau presents a vision of terrifying cosmic chaos and a scene of undeniable domestic loveliness, the poet’s work appears a calling of the highest order and a last-ditch attempt “to gap the space between.” In the balance of such seeming contraries lies the magnitude of Williams’s poetry. For more than fifty years, his dramatic changes led him to mastery while preserving the raw urge that initiated those changes, the hunger of starting out.□

Double Take

We’ve come to the place that we deserve.
The begonias, the bougainvilleas, white skirts against tanned legs.
Everyone’s supposed to be relaxed, well-mannered, making deals.
We all have time.
The blue and yellow walls of the faux-hacienda restaurant
evoke the sun on the Pacific. It’s part of the set-up for the next scene,
when the sand dissolves beneath our toes, a swell comes in rough,
and it’s unmistakable, we’re older.
We catch a glimpse of somewhere that we’ve been before
because we’re some place like it, but almost nothing’s changed.
Déjà vu.
Even the feeling that things are getting worse is the same.
Trace that backwards, step by step, till you’ve come to the place where you were happy.
Then live there. Then bring it forward.
If it doesn’t work, the Golden Age was the certainty that happiness was in the future.
If it works, and you bring it with you, it means the same, that happiness is yet to come.

Blue on yellow, surf on sand. We’re at the restaurant again; same table, same proprietor.
He doesn’t know us anymore.
The door’s still open but the parrot in the cage is gone; its job was to eat sunflower seeds
and cock its head as if trying to see up someone’s skirt and whistle.
We ask and he shrugs. It’s been years.
We’re talking about petty stuff, or the Grand Scheme of Things,
or we’re quiet and human, watching the light or just hanging out.
That’s the transition.
The surf against our legs can never only be the feeling of the surf against our legs.
That’s part of who we are, how we’re put together. We’re happy.
We’d call it that if we dared. If naming it won’t jinx it, and it doesn’t.
It doesn’t have to last; we don’t last.

—Alpay Ulku

A Symposium on Beginnings and Endings

Editor's Note: As is always true in the case of our symposia, these contributions were written simultaneously and independently in response to the assigned topic. Any overlaps, parallels, or violent disagreements are therefore purely serendipitous.

IT'S THE early 1990s, and I'm waiting by the door of my grandmother's apartment, listening to my uncle's ghost make his way up the staircase. Having grown up with *Peter and the Wolf*, I appreciate the idea that a being's essence might be bottled by pouring it down a funnel of sound. But ghosts are made of more complicated stuff than Soviet Pioneers and hungry wolves. Before some woodwind instrument can catch a draft of my uncle's spirit, it is taken apart to disappear in some inconspicuous case.

Looking down the staircase, I see a sturdy hand grasp the banister.

What makes my uncle's ghost so terrible, I realize every time I see him, is the fact that he is so lifelike. Even his leather jacket crackles as we hug.

"Goodbye!" I blurt out.

Everybody laughs. My uncle's wife and the cousins who have hung back. My parents, grandmother, brother, and my uncle's ghost, too. All of us squeezing into my grandmother's small vestibule in East Berlin. This is where we Westerners stay when we come to my mother's homeland four times a year. We come together in a divided city.

"Oh, hello, hello!" I cry out.

Everybody laughs too loud.

We sit down for *Kaffeezeit*, but all I can think of is my Freudian slip. I burn with that teenage shame of having shown my mind's underwear and worry about my uncle's ghost's feelings as I watch him dig into the cake.

My uncle turned into a ghost in 1983, when I was seven. I don't have a clear memory of how this mysterious process began. He just faded away. At first he would drop off my cousins at my grandmother's without leaving the car, so as not to be corrupted by Western influence.

Once my uncle had become political ectoplasm, it was Auntie, his wife, who dropped off my cousins. After a while Auntie, too, was absorbed by the city. There was often talk of shortages and makeshift solutions in the GDR; therefore it was easy to imagine my ghost uncle and aunt propping up some corner of their wobbly country. Losing one's face seemed a common side effect of saving the state's.

It was only when my cousins disappeared that my mother sat me down and began by telling me the end of a story.

"The state doesn't want us to see your cousins anymore."

I did not question this ending, because at seven years old I had already crossed enough borders to grasp that the world was flexible enough for those who hold power to bend it into a hard, unyielding place.

While my parents were busy catching up with old friends, I spent most of our time in East Berlin at my grandmother's apartment, thinking how

strange it was that my cousins should be there when I was not, sitting in the same chairs, eating from the same plates, as if in some parallel universe or derailed fairy tale.

I was twelve by the time the split-screen ended and both families were reunited in the old apartment, a year before the Wall came down. Someone took a picture of this double exposure—two dark-haired and two blond cousins, all in the same place at the same time.

My uncle's ghost does not like to be reminded of his past life. On our very



first reunion, in 1988, he came up the staircase as if he'd been waiting in his car for five years of rain to let up. He acknowledges no beginnings, no ends. I can only assume that nothing is over for him, since nothing ever began, which is the limbo that ghosts live in.

—Dounia Choukri

*

IN THE spring of 1972 I was an aspiring composer, out almost every night to hear new music. These were years of experimentation—music constructed by chance, music improvised, serialized, and randomized, music in search of new notational systems. And so I was among those first in line for the concert celebrating John Cage's sixtieth birthday.

I distinctly remember the last piece on the program—the "happy birthday" number—and how the longer the

ensemble of musicians played, the more I found it impossible to have any sense of where I was in the score or when, or how, the piece would end. After about thirty minutes, I could see that others in the audience were, like me, looking at their watches. And after what seemed like another thirty interminable minutes, I snuck out a side door.

I came to learn later that the ensemble had continued playing until the very last person had left the concert hall, and that this was Cage's birthday gift to us, the audience—a gift predicated on the assumption that if you were still seated, you were still enjoying the music and wanted to be there. And that if you weren't enjoying the music, you owed it to yourself to leave, good manners be damned. A gift? Maybe. To me it felt more like a prank.

But a sign of the times. There were visual artists trying to free their works from the constraint of frames and from gallery walls, there were playwrights breaking the barrier between actor and audience, and there were composers trying to blur, if not entirely destroy,

become six, all sounding at the same time. And each line can be repeated over and over, with no written ending. The music ends only when the players decide to stop. (Or maybe when the audience has all left, as at Cage's birthday concert.)

And four hundred years before Bach, Guillaume de Machaut wrote his gorgeous *Ma fin est mon commencement* ("My end is my beginning"), also for three voices. But when each voice reaches the end, instead of starting over again from the beginning, the way the piece does in Bach's portrait, the voice starts singing the notes in reverse order, backwards, eventually arriving again at the beginning. The result is a composition where the beginning becomes indistinguishable from its ending.

Learning how to construct music that can go forward and backward at the same time is a trick of the trade. Anyone can learn to do it. Harder to learn, and even harder to master (I'm thinking Beethoven), is how to create a beginning and end that are different from each other but sound related in a meaningful way: an ending in which we hear a vestige, or an echo, of the beginning; an ending that, through some undefinable but unassailable musical logic unfolding measure by measure, could not have become anything other than what it is. An ending that is unique to this work and an ending that is, as in life itself, inevitable.

—Michael Dellaira

*

WHEN I WAS eight years old and more susceptible to devastation than I will ever be again, I first experimented with a practice that would later become a habit: I started reading a book I loved in smaller and smaller increments as I approached the end. The book in question was *Watership Down*, the longest I'd ever attempted, and I had loved it forever—or at least, I had loved it since spring started softening the grey rigor of winter, which amounted to the same thing. For a child, life is a series of small eternities; a day was a year, a week was a life, and I would always be reading *Watership Down* in the muddy yard as the fresh spikes of the crocuses pushed up through the ground.

Only twenty years later, when that first eternity was over, would I discover that the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset had explained the predicament I sensed so obscurely in the offing. "The titles of certain books are like names of cities in which we used to live for a time," he wrote. "They at once bring back a climate, a peculiar smell of streets, a general type of people and a specific rhythm of life." That was it exactly: *Watership Down* was a place where I had taken up residence and which I could not stand to leave.

So I limited myself, first to twenty pages a day, then to ten, then to five. Yet no matter how slowly I read, I still progressed towards the final chapter, then the final page, then the final word, until at last I was expelled from the singular world of *Watership Down* and disabused of the notion that books might somehow be made to go on for-

ever. I had half-expected the novel to grow longer as I read it, but it hadn't, and now I was finished. This was my original apprenticeship in the fundamental tragedy of reading. Every story, no matter how ambitious or abundant, is doomed to end; no text is coterminous with the world itself. And this problem is an intimation of the fundamental problem. As the poet Stanley Kunitz puts it, "How shall the heart be reconciled / to its feast of losses?"

Naturally, then, I have a special affection for narratives that *aren't* reconciled to this feast, that gesture defiantly at their own continuation. The most conspicuous and self-conscious of these is Sartre's *No Exit*. The last line, "eh bien, continuons," is a despairing acknowledgment that the characters' volley of recriminations will go on forever. But Sartre is not the only one to end a book by refusing to end it, and by my lights works that reject their own termination make up a genre unto themselves. There's *Notes from Underground*, whose volatile protagonist goes on ranting long after the book is over, or so the text assures us: "The notes of this paradoxalist do not end here, however. He could not refrain from going on with them, but it seems to us that we may stop here." And then there's Dorothy Parker's restive story, "A Telephone Call," in which the narrator talks herself into believing that the man she loves is on the brink of getting in touch. When we leave her, she is hard at work convincing herself that he will have called by the time she finishes counting to five hundred in increments of five. "Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five..."

Other stories do not end because they remain unfinished. *The Castle* breaks off mid-sentence because Kafka died before he could complete it—but then again, it is hard to imagine how he might have continued the book if he had lived longer. *The Castle* does not end in part because it *could* not end; K cannot find his way to the castle because the castle is precisely that which eludes him, precisely that which he can only ever approach asymptotically. Kafka was obsessed by distances that expand as we venture across them, and his stories are full of nightmarish geographies that function as the spatial instantiations of the castle's inaccessibility. Roads lengthen beneath his characters' feet; courtyards open onto other courtyards; behind each door is another door. Endings and their putative satisfactions are dispelled by the convolutions of the very landscape. No one can ever reach the end of *Watership Down* because nobody can ever reach anything.

For Kafka, perpetual continuation was a hellish proposition, but for me, the notion of endlessness is a balm. What could be better than a road that grows beneath your feet, a book that thickens as you read it? Perhaps each of these unwillingly endless texts belies its nominal aversion to the consolations of eternity. At the very least, they present a formal remedy to an ontological problem. For Sartre, Dostoevsky, and Parker, the answer to finitude is recursion: their books end with instructions to start all over again. For Kafka, the answer is prolongation: both his stories and his unfinished novels expand,

pushing the ending so far into the distance that we can barely perceive it. Despite themselves, they are of a piece with the oldest and most irresistible fiction of all: the fiction of eternity. Maybe this is not a fiction but our eventual fate. One day we will be reconciled to our feast of losses or we won't have to be, until which time we can only conclude by refusing to conclude, by muttering obtinately, "Eh bien, continuons..."

