

## Contents

TLRWEB ISSUE 3

### FICTION

*Louise Aronson*

*Laurence Klavan*

*Daniela Tordi*

Snapshots from an Institution 2

Stray 13

The Panther

*Translated by Peter Selgin* 54

### POETRY

*Deborah Burnham*

*Vasile Garnet*

*Andrew Grace*

*Simon Perchik*

*Rabindra K. Swain*

*Lisa VanAuken*

In the Public Library Reading Room 9

Migraine 10

stamp (III)

*Translated by Carrie Messenger* 11

Is To Say 12

\* 52

The Musk of the Four Walls 53

Tom Kennedy Tells a Story 60

### NONFICTION

*Michael Pearson*

Western Dreams: Taos, Santa Fe, and Home 29

Epilogue: Where Stories Come From, Where

They Take Us 41

### EDITORS' CHOICES

*Bill Gillard*

Minister Faust

*From the Notebooks of Dr. Brain* 61

*Abigail Deutsch*

Shu Jiang Lu

*When Huai Flowers Bloom* 64

### CONTRIBUTORS

66

### TRANSLATORS

68

*Louise Aronson*

## Snapshots from an Institution

### **1: The Woman**

She lies in bed the way a letter lies in its envelope. Her eyes are blank and her mouth is open. The image appears to be black and white.

### **2: Her Husband**

He waits in an armchair by the main entrance dressed in a thick brown suit, a blue plaid cap in his left hand and a battered silver-tipped cane between his legs. The chair—beige vinyl, a two inch slash in the upper left corner—is meant to frame him, but he's too tall, too robust; his shoulders exceed the backrest, his legs stretch out on the mosaic floor across an ochre diamond and well into the adjacent roseate square. Each time the scarred double doors of the main entrance open, he smiles. He's waited one hour and twenty-five minutes so far. He's missed lunch. His thighs tingle and his stomach growls, but there's no sign of his son.

### **3: The Place**

It's a collection of sandstone buildings in California Mission style with red-tiled roofs and a hilltop location coveted with equal fervor by real estate developers and urban preservationists. In this wide-angle shot, greenery stretches top to bottom on the left and a parking lot for two hundred does the same on the right. A vast and gently sloped front lawn popular with local dogwalkers fills much of the foreground. Behind the lawn is a traffic circle and behind that a wide staircase and wheelchair ramp which bring visitors to a terrace where giant pots of native plants surround the main entrance. A newly paved drive lined by twin rows of sentinel palms connects the eleven buildings above with the security gate and busy street below. But the eco-friendly landscaping and handsome square bell tower notwithstanding, only the most inattentive passerby would mistake

this place for a college campus or corporate headquarters. The walls and windows are streaked with grime and too many of the people, coming and going, wear uniforms.

#### **4: Quality Time**

This one was taken a few hours ago, though it might just as easily have been taken yesterday or last week or last month or last year. In it, the woman and her husband sit in the fenced garden adjacent to Building 7. Although it's a warm sunny morning, he's perched at the far end of a black metal bench wearing his suitcoat and cap and she's beside him in her wheelchair, bundled in blankets and scarves. He visits her seven days a week and stays six hours each day, taking three buses from, and then back to, his studio apartment across town. Every other Sunday, when his daughter calls by long distance telephone from her home in another state, he tells her it's no problem. *What else would I do*, he asks, a question for which his daughter has no satisfying answer. And so, each morning at more or less ten o'clock, he arrives, rolls his wife outside, wipes her drool, makes sure she's warm, then watches the bees on the bougainvillea or the liquid food dropping through plastic tubing into a body he once lay awake admiring, timing himself to see how long he could hold back before reaching out with a foot, a fingertip, his tongue. It's much like caring for a baby, he explains to his daughter, except without the sweet smells, without the hope.

#### **5: History**

In the late nineteenth century when the institution opened, its residents were called inmates. The able-bodied majority worked in the kitchens and laundry (women) or—as shown in this recently colorized archival photograph—on maintenance and road repair crews (men). They also operated a large working farm and provided mending and tailoring services to other inmates, to the paid staff, and for a small fee, to people in the surrounding neighborhoods. Now there are no able-bodied residents. These days, the average age is 76 and even the crazies don't want to live here. Even the homeless. But they do, inside and out. Look back at snap-

shot 3. Use a magnifying glass. See the colorful mounds beneath the drooping fronds of the sentinel palms and on the margins of the litter-strewn lawn? If this were videography you'd notice that the mounds move from time to time—a bottle raised to eager lips, an ill-defined shape morphing into something vertical and recognizable, standing and stretching before ambling off. But even with a still image you can appreciate how very many mounds there are, curled under bushes and burrowed in heaps of trash on the extensive grounds the city doesn't have money to maintain.

#### **6: The Son**

He arrives two hours late and doesn't apologize. The camera captures the exact moment his left hand with its manicured fingernails and thick gold wedding band touches down on the sleeve of his father's coat. The only moment it touches down.

He's the piece that doesn't belong, standing in the institution's ancient foyer in his silk suit with his downtown hair and limited edition platinum watch. *Sesame Street!* his made-in-America daughter would shout, delighted, but he doesn't bring her here.

#### **7: Context**

From the street outside, there's a loud pop. The telephoto lens zooms in on a boy face down on the sidewalk. This image actually is black and white: white cement, black boy.

#### **8: Family Meeting**

A group of professionals, all women, three brown and two white, gather in the woman's room. Her husband stands by the door, his head pressed against a sun-warmed wall, his discount store loafers firmly planted on the speckled linoleum. From beneath half-lowered lids, he watches his son with the doctor and nurses and social worker, watches as his son charms and instructs them. He himself does not speak. There's so much he might say in his language or under different circumstances, but nothing that can be said here.

**9: The Doctor**

She steals a glance at her watch while explaining to the son how sometimes families choose to forgo treatments like resuscitation and hospitalization, and sometimes even x-rays and blood draws and antibiotics, everything but that which increases the patient's comfort. And then she explains how such decisions are not only perfectly legal but ethical and moral as well, based as they are on respect and compassion for the afflicted loved one. The doctor's slim, stylish watch is secured with a tiny piece of duct tape and her shoes need reheeling, but if she saw this photograph, she'd notice only the ways she's succumbed to middle age: lips in need of lipstick, crimped skin forming vertical lines between her brows and furrows around her lips, a body now more attractive clothed than naked.

**10: Questions**

All eyes turn toward the husband as the social worker in her smartly tapered skirt, faux-cashmere sweater, and three inch heels asks in his language—which is also her language, or at any rate, the language of her childhood—*Did you ever talk to your wife about what she would and would not want as she got older?* But before the husband can answer, the son