—Becca Rothfeld

*

I DON'T MUCH ponder beginnings and endings. The beginning is the egg, the ending usually soil or fire. Life storms and disappoints and consoles in between them. The great exemplar and investigator of the storms is William James, whose work I've used, still use, as life talismans. James's commentaries on the operations of consciousness are sketchy maps to my inner life. His

it, from thought to thought, invention to invention, while we also hold in mind the possibility of multiple events occurring in consciousness at the same time—that seagull, that German, that horse. One principle of Emerson's tidal style comes from the belief that nature, like language, is continually remaking itself. In "The Poet" he says, "Nature itself is a vast trope, and all particular natures are tropes." For something to mean anything, it must continually dart or spill towards new expressions and figures. It delivers us from being hostages to the past and preserves us from useless nostalgias. Emerson's creed, as James frames it, is that "Everything that ever was or will be is here in the enveloping now." It's our roiling life as it lives and exhausts itself in time.

The enveloping now is the proper subject of lyric verse. Beginnings are onsets and endings are stoppages. We abide in a speedy middle that keeps changing, and sometimes the changes feel like they're happening all at once. Life, if we have a little luck and stay

William James didn't invent but which was his grand bequest to us) is pure dynamism. All is process and the blend of recollections and actualities. The beginning is the wakening of consciousness that causes us to revisit endlessly what we believe to be our origins. The ending is something many of us never stop imagining. But it's the heaves and throes and languors of consciousness that most preoccupy us. Beginnings and endings become monumentalized, fixed in time and mind like ledger entries. But we move along with the grand exasperating all-at-once sluicing of physical and mental day-by-day experience, what James calls "the strungalong sort of life we actually lead," a life loosely defined, usually messy, more than a little incoherent, and sick with a surfeit of ambiguity. That all-at-onceness, veined into the flow of time, the rivering of it, compels us, while we carry on with whatever reality deals us.

—W. S. Di Piero

*



Principles of Psychology investigates the contrary forces of flux and immediacy, continuity and simultaneity, as consciousness experiences them. Here's a passage I go back to, from his essay "Reflex Action and Theism": "Can we realize for an instant what a cross-section of all existence at a definite point of time would be? While I talk and the flies buzz, a sea-gull catches a fish at the mouth of the Amazon, a tree falls in the Adirondack wilderness, a man sneezes in Germany, a horse dies in Tartary, and twins are born in France." We can imagine but not realize that impossible instant, which makes it fertile ground for aspirational lyric poets wanting to express a simultaneity that instead somehow, mysteriously, enacts process, actuality playing itself out in time. Its manner of playing out was one of William James's great subjects.

He derived some of his ideas from Emerson and believed that in mental life we "trope along," as Emerson put

attentive to things, swings between habit and invention, between useful self-repetitions and an encouraging disorder. Poets sometimes get too caught up in reductions, redactions, shrinkages. (Beware wishing *too* much economy in using words in a poem.) Sometimes poets are expanders and accretioners: they aspire to an expressiveness that accommodates simultaneity *and* flux, snapshot *and* movie, but played out under the extreme pressure exerted by our knowledge of the egg and the dirt. A poet may want to get everything in, even in a poem of maybe three quatrains, or of one line, while also aspiring to give shape to the feeling of an irreducible simultaneity of physical and mental events. Lyric poetry wants a stabilizing regularity of some kind but wants even more the hectic rush that surprise brings.

We live in the stream of existence from deep time into the vexed present, its effects and surges and lulls. The stream of consciousness (a phrase

SAD NEWS from England, where the photographer Ander Gunn has died at the age of ninety-two. I first met Ander in May 2018, when I visited him in his ramshackle barn conversion midway between Cornwall's north and south coasts, although we had corresponded for some six months before that. Most notable, in that correspondence, was Ander's decision to mail me all the letters his brother, the poet Thom Gunn, had ever sent him—the originals—for a book I was co-editing at the time. You might imagine my combined thrill, horror, and relief opening *that* parcel. But the letters had survived that long (the earliest was from 1955) and they could survive the twenty-first-century Royal Mail. I returned them in person.

It was Ander's collaboration with Thom on *Positives*, published by Faber & Faber and the University of Chicago Press in 1966, that first sparked my interest in the Gunns, an interest which took care of the next decade of my life. *Positives* pairs Thom's short poems ("captions," he called them) with Ander's black-and-white photographs, and traces a life arc from birth to death through scenes of infancy, adolescence, youth, work, relationships, and old age. In his notes, Thom referred to the project as the "Anderbook" and described it to Faber as "The Gunn Brothers' Guide to Humans." This was the mid-1960s, and Ander and his family were living in Teddington, a west London suburb; Thom was visiting for a year, on sabbatical from teaching at the University of California, Berkeley. "Looking through some of Ander's photographs I found interesting possibilities in a collaboration," he wrote later. "I had always wanted to work with pictures, and he was taking just the kind that made a good starting point for my imagination."

Across the large oak table in his dining room, Ander took me on a tour of *Positives*, identifying the subject of each picture and recalling where they were taken. He was extraordinarily vigorous, mentally and physically, and

I remember thinking I'd like to be like that if I made it to eighty-six, as he then was. He literally bustled: into the kitchen to make tea, into the garden to shoo the pigeons, into the darkroom-cum-office to fetch a photograph, letter, folder, album, box. I was in semi-constant fear that he would trip over Lizzie, his well-fed, long-haired mini-Dachshund mix, who scuttled about in his wake.

A few weeks before that visit, Ander's second wife, Bett, had died, and I asked whether he still wanted me to come. He said yes, and I think he enjoyed the company, as much as one might enjoy someone a third of one's age asking stupid and intrusive questions about things that had happened sixty or seventy years ago. He talked for many hours, across three days, about his brother, his parents, his children, his life: his itinerant twenties, turning bedsits into darkrooms across northwest London; the move to Cornwall in the 1960s, inspired by his friend, the painter Karl Weschke; his visits to San Francisco in the 1980s and 1990s to see Thom.

Mostly we talked inside, but one afternoon we ventured into the gloriously untamed garden and sunned ourselves on blue-and-white striped recliners, eating the chocolate biscuits Ander kept in the freezer for extra crunch. The next afternoon we drove to Cape Cornwall and poked around on the beach. He pointed out the Brisons (a twin-peaked islet about a mile offshore), which are said to resemble Charles de Gaulle in the bath. Ander didn't bring a camera with him that afternoon—although I took a selfie of us, both with windswept hair—but you could tell he was looking at that familiar stretch of coastline with pictures in mind. His dramatic black-and-white seascapes are some of his finest work.

Ander started taking photographs in the 1950s. Pictures he took with an old Ensign in Norway were well received and, encouraged, he read everything he could find about photography and taught himself to use a Braun Paxette rangefinder camera with a Tessar lens. He photographed famous artists and writers—Barbara Hepworth, Jean Rhys, Tom Stoppard—as well as seascapes, urban scenes (most notably London, for *Positives*, but also Leeds, where he lived for a decade), and flowers, all in black and white. The Jackson Gallery in Cornwall held a retrospective of Ander's work, titled *Seven Decades*, in 2022.

The last time I saw Ander was in the summer of 2023. He had agreed to take my photograph for the sleeve of my book about his brother. (Ander is on the front of that book, too: peer closely and you can see him reflected in Thom's sunglasses, taking the picture.) At that point he had not taken and developed a photograph for almost two years. I visited for lunch, with Ander's daughter, Charlotte, and his grandson, Joe. It was, I think, the first time he had ever held a digital camera—it was a Nikon DSLR—and he took the photos carefully, as though he would waste film taking too many. Joe was his able assistant; Charlotte documented the moment.

Having pictures taken by Ander on the front cover of my book about

Thom and as my author photograph felt appropriate: *Positives* was the beginning of something for me. I shall miss him.

—Michael Nott

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WHEN MARY van Butchell died, she was embalmed by her husband and his two doctor friends. She was filled with preservative fluid, injected with color additives, and given sparkling glass eyes for aesthetic reasons. The men dressed Mary's body in a lace dress and coated her with plaster of Paris. She looked a bit like a bride,

Welty put it, bound to here-ness and now-ness. Mary stayed in the here and now. Her glass coffin was exposed to frosts and pigeon shit and ogling and changing fashions of the oglers. So, too, in its visual conspicuousness did Mary's preservation prevent those who knew her from reminiscing: new information about Mary's physical state overshadowed the memory of her personhood.

We have a great responsibility, as the living, to make clear our endings. When I was a funeral director, I guided families up the hill of the cemetery on foot behind the hearse. The burials were solemn affairs. I instructed mourners to throw dirt and roses on the coffin, and I threw dirt and roses,

decades. It took an act of great coincidence and violence—and really, doesn't it always?—to sever Mary's tie to our world. The museum which held her body was obliterated in a World War Two air raid. In the air raid, her body endured a second death, a final expulsion from time. Long after anyone could recall her spirit, long after anyone had shown tenderness to her body, Mary was at last gone from our sight.

Our relationship to time is our relationship to mortality. There is safety in death. In death, the body—beyond our here-ness and now-ness—cannot suffer harm or disrepair or pain. The spirit cannot despair or falter. When the body is made unrecognizable by disposition, both the spirit and body enter



laid out in a glass coffin. This was London, say 1776.

Mary's husband, the eccentric and quack dentist Martin van Butchell, installed Mary's coffin as an exhibit outside his practice. The embalmed woman—perfectly preserved, as he would have it, so delicate still—was advertised to Londoners as a kind of sideshow. Come see the corpse, and get some dentures made while you're at it.

Reactions were mixed at the time. I'd wager yours is not, that you find it outright disgusting or sickening or enraging. No, Mary did not consent to this after-death procedure while she was living. She died young and quickly.

I'm writing on endings, and there is, to me, no more obvious ending to any story than death. But Mary's story didn't end with her death. She remained liminal between life and death. With a body unfit for decomposition, for the natural return to scattered matter, she failed to leave our world.

We are time-minded, as Eudora

too. As the gravediggers shoveled and we walked down the hill, there was always a strange and hallowed lightness, like a break in an evening storm. Children wanted to play red-light-green-light with me. Adults began to talk about the lunch menu, the traffic.

The funeral tradition confirms a psychic reality: this plane is no longer home to the dead. We are closed for business. When we leave our dead unburied, unburned, unhydrolyzed, or undonated to research, we suggest that they have a home here where there is none. We offer liminality that we do not have the power to bestow. A termination, an ending, is the only appropriate action left in the relationship with the body. We may continue bonds with the dead in our metaphysics, but this plane here, it's No Vacancy.

Martin van Butchell's second wife, quite reasonably, protested Mary's presence outside his practice. Mary's body was moved to the Hunterian Museum, where it was on display for

the realm of the immortal. They are held by us only in memory. Funeral traditions unfetter the dead in a way that we, the living, cannot be released. The proper observation of rites is a final act of love; in a true ending, we offer true freedom.

—Kate Busatto

*

PERHAPS IT'S my crepuscular nature: I'm drawn more to endings than to beginnings. My age no doubt reinforces the temperamental bent. I'm seventy-one, and naturally foresee my own conclusion as my old-fashioned bound address book more and more resembles a cemetery; I refuse to erase the names of the dead.

This feel for endings has something to do with the art of poetry. In metrical and in free verse, the line ends before it collides with the right-hand

margin. End-stopped or enjambed, the line, not the sentence, is the fundamental unit of emerging sense. The end of a line enforces a pause; it makes room for thought to collect itself before springing or sidling forward. It prefigures the august endings we will encounter in life.

The fact that we end, and know that we will, irradiates life. The ancient Greeks thought so: they scrupulously distinguished mortals from immortals, and celebrated mortal effort in its brief flash of glory on the battlefield or the athletic contest. Even as an adolescent, I thought I wrote in the light of death. I still do.

Every poet has to think about endings—of lines, of poems, of books—but Robert Frost contemplated conclusions with particular foreboding and, at times, relish. His first book, *A Boy’s Will*, ended with “Reluctance.” Frost was thirty-nine when *A Boy’s Will* came out in England in 1913; he was “young” as a poet, but old to be bringing out a first volume. The poem balances between a sense of being prematurely aged (“I have come by the highway home, / And lo, it is ended”—But what is “it”?) and the last stanza’s passionate protest:

Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?

This poem bleakly insists on the dying season, clattering the second and third stanzas with dead leaves, but then lets loose its volley of infinitive verbs, actions it wants to refuse: to go, to yield, to bow, to accept. No, this speaker won’t “accept the end,” though the grim possibility or even likelihood of ending (a love or a season) closes the poem and the book and leaves it in our minds.

Frost sometimes envisioned ends more apocalyptically. He could present the scene as a bitter, abbreviated, self-knowing comedy, as in “Fire and Ice”:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.

Here he crams the end of the world into nine clipped lines, cutting back from four-beat lines to two beats, contracting from “desire” to “hate,” and tying it off with a strategic understatement, the adjective “great” in its purposeful banality:

I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

The terror in these lines pulses not from the prospect of planetary annihilation, but from what this speaker tells us about himself.

In his perpetually suggestive book *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode reads Renaissance and modern literature in terms of Christian apocalyptic thought, the dread (or anticipation) of a literal absolute blow-up, culmination, and fulfillment, or the more tempered expectation of a deferred ultimate resolution: “No longer imminent, the End is immanent.” I find myself turning to a more Classical

model. The end of *The Odyssey* has always struck me as shocking and depressing. *The Odyssey* is usually described as a comic poem, but in a few savage lines, its breathtakingly abrupt ending reveals human nature as bent on destruction. It’s not the end of the world in question here, but the end of a mighty poem, and more fearfully, the sense that only supernatural intervention could bring an end to human conflict. Odysseus and Telemachus, having slaughtered the suitors in Book XXII with the help of the swineherd Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius, and of course Athena, have now in the final book joined Laertes in his country retreat, where they confront the crowd of the suitors’ relatives, furious for revenge. Patriarchy leaps triumphantly into action, grandfather, father, and son fending off the attackers. “They would have cut the enemy down / To the last man,” the poem tells us (in Robert Fitzgerald’s translation), but Athena looms over the melee and roars at them: “Break off this bitter skirmish; / end your bloodshed, Ithakans, and make peace.” Everyone drops his weapon except Odysseus, who ignores the goddess and, uttering his own shout, swoops at the fleeing enemies like an eagle. It takes Zeus hurling a thunderbolt to stop him. Only in the final eight lines does Odysseus obey; disguised as Mentor, Athena imposes a treaty.

End of poem. It’s a fairy tale. Left to ourselves, we humans seem inclined to fight, no matter the cost. As I write these words, I bear keenly in mind the sense of another ending: the end of a century of American “global dominance,” the dangerous imperial delusion that ever since World War Two has fueled the fantasy that the United States can run the world.

It’s a very old story, how empires end.

—Rosanna Warren

*

SEVENTH GRADE was a disappointment. We’d been assigned *The Divine Comedy*, a text which, despite its excellent Russian translation by Mikhail Lozinsky, left me deeply confused. What kind of comedy was this? It wasn’t even *funny*.

Dante’s poem was my first encounter with “comedy” and “tragedy” in their ancient sense, as defined by their progression and ending. *The Divine Comedy* is comedic because things begin darkly for the poet and end somewhat better. In seventh grade, though, we didn’t get to that part. Our teacher, dubious about our intellect (and with good reason), assigned only the *Inferno*, and so we did not venture past Hell.

I thought of this years later, when I was back in Russia after having completed the first round of graduate studies in the States. I had a grueling two-hour commute across all of Moscow to the place where I taught. The metro was crowded, riddled with pickpockets and bodily odors. To occupy myself, I listened to a series of lectures on Shakespeare by the Oxford professor Emma Smith. It was there that I came across this quote by playwright Thom-

as Heywood: “Tragedies and Comedies...differ thus: In Comedies, *turbulenta prima, tranquilla ultima*, In Tragedies, *tranquilla prima, turbulenta ultima*. Comedies begin in trouble, and end in peace; Tragedies begin in calmes, and end in tempest.” Even better than the quote itself was Smith’s comment that “the difference between tragedy and comedy is largely a sense of where we choose to start and stop.”

Now, I thought, hugging my bag closer to my chest, ducking sweaty armpits, *this is something I wish I’d known at fourteen*. It wouldn’t have helped my understanding of *The Divine Comedy*, but it would have clarified the other drama that took over the seventh grade: the first romantic pursuits. My classmates wrote love notes and watched each other obsessively, messages and gossip got passed around, there were slow dances put on by the school in its basement cafeteria where arms inevitably slid lower and lower, the crushes, the whispers, the first dates and breakups and more dates. My classmates went from ecstatic to heartbroken to lovestruck again. Watched from a distance (which is exactly how I watched this drama unfold, as befits anyone who takes Dante too seriously at fourteen), these romances had no clear beginning or end—just the constant reshuffling of the same people into new pairs. *Turbulenta prima, tranquilla ultima*, and vice versa, and so on.

Before seventh grade ended, something else did. In his New Year’s address to the nation, our president announced he was stepping down. There and then, not waiting for the term to be over. He said it was time to give young politicians a chance.

For years, I could not reconcile my

memory of that night with the historical facts. This was December 31, 1999, and for once I did not spend New Year’s Eve at home with my mother and my grandparents. A boy I liked had invited me, along with a few other classmates, to a restaurant. It was the night of the millennium; his parents footed the bill. While my country as I knew it came to an end, I was peeling clementines, staring at my crush, getting ready to step into that whirlwind of elation and heartbreak. Yet I also remembered that I had heard the president’s address live. Only recently did I discover the reason for this confused memory: because of its unprecedented content, the address was played earlier in the day. I must have heard it from the kitchen where I was helping my mother slice potatoes and grate beets for the traditional New Year’s salad.

How to explain now, from a point in time where we know how the story ended, that a quarter of a century ago this transition of power felt like a good turn of events? Our old president would get drunk on national television, cry, and dance in the village streets. The new one was younger and spoke English. It felt, for a moment, like entering a new phase of life—a happy one.

Then, of course, *tranquilla prima, turbulenta ultima*. If you know how things began, you know how they will end. My country has had nothing but trouble and tempest for years, and in its pain it’s hurting those around it. My only consolation is the idea that beginnings and endings bleed into each other, that they are largely a matter of where we choose to start and stop. Perhaps this moment is not the end Russia is moving towards. Perhaps we are still only moving through Hell.

—Evgeniya Dame

At the Border

After many days’ travel,
we came to the river, which divided
a country at war from a country at peace.

There, a young man was hired
to ferry us in his wooden boat
on a cloudy night, so the gunmen wouldn’t see us.

Halfway across the river
rain fell,
obscuring both banks.

The young man rowed for a long time,
and though it felt like we were moving,
it also felt like we were going nowhere.

Soon, the boat began to fill with water,
not only from above, but from below.
Faster and faster the river seeped in.

It was then I realized
I could not recall my life—
yet as we sank, I swam to save it.

—Pio Arango

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MISCELLANY

Morning Coffee (August 7th, 0458)

Ibe Liebenberg

I WOKE UP two minutes before my alarm, which was set for 0500. I thought I heard rustling in my room from the bed next to me.

I walked into the kitchen to make coffee. It was dark in the living room and kitchen. I turned on the oven's hood light and saw that the coffee was already made and some was missing. I felt the glass pot and it was hot, so I poured myself a cup, turned the light off, and went into the living room to sit in my recliner in the dark. It looked like a dark shape was sitting in the recliner next to me, not moving.

"Morning," Captain Diaz whispered.

"Morning," I whispered back.

"Isn't this nice?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"How'd you sleep?"

"Good," I said.

I was relieved it was Captain Diaz. It had only been an hour since our last call, and as soon as my head hit the pillow I was in a bad dream. I dreamt Captain Diaz and I were driving in the engine. Maybe New Guy was in the back seat, but he never showed himself and I didn't bother to turn around to see if he was there. We were driving next to a slow-moving creek, and a woman in her thirties flagged us down and got up on the sideboard, so I rolled down the window. She pointed to the water and said she couldn't find her daughter—she was swimming, then disappeared. Cap called her a weirdo and told her to get off the engine. She screamed at me while we drove off. *Don't worry*, Cap said. *We will come back*. Cap got on his phone and played the song "Crazy Bitch" by Buckcherry. Inappropriate, I thought, even in my dream. He told me we had to go to the next town to turn around. I had never heard of the place he named. And while we were there, he said, he could run an errand or two before returning to look for the daughter. I went along with it. It all made perfect sense.

When we got back to the creek, the woman was sitting on the shore with her head in hands, crying. I could see the small girl submerged in the clear water only a few feet in front of her. I dove in with all of my clothes on, grabbed the girl, and carried her onto the shore. The woman screamed at me while I turned the small body on its side and water poured out of her mouth. She started to cough and sat up. The woman grabbed the girl and started to walk down the road. I took my phone out of my pocket to call my wife to tell her about it, but it wasn't working. Somehow I was back home in my driveway and excited to tell my wife and son about saving the girl. I had never saved someone before. Usually everyone died during CPR.

When I opened the door there were a lot of people in the house all sitting down in chairs. No one looked up at me. I started telling a few of them what had happened and they didn't raise their heads to look at me.

I woke up to the sound of someone rolling over in the other bed in my room. I lay there quiet for a few moments to figure out where I was. I realized that I was at the station and that no one should be in the other bed. I turned on the light; no one was there.

"I dreamt we were on a call," I said.

"Oh, how fun." Cap took a sip. "Cannot even escape work in your dreams. What a nightmare."

I didn't want to tell him that it *was* a nightmare. I took a sip of coffee.

"What's wrong?" Cap asked.

I wasn't sure why he was asking me, because he couldn't see me and I didn't make a sound or say a word.

"I didn't say anything," I said.

"Oh, I thought I heard you say something."

"This coffee tastes weird," I said.

"It's tea."

"You made tea in our coffee pot?"

"It's better for you," Cap said. "You are welcome."

I didn't like the fact Cap had woken up before me and made coffee, let alone made tea instead. I never liked it when a captain did any job I felt was a firefighter's responsibility. I thought it made us look bad. And making coffee was definitely one of those jobs. I took out my phone and set an alarm for 0430 the next morning.

I checked my messages and didn't have any, so I started to compose one:

I miss you and Jake so much. Do you think you'll be home when I get there on Sunday? Or where are we

having his birthday party? I'm good with wherever. I can drive to the bay when I get off and meet you there if that's easier. Either way is fine, just let me know. I will be there.

I deleted the message, then looked up CPR-for-dogs tutorials. It is much more difficult than with humans, due to how many different breeds and sizes of dogs there are. I mostly looked them up so I could save my own dog if anything happened to it. But I worried about other people's dogs, too. Even strays, no one's dogs. Because my wife and son hadn't been home in two weeks, my dog was waiting for me.

"Cap, can we stop by my place and check on my dog at some point today?" I asked quietly.

"Depends where it is," Cap said softly and slowly, like he had our day already planned out and wasn't sure if he could fit it in.

"Here, in Paradise."

"Which side of Paradise?"

"The west side. On Valley View Drive."

"Oh, the nice side."

"It's not bad," I said. It wasn't that great either. We lived in an early 1900s hunting cabin that was a little over eight hundred square feet and renovated in what looked like the early Seventies. It was the nice side of Paradise, just wasn't the nicest place on that side.

"Sure," Cap said.

I went back to dog CPR tutorials on my phone and focused on small breeds. Any time I would see someone walking a dog or a dog by itself when I was on a call, I would quiz myself and think about what I would have to do to save it. I did the same for humans, but they were easy. For people, I only focused on toddlers and babies. And what I would need to do if I had to do CPR on one again. If I was somehow the only firefighter there. Or if there were two of us. I did CPR on an old person at least once a shift. I had only had my hands haunted with that small body once or twice. When do you put the child down? When do you give up and call it quits? Even though the baby was gone, I didn't stop until the nurse at the hospital took her from my hands. My fingers are still pressing down on that little chest. Pushing that tiny heart.

I went into the kitchen to pour out my tea and make coffee.□

When the Worst Happens

When the worst happens,
silence, like an ambulance without siren, arrives.

A silence that doesn't need the rest of the story.

It is the story.

—Jane Hirshfield

Small Heart

Cassandra Garbus

AT NIGHT, her first spring alone, Ms. Alexandra Abassian often snapped awake. Her students inhabited her dreams, recast as old high school friends, the tricky girls whose loyalties were always shifting. Boys in their school blazers teemed on her childhood lawn, transformed into lovers who had once meant too much, and twice, she was fired by Mr. Dole, his face distorted across that long desk where he often chastised her and other teachers. Though after two decades of marriage, she had been sure that parts of herself were gone forever, now at night her dreams were charged with desire, both exquisite and painful. When her childhood neighbor, the valedictorian, pressed against her, his body felt so substantial, so real, that for a moment the next afternoon she imagined him, there, across the school lobby, tennis racquet over his shoulder. But of course it wasn't her old classmate, almost fifty now, somewhere in California, but her student, Kenneth Bhimani, his legs just as dark and taut in his tennis whites.

"Out of dress code," Ms. Abassian teased too brightly over the heads of kindergarten mothers, greeting their children with showy voices.

"Are you giving me a penalty? Mind control," Kenneth Bhimani said, flashing his copy of *1984* awkwardly at her, and Ms. Abassian laughed in the frothy, off-putting way that had become hers since her husband had left.

"I have a bit of gossip for you..." Cole McCur, the tenth-grade English teacher, sidled up with his UPenn coffee canteen and another story of his own two-timing. "And to be politically incorrect, she's really..." Mr. McCur cupped his hands away from his chest, as if it were something wonderful that he and Ms. Abassian were this close, that they could talk this way about breasts, and Ms. Abassian laughed, pleasing, always pleasing.

The kindergarten mothers crowded out the lobby doors, past the British receptionist. On the sidewalk, Kenneth stepped aside to let the girls board the tennis bus first, and Ms. Abassian saw him, her husband, across the traffic on a

bench outside Central Park, as if there were truly no boundaries between the real and the dreamed of. She had not seen him for two weeks, not since he picked up their son at what had become only her front door. But now there he was, gazing downtown, as if his appearance at 63rd Street and Central Park West at 3:10 had nothing to do with her. His hands were punched into the pockets of his leather jacket, and his knee must have been jerking furiously, she could tell, even from a distance, by that stiff angle of his leg.

"So therein lies the dilemma," Mr. McCur was saying of his two women, just as Ms. Abassian's and her husband's eyes locked. After twenty-five years, even with the traffic between them, she knew his expression well—that look of both longing and dread, as if she had already asked too much.

"Mr. Mac," several eleventh-grade girls greeted Mr. McCur, even though he no longer taught them, and Ms. Abassian reproached herself for not being the one the students flocked to. But outside the school, she forgot the girls entirely. There was no sign of her husband along Central Park West. She dialed his cell phone, then his new studio on 27th Street, which she had never seen. His outgoing message sounded professional, chatty and masculine, revealing nothing of his family life.

"It's me," Alexandra said, as if twenty years had dropped away and they were still leaving hopeful messages across the city for each other. But on her answering machine an hour later, there was only a reminder about her children's doctor's appointments the next day.

BY MAY the high school girls had switched to their light-blue uniform skirts, and Ms. Abassian had survived her first winter alone. Somehow, though, in the warm weather, her wounds felt raw all over again. In class, she was unsure of herself, and on the school's granite steps to Central Park West at the end of the



day, returned to herself, to her journey home alone, she inevitably had to fight back tears.

Nights, it took hours to fall into her boundaryless sleep; she was too alert, listening for every creak, every hiss, worrying about intruders in their second-floor apartment in Washington Heights. She slept in sweatpants and T-shirt, never feeling the breeze on her skin. In the next room, on either side of high shelves, were her eleven-year-old daughter, Esme, and fifteen-year-old son, Reese, an insomniac too, who stayed up all night—doing what?—on his phone.

From the very beginning Alexandra’s parents, Armenian immigrants, warned her against her husband, as they had always warned her against all the ways she had strayed. In her New Jersey suburban public school, she had only been a B student; in college she’d proclaimed herself an atheist, and then went on to a graduate program in theater, where she met her husband.

“No faith, no money. How will he take care of you?” Her mother caught Alexandra’s arm when they were alone in the kitchen, chopping onions for *dzhash*, their first dinner in Alexandra’s and her husband’s apartment in the East Village. With her parents there, the rooms seemed especially small, the corners dirty.

“I hate when you worry.” Alexandra edged away from her mother’s familiar scent of lavender and sweat and onions.

His name was Jack, plain and simple, and Alexandra imagined that the landscape of his childhood—that long flat road in Minnesota—had given him his restlessness. His face was all angles, whose sharpness and shape seemed to change from every vantage point. Men and women solicited him on the street. It was odd, the real power of beauty. It was so much a part of him, of his destructive confidence, his indulgent moods, that she couldn’t say whether or not she would have fallen for him without it. His good looks convinced her she was lucky to be with him, that she had been graced.

On his motorcycle, at night, he whisked her up and down the West Side Highway. Always in motion, off to a friend’s cabaret or some East Village show, he could cycle through impersonations with unsettling ease and abandon himself completely to roles. She loved him best when he was performing, though she worried about that emptiness, that sadness she caught in his face when no one was looking. At night, he whispered, “I adore you,” his fingertips seeking all parts of her.

Afterward, he would curl against her shoulder, as if she were the necessary force binding him to earth, and he would chatter about anything, her parents, then his.

“White trash,” he said, to get a rise out of her. “*How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child!*” And then he trained his lips into various expressions around his cigarette: suave, tough, angry, scared.

People guessed he was an actor, with his showiness and self-deprecating humor. Short-term soap opera roles as the wayward brother or troubled lover kept him treading water for over a decade. But for the past five years he’d struggled for work, drunk too much. He tried bartending, telephone sales, and then real estate. Though he trekked with clients to ten, fifteen apartments, answered their phone calls at ten P.M., his deals ended up falling through.

“You have no sense of planning,” Alexandra told him when he couldn’t help with the rent.

“A haranguer, a shrew. You want me to be miserable?”

She rolled her eyes.

“You want me to give up?”

“Of course not.” She tried to soften, to be generous and kind, though she couldn’t help thinking she was stuck in her job, teaching run-on sentences, because of him.

They had been married twenty years, but for the last several, they had gone months without touching. She blamed her flesh itself: her bulging stomach, hanging breasts. But mostly she pretended her body did not exist, hid it in Jack’s button-down shirts.

She had almost thought it was an agreement—*this* was the level of misery they would tolerate. They had let Reese, then Esme, sleep between them too many nights when they were small.

“I love you so much,” Alexandra had cuddled against her daughter, feeling the tender parts of herself all over again, at last.

Jack’s electronic bank statements arrived to his computer only. When he couldn’t pay his portion of expenses, he confessed the price of his leather jacket, his new haircut. He needed relief, he told her. Pleasure.

“I need more work. That’s all,” he said, his eyes flitting away.

Clearly he was paying for things she didn’t know about. But she allowed herself to acknowledge this only for a moment before she shut down, closing the doors of her mind so that nothing so destructive could seep through. Her husband loved her, loved her in the way of all marriages, which was a mixed way, but a way which one settled for.

But in the midst of daily life, the evidence presented itself.

First, she found the headshots. After a half-day at school, she had an afternoon to herself, a rare opportunity. But she was drawn to his computer, even though she feared when she opened it on the dining room table that nothing would be the same afterwards. She paused with the lid half-open. Did she really want to know his private thoughts? Should anyone ever really know so much about another person? Did she even want to ruin the afternoon?

His browser history was programmed to clear after every use. But in an untitled folder, unfamiliar headshots leered at the viewer. So what, so what, Alexandra thought. She searched his document files. Found nothing. See, she told herself. And though her hands were shaking, gradually, over days, she let herself believe there was nothing so odd about those photos, nothing so odd about why his browser was set to clear after every search. It was a kind of

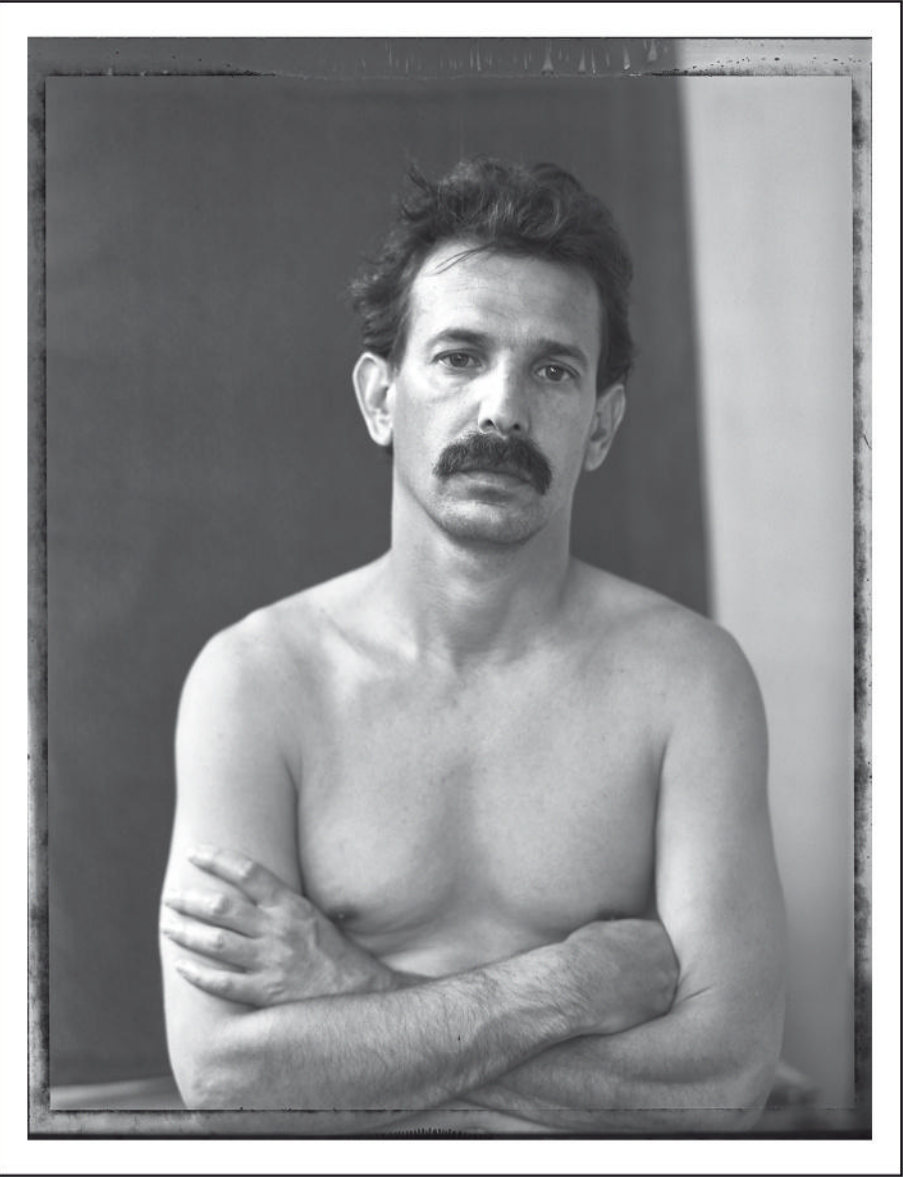
Orwellian doublethink, knowing the moments she let herself not know, but still letting herself forget.

“*To Alexandra, whose steadiness and love I appreciate more than I could ever say,*” her husband read from his birthday card only a few days after the headshots. His eyes were foggy with emotion, emotion she believed to be real or at least simultaneously true with other emotions, and she hugged him, feeling the children watching them. Even Reese, often so sullen, smiled at his parents’ display of warmth.

In the three years before the final discovery, it was easy to brush the headshots aside, easy to forget their leering quality. After all, they were only blips, spread out over years, submerged by the other business of life: her mother was dying, then her father. She faced sixty papers to grade every week and the steady threat of conflict with Mr. Dole, who enjoyed luring teachers into casual banter and then attacking. Her life with Jack was busy, taken up by parent–teacher conferences, worries over Reese, and the occasional days they regressed to who they had once been, flirting around the corners of museums.

Jack’s cell phone was most often hidden away, but she hardly let herself think about why. Once, around the time she had discovered the headshots, a text message buzzed on the kitchen counter: “*are you busy?*”

“Dad, what are you so nervous about? Ooooo,” Esme said, after he snatched away the phone, but then she never mentioned it again. The troubles of her parent’s marriage would ferment inside of her long before she actually knew what they were. Later, Alexandra would realize that she had made an arrangement,



both unconscious and purposeful: *I will tolerate this as long as I don’t have to truly acknowledge it. As long as you don’t throw it in my face.*

After all, she had trusted him, given her life to him, before the priest who had known her since childhood. She had forsaken her own family, blocked out their judgments, and in their final years, when Jack was unemployed and drinking too much, she was ashamed and had gone without speaking to them for too long.

And anyway, she and Jack were in constant contact throughout the day, checking in about an audition Jack had or about Reese, whose interest in school was lackluster, even before the separation.

“*Where are you?*” Jack would text every few hours, sending random photos: an angle of a building, a red sneaker abandoned on the sidewalk.

It had seemed unfathomable that Jack could deceive her, that he could tell her he loved her in one moment while betraying her in the next. But sometimes Alexandra thought degrees of infidelity were all a part of it, the morass of marriage.

“DOUBLETHINK,” she would underline on the blackboard, teaching 1984, about the Memory Hole, where evidence of truth was shredded. “How does the government control the truth? What do we purposely not acknowledge about ourselves?”

Her students gazed towards the iron-plated windows or down at their unmarked pages. They were not interested in the government or oppression, and they were hopeful about their own truthfulness with themselves.

“This book is good, but boring,” they generally thought. Goldstein’s discus-

sion of oligarchy, in particular, went on and on. Couldn't she let them skim this one section?

"I'm too good a girl," Alexandra joked, and she imagined what they would say about her behind her back, how she tried too hard to be funny.

THE TRUTH was revealed on the hottest day of July, a week after Alexandra's and Jack's twentieth wedding anniversary. After a pedicure downtown, a rare aimless afternoon, she was heading to the train at 14th Street when a sharp pain in her chest made her swivel. The deep familiarity of her husband's presence registered inside of her even before his image assembled clearly in her mind. In front of West Side Market, his hand was on the shoulder of a tall woman in an iridescent raincoat and wide-rimmed hat. He was pulling her towards him, but the woman jerked away towards Sixth Avenue.

He squinted after the woman until she was out of sight, then turned into West Side Market, where he often bought groceries. The two-way traffic on 14th Street moved between them, and Alexandra was both in the moment and outside of it, knowing this was the moment her life would change forever, in front of this particular deli, this particular stream of cabs and the car painted with the Coor's Light advertisement, "Who Wants a Cold One?"

She ducked into the deli entrance, avoiding eye contact with the Korean man behind the counter. Flies swarmed the peaches; watermelon glistened under Saran Wrap. Emerging from West Side Market, her husband felt into his back



pocket for his cell phone, dialed her number.

"Hey," her husband said, as if she were his buddy.

"What have you been doing, Jack?"

He'd just had a meeting with the Corcoran people, he said. "They're all shits." Shopping bag on the sidewalk, he combed back his short hair. His voice was easy and natural, no trace of a lie.

"I saw you."

"Saw me what?"

"I saw you, just now, with the woman."

"What are you talking about?" Still, though, she would have pushed the truth away, shredded it down the Memory Hole, if he hadn't suddenly whirled around, panicked. "Where the hell are you?"

The Korean man glanced up from the bills he was counting, and she hung up the phone.

"Alex," Jack yelled across the traffic between them, and she darted downtown through the crowd. By the time Jack crossed 14th, she was more than a block ahead. Breathing hard, she hid around the corner of Waverly, the traffic on Seventh Avenue streaming nowhere she recognized. When she peeked uptown, her husband wasn't anywhere to be found. Had he taken another side street or simply stopped looking for her? Was he relieved that she had finally discovered him?

Later, he would tell her he had searched for an hour, somehow missing where she had turned, but she wasn't sure whether to believe him.

HEIDI WAS the one on 14th Street. Often when he'd said he'd been showing apartments, he'd actually been with other women, from the computer, from chat rooms, who were somehow willing to meet him, a stranger—where? at hotels, at their homes?—in the middle of the afternoon.

He was ashamed, out of control, he said. He had never cared for anyone but her. It had nothing to do with love, it was only physical. As if somehow this would make it hurt less, as if it were not in the physical, the body, where she was most wounded and where she most yearned.

"How many times did you do this?" she grilled him in a voice no one would like, and he covered his eyes. The old air-conditioner in the bedroom made the air smell stale. She had the impulse to fling open the window, to the hot New York City night. In the next room, their children should have been asleep, but who knew, especially with Reese?

"How often? How often was it?"

"What does it matter?"

"Was it anyone we knew?"

"No. I told you."

"You have to come clean." But the more she tried to cleanse, to purge what had happened, the more the dirt grew. He'd actually been with some of the computer women several times, not just once, not just at hotels, but out to dinner, drinks...

Twice a week, with a harrowed look, he visited a psychiatrist at Columbia Presbyterian and took prescriptions that flattened his moods. He stopped drinking, took up smoking again, and most of the time, during the months before he finally left, he looked wan and unhappy.

"I was having a nervous breakdown. Only I didn't know it. The pressure was too much."

He quit selling real estate, gave up his receptionist position.

"And this is the answer? Quitting everything?"

Her own parents had been tied to their shoe business their entire lives; they had devoted themselves to Alexandra and her sister without ever thinking their lives should be otherwise. But who knew? Had they really loved each other so long?

"You were never nice to me," Jack said from the opposite side of the bed.

"I was never nice to *you*?"

"You were always angry."

"I had reason to be."

"Every minute?"

"I was not angry all the time," she said, though she felt the dry residue of rage between her teeth.

"You knew who I was when I met you, Alexandra. But then you expected a millionaire."

He'd had success, he claimed. Only she'd refused to acknowledge it. He had become what he had set out to be: a steadily working actor.

"So bitter, Alexandra. You didn't have to give up acting. No one told you to."

"Someone had to do it."

"Why?" he asked, as if he really didn't know, didn't understand the course of their lives as she saw it at all.

But she hadn't missed acting anyway. That was what she didn't admit to him. Acting was like sex; she had pushed it aside so long she had almost forgotten it. If she'd ever read a script along with Jack, it might have touched something off, some deep longing, only momentarily irresistible.

And Alexandra thought of all the women, the politician's wives, her own friends, who had forgiven their husbands, who had decided to believe fresh promises. What could one expect from marriage anyway? Were those who forgave ever happy, or in accommodating themselves had they condemned themselves to eternal bitterness?

In September, school began with the usual faculty meetings and books to unpack. Alexandra was exhausted, anxious to please, regretting her irritability, dreading, always, the final abandonment, though she could not bring herself to end it herself. She was impatient with students, fantasizing walking out of a class one day and never returning. She both feared and fantasized about being fired.

On other days, though, her loose emotions were channeled into poems she was teaching, and she felt the students journeying with her towards truth, understanding, and even beauty.

"The trouble is, I'm good at this. And sometimes I love it," she told Jack, who nodded quickly, looking away. Since her discovery, his subsequent therapy and forced sobriety, he had developed a way of shrinking into himself, of always feeling accused, though sometimes he would suddenly declare his love.

"You're the best, Alexandra," he would say with sorrow and remorse, so unlike the person who had once appeared so vacant, so empty when he thought no one was looking.

IN MAY, her students were restless for summer. They did not seem to notice anything different about her, that she was now alone; they asked about the quizzes she had not yet corrected, faked both boredom and interest. Many were in despair and couldn't concentrate, no matter how she tried to entertain them. The iron-plated windows overlooking Central Park West were tilted open, and Ms. Abassian couldn't help losing focus herself, gazing out to the park benches, wishing her husband might slip into her line of vision once more.

In her World Literature class, Kenneth Bhimani huddled over his book, his uniform pants a little too short for his lanky legs, his hair shaggier than in the beginning of the year. The only darker-skinned student in the class, he was as serious and purposeful as that classmate years before, the one who visited her



dreams. (Who had broken whose heart? Somehow she only remembered confusion, and then suddenly it was too late.)

"*His life had been most simple and ordinary and therefore most terrible,*" Alexandra read aloud from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* in front of the class. "Any ideas? What is this story saying about love? Does Ivan Ilyich's wife truly care for him?"

"She's selfish," Rachel, captain of the tennis team, said. "She only thinks of how his illness affects her."

"Simple and ordinary and terrible. What's wrong with 'ordinary'?"

To be ordinary was not good enough, they said. They would give up anything for their dreams, to become famous singers or rich in business. Ms. Abassian asked about their future goals, and when someone reminded her she had asked this question a month before, she scrambled, telling them this time was different; now she wanted them to consider what would truly make for a meaningful life.

Kenneth wanted to go into his father's real estate business.

"Will that make you happy?"

"Sure," he shrugged, giving nothing away.

"When did you know it was your dream to be a teacher?" Rachel blinked up at her, and suddenly all the tennis-playing girls, Kenneth, and the other boys were focused on her.

"I'm not sure when it happened."

"Did you know in high school?"

"Not really."

They were all still waiting. Outside the window, no sign of her husband.

"I loved literature. And I didn't want to work in an office. I wanted to be in a classroom."

She directed them back to Ivan Ilyich, and Kenneth raised his hand, not high, but level with his face.

"No one really lives, and likewise, they don't confront death. They are too spiritually circumscribed."

"Circumscribed." Derek poked his back with a drumstick.

"What is the story saying about love?" Ms. Abassian rocked in her chunky black boots, and then she wrote on the blackboard: _____'s life had been most _____ and _____ and therefore most _____.

"Fill in the blanks. The character can be real or made up."

She smiled, brightening to brighten them, and as they wrote, she tried not to gaze out the window, but instead focused on the Frost poems Mr. McCur had tacked on the bulletin board.

Ms. Abassian called on Rachel first.

"*Her life had been most glamorous and adventurous, and, therefore, most thrilling.*"

"*His life had been most boring and something, I couldn't think of anything,*"

Derek said.

"Kenneth?"

"*His life had been solitary and mundane, and therefore imaginative.*"

"Mundane means boring," Derek corrected.

"I know that," Kenneth said, and the tennis-team girls giggled. At the end of class, while the other students gathered their knapsacks, Kenneth bowed slightly, thanking Ms. Abassian. Her own immigrant parents had always reminded her to thank teachers after every class, and for a moment she was giddy, as if she could live her life all over again and marry Kenneth instead.

"If you liked this story," she said, "try *Anna Karenina*."

"What's it about?"

"Oh, love. Jealousy. What's at stake."

"Yes? Sounds expansive." He pronounced with an extra bit of air, and then flipped through the book she had pulled from the shelves. Alone, a few moments later, Ms. Abassian closed her eyes, trying to feel it was not so horrible, her own life, in this classroom as an English teacher, and as a single mother, though neither was what she had planned for herself.

"How are the lessons?" Mr. McCur stuck his face inside her classroom door, feigning an Irish brogue. "Any worthy minds?"

"Maybe."

"It's spring. Time for a sonnet or two. Time for a poetry bash." He asked about various students, who might be up to AP English the following year, and she found herself slipping into a lengthy discussion about this or that particular student.

"Kenneth is talented, of course. But he stuffs in big words. And he says he wants to be a businessman."

"Smart move," Mr. McCur nodded, poised to embark on another story of his own secret maneuverings with women, but for some reason it didn't bother her this time.

THAT EVENING Alexandra's husband showed up unexpectedly, as if he had somehow sensed the thread of space between them. For a moment she was disoriented, thinking he was meant to be there, that he had only come home after being out for the day. His blue T-shirt set off his eyes, so strikingly blue, so stunning with his sharp jaw and cheekbones; for a moment, she couldn't tear her eyes away.

"I want my lamp back."

"You want your lamp back?" She didn't move aside in the doorway. In the living room, the children were transfixed by *The Simpsons*.

"I paid for it."

"You paid for nothing."

"Fuck you."

“Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? You’re not allowed to just show up here.”

“I have a car downstairs.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

“So you thought it was a good time to come over?”

“For me anyway,” he joked, mocking himself for his own selfishness, then he winced. She headed down the hall for the metal lamp, two hundred dollars, from one of his spending sprees.

“That’s how selfish I am.” He wrested the lamp from her, half-acting, half-serious.

“I’m not arguing.”

“You wanted love from a fairy tale, but your heart was small like this.” He showed only a tiny bit between thumb and index fingers.

“Like this?” She measured the same amount. “What about your heart?”

“Daddy.” Esme rushed from the living room, all of her saucy eleven-year-oldness gone, to wrap her arms around his waist. “When are you coming home?”

“When,” Jack repeated, then crouched in the doorway, head between his knees.

“Mom, Daddy’s crying,” Esme said, in an accusatory tone she must have learned from them, and then she patted her father’s head and started crying herself.

“Daddy’s very sad,” Alexandra nodded benignly, like a shrink, all the while thinking to herself, *I will never forgive you for this*.

Later she dialed Jack’s cell phone, left a message.

“That was horrible today. So selfish. So typical. Maybe you shouldn’t be allowed to see your daughter.”

But alone in her bed that night, she blamed herself for being exactly what he said: small-hearted, angry, unable to forgive, unable to love. And for a moment, she would have given anything just to have Jack back. To return to that time when she had guessed nothing of what went on, nothing about the women who emerged from computer screens. To be that naive, to believe herself loved once more. To not worry about growing older alone. To not feel that thickness around her throat, self-hatred propelling her towards the open window.

At two A.M., after she had finally fallen asleep, her husband rang her back.

“Pick up the phone, Alex,” he said into her answering machine. “Pick up the phone. Goddammit.”

“Don’t swear at me.”

“Don’t threaten me with my children.”

“You owe me twenty thousand dollars. You fucked other women. My mother was right.”

“Your mother?” He laughed raggedly. “You can’t forgive me. Ever.”

“There is nothing worse than being deceived.”

“Then go to sleep, you fucking schoolteacher,” he fired back, then hung up. The longer she tried to sleep, the more anxious she was about how she would function at work the next day and the more wired she became, worrying about all the papers she had to grade and the second half of *Ivan Illych* she had counted on waking up to reread at five A.M. She imagined Mr. Dole calling her into the office, reiterating parent complaints about how her lessons had gone downhill in the past few months, how she handed back papers late, and how in the recession someone had to be cut...

She kicked off the sheets and dialed one of the numbers charged to her husband’s credit card, a phone sex line.

“Are you going to suck my big tits?”

Alexandra waited, making a sound, a groan, like a man.

“I’m taking off my shirt,” the woman said, and Alexandra imagined the woman to be beautiful, like Heidi, or not even beautiful, but to have a great body. Which meant to her husband the most basic of clichés, though he never would have admitted to it. And as she listened on the phone, she imagined Heidi with her perfect body, the breasts for which her husband couldn’t resist squandering their lives together. But Alexandra knew that most likely the woman on the phone was like her, ordinary and alone.

And when she hung up the phone, nothing, of course, had changed. She was still herself at fifty, alone, in the morning light, and she wondered if this was how her husband had ever felt, this dread, this letdown, because nothing ever changed, you were always the same person, even after moments of intensity.

“I THINK I figured out the end of *Ivan Ilyich*.” Kenneth edged up to her as she was leaving school the next day.

“Oh yeah? Tell me,” she said, eyes stinging from too little sleep. She had thought it would feel dangerous, being outside the school building with him; after all, his brown skin and delicate features had shown up in her dreams. Instead, though, in the wash of sunlight, she felt exhausted and longed to be alone. This moment of leaving school was when tears always came. And, as if on call, they almost did this time, even though she was next to Kenneth, in his tennis whites, Adidas racquet bag over his shoulder.

“So what’s the secret?” she said. Rachel and the rest of the tennis team were in a circle on the corner, phones out, texting, by the tennis-team bus.

“At the end, Ivan Ilyich is happy because he no longer is looking for answers.”

“You think so?” Women in spandex with baby strollers pushed by them, heading toward Central Park.

“He takes the simple view of death, like his servant, Gerasim,” Kenneth said.

“What’s the simple view of death?”

“That death and decay are natural. That we shouldn’t recoil.” Kenneth’s white sneakers were clean and bright, his socks neatly folded down. Who knew

what would become of him?

“Ms. Abassian,” the tennis girls teemed around her. “Are you coming to our game? You never come.”

She explained, with too much detail, that she had to pick up her daughter from school in another part of town.

“Bring her. We want to meet her. Ple-ease.”

“She’s not feeling well.”

“Oh, you’re kidding us,” Rachel teased, and Ms. Abassian laughed guiltily at her own white lie.

“We love you, Ms. Abassian.” Rachel made a fake heart with her fingertips.

“Bye, girls,” Ms. Abassian called back in her most teacherly tone—affectionate, yet distant too—as they boarded the bus ahead of Kenneth, their tennis bags bouncing on their backs.

At 59th Street, commuters converged down to the subway lines, but Alexandra kept walking along Eighth Avenue, feeling that anxious rush in her heart. She was never one to take a risk, to not get on the train when she was supposed to. But that wasn’t exactly true, she argued with herself. Hadn’t marrying Jack—didn’t marrying anyone—involve a kind of throwing one’s life to the wind?

Not knowing where she was going, she wandered along the bland, tall buildings of Seventh Avenue and somehow wound up on 43rd Street amid the Broadway shows and tourist shops with their miniature Empire State Buildings and Big Apple T-shirts. Beneath the giant screen with the Coca-Cola ad, she stared up at the wide, spinning world, the uncertain moving clouds, and she thought of Jack, Esme, and Reese, orbiting through their days without her. Someday soon it would be Reese’s and then Esme’s turn to leave, and she dialed Reese’s number, not expecting him to pick up.

“I just wanted to hear your voice,” Alexandra laughed without meaning to, shielding the phone from the sounds of 43rd Street. “You know I love you, don’t you?”

“*Mom.*” But he humored her, chatting about a particular teacher, and she tried to be at ease, to be soothed by her son’s voice, before letting him go. The currents of traffic stopped and then started again. The billboard flashed another rippling trail of Coca-Cola, and, alone, Alexandra couldn’t help crying out.

She was nowhere near where she was supposed to be.

It was almost five already, but she held on tight to the light post, watching the traffic continuing on Seventh Avenue.

“Save me,” she cried to the rippling light of the Coca-Cola, but her desperate words sounded false, as if she might finally be faking them, as if she might actually be relieved.□

The Woman Who Wanted to Stop Death

She went to the Lake. She said:
Lake, old idle mind of the world,
Can you carry a part of me?
She handed the Lake her reflection.

She went to the Sun. She said: Sun,
Warm-eyed judge of the world,
Can you carry a part of me?
And handed the Sun her body.

She went to the Wind: Wind,
Tireless inquisitor of the world
(It was hunting the evasive smell of jasmine)
Carry a part of me?
And gave the Wind her soul.

With what did she give her soul?
Bodiless, handleless, toothless bit of breath.

—Abigail Dembo

Laurent Cantet and the Working Life

Steve Vineberg

WHEN THE French writer-director Laurent Cantet died in April 2024 at the age of sixty-three, he left behind a small legacy, consisting of nine full-length features, one segment in an anthology film, a handful of shorts, and an episode in a TV mini-series, all squeezed into the quarter-century between 1997 and 2021. Yet in three extraordinary films—*Human Resources* (1999), *Time Out* (2001), and *The Class* (2008), the Cannes Film Festival jury’s unanimous choice for the Palme d’Or—he managed to stake out territory that few filmmakers have roamed around in: the working life. The directors who have ventured into this subject have almost all been documentarians, like Louis Malle in *Humain, trop humain*, Barbara Kopple in *Harlan County U.S.A.* and *American Dream*, or Fred Wiseman in dozens of pictures. Cantet’s most significant training was as assistant director to one of movie history’s most brilliant documentarians, Marcel Ophuls, on *Veillées d’armes*, about the siege of Sarajevo, but Cantet himself remained in the domain of fiction moviemaking.

When I saw *Human Resources* in the theater, I was aware that I was watch-

ing something highly unusual, a film that truly delves into contemporary issues of labor and class. It’s set in a factory in the French provinces, where the thirty-five-hour workweek is a hotly debated topic. This is the town where the movie’s protagonist, Franck Verdeau (Jalil Lespert), grew up; his father, Jean-Claude (Jean-Claude Vallod), has spent his whole adult life working at the same machine. But Jean-Claude feels a sense of achievement in having educated his son beyond his own station. Now, a year away from a graduate business degree, Franck returns home to intern on the management side, and it’s his father who emphasizes the importance of keeping his distance from the workers—of eating lunch not with his dad and the men he’s known since he was a child (some from his own generation), but with the boss, M. Rouet (Lucien Longueville), who has taken a liking to Franck and has hinted at the possibility of hiring him in a management position when he gets out of school. When Franck, drawing on what he’s learned in his university classes, comes up with the idea of asking the workers to fill out a questionnaire about their feelings about the thirty-five-hour workweek,

Rouet encourages him. The union has stated its opposition to the proposed change, but Franck—operating out of scholarly curiosity, not out of a political position—suspects that the questionnaire might indicate that the union is out of touch with the point of view of its constituents. What he’s too naïve to see is that Rouet is seizing on it to further his own agenda: to force a wedge between the workers and their union and make it possible for him to lay off employees, including, as it happens, Franck’s father.

Low-key and absent the patina of most fiction filmmaking (I didn’t recognize a single actor), but not, heaven knows, absent the virtues of craftsmanship, *Human Resources* is a brutal coming-of-age story. Cantet and his co-screenwriter, Gilles Marchand, don’t gloss over the ugly truths of work life for the working class, or the irreconcilable tensions between classes. Cantet is unrelenting in the scene where Jean-Claude learns that he’s being laid off and just stands at his machine, so devastated he can’t move away from it but too proud to break down or say what he’s feeling. Jean-Claude is an old-school employee: he stands behind the company, he doesn’t question the boss’s decisions, and, unschooled, unsophisticated, he lacks the confidence to voice an opinion of his own. (He was reluctant to fill out his son’s questionnaire; he doesn’t think it’s his place to say what a factory boss should do or not do.) So he doesn’t even have the resource of long-term bitterness when he finds out he’s being retired—a quality the outspoken union delegate, Danielle Arnoux (Danielle Mélador),

has in spades. By the time Cantet takes us inside a meeting between management and labor, the union battles have been going on for so long that the relationship between the two sides has grown rancid, and it takes little for them to turn incendiary. Danielle is an unlikable character, and her patronizing, know-all attitude toward Franck sets our teeth on edge. But she isn’t wrong about Rouet: he’s every bit the snake she’s always protested he is. She’s far closer to the truth about him than Jean-Claude, whom we do like and of whom we feel protective.

Human Resources doesn’t have the breadth or sensibility of a tragedy; it’s more like one of the “case studies” the early naturalist novelists like Zola and the Goncourt brothers favored. But it’s acute and unsettling. When Franck realizes how Rouet is using his questionnaire, he bands together with Danielle and the other workers to publicize what the boss is up to; he becomes a renegade. This new set of actions—just like his questionnaire—reminds us just how wet behind the ears he is. When the workers go on strike, though, his father continues to show up for work, and it’s Franck who confronts him, turning off his machine and berating him, not just for refusing to take a stand against the company that Franck feels has no right to his loyalty, but for lifting Franck out of the class he was born into and leaving him, in a sense, without social roots, without a place to belong. It’s a powerful scene, unstinting enough to make you gasp—and then, perhaps, painful enough to make you want to cry for the gap between father and son that



nothing can ever close again.

CANTET’S MOVIE *Time Out*, co-written with Robin Campillo (who worked on most of his screenplays and edited or co-edited all but his last two films), revolves around Vincent (Aurélien Recoing), who has been laid off from his consulting job months before the story begins, but leaves his home in France every morning, drives over the Swiss border, and calls his wife Muriel (Karin Viard) on his cellphone from rest stops and hotel lobbies between invented meetings with clients. These calls home are like communiqués from the desert. He even goes so far as to suggest to Muriel that he’s unhappy at work and contemplating a change, and then he makes up a whole new job, at the UN, which requires him to stay in Geneva for days at a time. In one particularly upsetting scene, he walks into an office building with his briefcase under his arm, in the company of some people who actually work there; he manages to convey the impression that he’s in their group without interacting with them. It’s a brilliant charade, but it can only work for a little while. Then he wanders the halls with a smile on his face, peering into meetings behind glass walls. He’s like a replicant impersonating a human being.

The way people feel about the work they do—especially men, who still, in 2001, three decades after the women’s movement made its first strides, saw themselves in the traditional role of the breadwinners—is a great subject, but hardly anyone has broached it. (Most movies can’t even manage to convince us that the characters in them really do the jobs they say they do.) Vincent in *Time Out* is in serious financial trouble; his strategy for getting himself out of it, a bogus investment scheme, is an act of desperation. But though he does feel terror at the possibility of no longer being able to continue in the role of a breadwinner, his problem is more complex. It’s that his life has been defined, as most of our lives are, by the work he does, and though it turns out he’s felt alienated from it in some essential and profound way for a long time, he has no other mold to press himself into. So he floats about like a ghost, haunting the countryside, applying all his professional experience and practiced style to the task of pretending to be employed. It could be said that the workplace is a kind of stage set for a man who does the kind of corporate work Vincent used to. But by the time we encounter him, his whole life has become a performance.

Human Resources is an honest, creditable piece of work that feels completely fresh. *Time Out* is, I think, a masterpiece. Cantet sustains a tone of fractured horror, as if Vincent hasn’t allowed himself to put together the reality of his situation. The nighttime and pre-dawn images of him driving the highways (shot by Pierre Milon) convey an emotional desolation that you can see Vincent is trying to keep himself insulated from. Early on we encounter a strange scene where he and Muriel stand outside a gym, watching their teenage son (Nicolas Kalsch) at a judo class, and as Cantet shoots them, the images of young men engaged in this ritual seem to be projected onto

the side of the building. We may not realize right away why this moment is so disturbing, but it links up later on with the image of Vincent watching the meeting in that office building, where he looks as if he might be observing another obsolete version of himself engaged in an activity he’s now closed off from.

The movie is beautifully acted, especially by the stage-trained Recoing, whose performance is a triumph of tension held almost perfectly in check. The fissures in his serene surface, which appear and then vanish, carry the stamp of trauma that verges on psychosis. And Viard is very fine as Muriel. They have some remarkable scenes together. Some weeks after he’s told her about the invented UN job, she senses his distress and asks him what’s the matter, and he confides (if that’s the right word) that things aren’t going well at work, that he’s only been deluding himself into believing that they are, that he’s worried about disappointing everyone, about screwing up. His confession is undeniably an expression of real anxieties, but they’re not precisely his; at least, they’re anxieties he remembers feeling when he was still working, and possibly they’re also an indirect expression of the ones he’s feeling now, which have to do with an entirely different set of factors. This is a variation on his behavior in the corridor of the office building: he’s projecting a reality that isn’t his own, but one he’s more comfortable with, though it’s animated by his current emotional state. In another sequence, Muriel goes to visit him in Geneva so she can see the apartment he says he’s taken there (his father loaned him the money for it). But of course there *is* no apartment, so he takes her into the mountains instead, and for a moment he loses her in the mist. He pauses before making contact, almost as if he were contemplating using this unintended separation between them to make a getaway from his life. But then he calls her name, and the haze clears enough for him to see her standing with her back to him, looking out over the snowy expanse. She turns to him with a warm smile and asks playfully, “Did you think you had lost me?” The answer, if he could frame one for her, would be very complicated indeed.

HUMAN RESOURCES and *Time Out* are very different from each other, and *The Class* is utterly unlike either. It’s based on François Bégaudeau’s memoir of teaching French at a multicultural public school in Paris; Bégaudeau co-authored the adaptation with Cantet and Campillo, and he plays the role of the teacher, who is called François Marin. The actors who play the students are non-professionals, and so utterly convincing that we might begin to wonder if we’re watching a documentary in which real people are playing themselves, as they do in Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* and *Man of Aran*. (We’re not.) And these young people mesmerize the camera. The film encapsulates a year in the classroom, François’s fourth at the school, where the class we see him teach, composed of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds (he’s also the supervisor for the grade), is at least half made up

of students he had the year before, so most of them know him well. But they’re older now, so he can’t always count on his previous relationship with them, and at least one of them, Khoumba (Rachel Régulier), has, according to him, changed her attitude. She continually challenges him, is often insolent, and sometimes refuses downright to do the ordinary things he asks of her, claiming that he’s always picking on her. François tends to tolerate his pupils’ joking around and restlessness and tendency to fade out; we can see that he gets a kick out of them. He doesn’t mind the fact that Boubacar (Boubacar Toure) takes any excuse to bring sex into the discussion, or that the students sometimes change places. He acts amused and even philosophical when one of them repeats the rumor that he’s gay, rather than, say, shutting the student down with a stock remark about privacy—a remark he’s enough of a veteran to realize can only backfire. But he tries to make sure that certain lines don’t get crossed.

The expert line crosser is Souleymane (played by an indelible young man named Franck Keïta), a kid from Mali who usually arrives without his books and has a volatile temper. He drives the rest of the teaching staff crazy, but François develops a soft spot for him after he seems to be getting somewhere with him. François has assigned the students to write self-portraits and read the first versions of them aloud, but Souleymane resists both the written and the oral parts, insisting that no one else knows him and he wants to keep it that way. But he’s become interested in photography, and he’s talented, so when he comes up with photos for his self-portrait, François praises them and encourages him to produce more. The boy’s reflexive response is to laugh at the compliment and put himself down, but it’s obvious that he’s pleased. Unfortunately, the good vibes between student and teacher don’t last. Later in the year the class is asked to present an argument in front of their peers—to take a stand. The atmosphere heats up when several of them get behind their home teams in the Africa Cup, and Souleymane becomes insulting to other boys in the class and then disrespectful to François, who takes him to the office of the principal (Jean-Michel Simonet). It seems like an overreaction; it’s hard not to imagine that François is acting, at least partially, out of his disappointment that Souleymane is reverting to old form after a breakthrough in their relationship.

And then the situation gets worse. The rules of this school allow for two class reps to sit in on the meeting of all the faculty teaching in that grade, a session in which they discuss the students’ progress. The reps, Esmeralda (Esmeralda Ouertani) and Louise (Louise Grinberg), gossip between themselves and giggle through the meeting. Then, violating confidentiality, they tell Souleymane that François “wiped him out” in the teachers’ discussion, which isn’t accurate; they quote him out of context, either out of group loyalty or to brew up trouble. Souleymane is so incensed that he storms out of the classroom, swinging his briefcase so wildly that it catches Khoumba on the cheek and makes her

bleed. But it’s the two girls François is furious at. He descends on them in the corridor, railing at them for behaving like “skanks” in the meeting. The French word he employs is *pétasses*, which can mean “whores,” and though François argues that isn’t the way he meant it, his indiscretion has the expected deleterious effect on his classroom. Meanwhile Souleymane is expelled for his conduct (François tries to take his part but has to submit to the regulations) and his regal African mother—who understands little English, so her son has to translate his own fate for her—walks proudly out of the meeting with an expression on her face that clearly signifies he received about as much sensitivity from the faculty and administration as she anticipated.

The film appears so casual in its dramatic and narrative approach (though in fact it’s carefully crafted) that the episodes give the impression of arising out of their own energy, just as they would in a real-life classroom—or in a real-life teachers’ lounge, where some of the most memorable scenes take place. In one, an administrator alerts the faculty that the mother of Wei (Wei Huang), a gifted Chinese boy beloved of all his teachers, has been arrested as an illegal immigrant, and the boy’s future is uncertain. In another, a novice teacher (Vincent Gaire) has a meltdown after a particularly bad class, and all his piled-up frustrations with the students spill out. His colleagues sit and listen silently, understanding that nothing they say in the moment can help him, that he just has to get it out. When he’s run out of steam, another teacher quietly leads him outside for some air. The aura around Vincent is constrained, but the sympathetic faces of his colleagues provide a buffer for him, so that he can unravel without feeling judged and without doing any real damage to himself.

Every teacher knows what it’s like to want to smash your head against the wall after a class or a conference with a student has gone awry, as Vincent clearly does here. Every teacher knows what it’s like to misspeak during a class and regret it afterwards, or to get embroiled in a face-off with a student where the line between the impulse to pursue your point for the student’s good and sheer obstinacy becomes blurred—which is what happens with François and Souleymane, or with François and the class reps. I can’t think of another movie as precise and complex in its consideration of the cause and effect of scenes like these, and of what it feels like to be that teacher.

The Class chronicles the working life in a special way, and it also belongs in the category of the best films about education, along with François Truffaut’s *The Wild Child*, Martin Ritt’s *Southerner*, Mike Figgis’s remake of *The Browning Version*, the documentary *To Be and to Have*, and just a few others. Cantet made just one other terrific movie, the 2005 *Heading South*, about sex tourists in Haiti in the 1970s, featuring an astonishing performance by Karen Young in a role Tennessee Williams might have written for her. But his distinctive contribution to movies was his attention to how we feel about our work. He should be remembered for it.□

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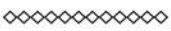


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ART

Neglected Seasons

Matthew Zipf

“What times are these, when
A conversation about trees is almost a crime
Because it entails a silence about so many misdeeds!”
—Bertolt Brecht

The Aesthetics of
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a show at the Nezu Museum, Tokyo,
Sept 14, 2024–Oct 20, 2024.

THE FIRST imperial anthology of poetry in Japan, compiled in 905 A.D. at the emperor’s request, contained two books about spring and two about autumn. Summer and winter were given one book each. A later collection, the *Shinsen Waka*, included a hundred and twenty poems in the section on “Spring and Autumn” and forty on “Summer and Winter.” Painters, too, long preferred the milder seasons, and they tended to pair them in the manner of that second collection. They painted many screens that set cherry blossoms alongside autumn foliage.

These are the bare facts that inspired a recent show at Tokyo’s Nezu Museum. With a dryness that amused me, the curators cited the anthologies and described Japanese art’s “bias in favor of spring and autumn... While this tradition was carried on, in Edo-period art, the combination of summer and autumn, instead of spring and autumn, is also striking.” It seemed to me hardly enough occasion for a show, or else there was a different sense of what constituted interest in Japan. How could the juxtaposition of two seasons that followed in natural sequence be “striking”?

Before arriving in Tokyo, I had worked for several months at a large American museum. I helped edit the exhibition catalogue for a highly political show, and I reviewed labels for their compliance with certain rules of style and “inclusive language.” Politics, if it had not changed the direction of the museum, had come to suffuse the official rhetoric. I kept waiting, then, as I read the Nezu Museum’s paragraphs about summer and autumn, for the turn to climate change, the moment when the seasons would be revealed in a more sinister aspect. I expected a justifying theme. But this was the show: the less famous, semi-neglected pairing of summer and autumn. The two seasons would be considered for their own sakes, in their interplay and essence. The museum was inviting us to direct contemplation, to look at summer and autumn not as a way of understanding something else, but just those two things.

THE PLAINLY named “Aesthetics of Summer and Autumn” is a rich, two-room show, with some small objects—sets of lily-shaped dishes for summer, a spiderwebbed stationery box

for autumn—in glass cases that let us “rest the eyes.” The principal works are the large screens in each room, accompanied by many elegant hanging scrolls, their ties falling forward like bangs. They appear largely as couples: pairs of hanging scrolls, pairs of folding screens. Sometimes a pair traverses the seasons, sliding smoothly or jumping abruptly from summer to fall, depending on the artist’s vision. Others are diptychs for a single season. The curators have arranged the works in a progression of time, based on the flora, fauna, or tone of each: “Summer Arrives,” “Midsummer Mood,” “From Summer to Autumn,” “Autumn Cool Begins,” and “Autumn Grasses.” In-season creatures populate the different painted worlds. The cuckoo heralds summer in Japan; the bat, a symbol of good fortune, is summertime itself.

The finer splitting of the show, the sorting of works not into summer and autumn but into smaller categories, is a reminder that the four seasons are only accepted clichés. Time could be divided otherwise. One has, along with the solstice and equinox, the behavior of animals, particular changes of weather, the winds, fresh blooms, gradual fadings. “The year has many seasons more than are recognized in the almanac,” Henry David Thoreau wrote in his *Journal*. “There is that time about the first of June, the beginning of summer, when the buttercups blossom in the now luxuriant grass and I am first reminded of mowing and of the dairy. Every one will have observed different epochs.”

There is pleasure in the seasons we devise for ourselves, and there is a different pleasure in the ritual of common symbols: the purple crocus that spells the end of winter, the birdsongs that return in spring. In Japanese art, white lilies have come to bear the standard of summer. They appear at the Nezu in two works from the Rimpa School, an Edo-period movement that produced beautiful, gold-foil screens. *Summer Flowers*, a pair of two-panel screens by Ogata Korin, from the eighteenth century, shows a cascade of flowers observed with botanical precision. There are a few white lilies, their stamens pointing through the petals, ensconced among the other flowers. A century later, Suzuki Kiitsu painted those lilies almost comically large, without much regard for science, in the river-wide *Mountain Streams in Summer and Autumn*. From Korin to Kiitsu it is possible to see the coalescing of a tradition, how the seasons get their markers, the beloved things people can watch for, wait for, and understand as signs.

Through art, the seasons become

international: those signs and markers travel. Snow stands for winter in places where snow almost never falls. The works in the Nezu show attest to a medley of close observation and imported sensibilities. A few of Korin’s *Summer Flowers* had been brought from the South of Japan; one work, in the show’s autumn section, is not Japanese at all, but comes from China. The seasons get imported, exported: as Teju Cole writes, “Spring, even in America, is Japanese.”

In my case this was literally true. I grew up outside Washington, D.C., where spring meant the National Cherry Blossom Festival. Every year, my mother entered the annual lottery to run a ten-mile race that passed around the Tidal Basin and coincided with the bloom. My friends went downtown to take pictures with the soft pink flowers. The trees, thousands of them, were gifts from Japan. Their annual blossoming confirms an amity and proves that time is still in joint.

But more often it is a failure of seeing, this definition of the seasons from elsewhere. We miss our own harvest, thinking of Vermont’s red and orange leaves. Kiitsu’s *Mountain Streams in Summer and Autumn*, even with its too-large lilies, fulfills the task of noting the local world more carefully. It consists of a pair of wide, six-panel screens. One panel is summer; the other, autumn. A simple, stylized stream flows through the green mountains, among lichen-spotted rocks and trees. The stream continues into the next screen, crossing the synapse between the final panels. They line up at the edges, gold foil to gold foil, green to green. From summer to autumn, the green changes just slightly, a step toward fading. The cypress trees start to brown from the base of their branches. One deciduous tree has lost almost all its leaves. But the lichens go on, steadily, like a polka dot spray for both seasons.

Autumn does not come all at once: that is what Kiitsu has seen. Some trees hold their leaves when others are already naked, a more various and charming state of autumn than the common “blaze” in pictures. In my own neighborhood, I watch the ginkgo trees change at irregular rates. On a single block, there are several trees of the same species, with the same conditions of soil and light, but some examples prove more eagerly caducous than the rest. A few trees are almost fully yellow while their brethren stay green.

EVERYWHERE IN Tokyo there were attempts to match the season. On the upper floor of the Nezu, specific tea bowls were brought out for the end of the tea year, which would finish ritually with October. The Tokyo National Museum had rotated the kimonos on display to mark the change to autumn. And down the street from the Nezu, the Yamatane Museum would soon close its exhibition on “Higashiyama Kaii and Summer in Japan.”

In one painting at the Yamatane’s show, a woman’s attention was caught by a firefly. In the Nezu’s summer section, a hanging scroll showed a child fanning himself in a pavilion. I felt transported by these little gestures, which were so familiar to me. I could

step into the paintings. The child’s fan, a stick with an oval at the end, was longer than the handheld fans I had seen all over Asia, but no different in principle. One of Hiroshige’s wood-block prints at the Yamatane showed people caught by a sudden shower of rain: three friends, perhaps, trying to stay dry under one umbrella, someone’s hat flying off in the wind. The paintings were very close to us: my sister and I had sweated on our walk to the Yamatane, and afterward I fanned her with the museum brochure. And yet the works were so far from us: hundreds of years away, in the Edo period. There was the simultaneous sensation of anachronism and timeliness.

Van Gogh painted a copy of that windswept Hiroshige print. I was reminded of him, in another confusion of time, when I looked again at a section of Korin’s *Summer Flowers*, the early Rimpa screen in the Nezu show. The irises are stark. They are at the bottom of the work, perhaps hiding a little. They are imposters, spring-blooming, not summer flowers at all. I think Korin could not give them up. The flowers’ dark blue against the gold is irresistible; the blue is as rich as the gold; and the petals are beguiling, alien in structure, with such width at the center and such a thin connecting point that they should be made of metal. Korin is famous for his irises. The Nezu has a larger work by him, declared a National Treasure, that consists solely of this one flower repeating across a pair of six-panel screens. The museum brings the screens out each spring, from mid-April to mid-May, when real irises bloom in the garden.

There are histories to be unearthed, always. My vision was trained for that, well before I had begun working at a museum. I wondered about the Nezu’s funding. I read it came from a railroad fortune, which could not have been entirely clean, given the years of empire. And what about the cherry blossoms I loved in Washington? The first shipment of two thousand trees had been arranged by First Lady Helen Herron Taft, in 1909. “Mrs. Taft had lived in Japan,” the National Park Service says, “and was familiar with the beauty of the flowering cherry trees.” This is an evasion. She had not lived in Japan just by some interesting chance. Her husband, William Howard Taft, had brought her there, while he was working as the United States Secretary of War. In his official capacity, he made the Taft–Katsura Agreement, confirming the American policy that allowed Japan to dominate and terrorize Korea. Japan, in turn, agreed not to interfere with America in the Philippines. Helen Herron Taft and William Howard Taft had lived in the Philippines, too. He served as colonial Governor-General there. The cherry trees were selected to represent different parts of the Japanese Empire. Soon enough, that empire would conquer the Philippines anyways. This was the kind of label I would have written, I knew, for an American exhibition. I would question the cherry blossoms. But was it possible, I wondered, to contemplate those histories, and still see the seasons for what they were?

After I had gone through the Nezu show, I walked around the museum’s

small, careful garden. The grass had dried out in the heat. It had been mowed close to the ground; it was yellow in parts and flat. Two orange dragonflies buzzed around in what was otherwise perfect stillness, guarded by a tenth-century Buddhist pagoda. The

dragonflies left shadows of their fuse-lages on the ground. I watched them for some time, as they hovered and then swerved onward, their movements incomprehensible to me, making complex, efficient paths in the air.

I went in to say goodbye to the

woman who had welcomed me to the museum on a preview day, thanking her for some points of guidance. I told her about the pretty dragonflies in the garden. “Yes,” she said, and added, with the perfection of constrained interest: “It’s the season.”□

Hat, Coat, Gloves

Opposite the Comédie Française is the Café de la Régence; inside is a secluded room, with an armchair and a table. When I enter, the immovable dust has already got to its feet.

Between my lips made of rubber, the ember of a cigarette smokes, and in the smoke you can see two intensive smokes, the thorax of the Café, and in the thorax, a thick rust of sadness.

It’s important that autumn is grafted on to other autumns, it’s important that autumn blends in with the green shoots, the cloud with semesters; the frown line with cheekbones.

It’s important to smell like a madman postulating how hot the snow is, how swift the tortoise, how simple the how, how sudden the when!

—César Vallejo
(translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)



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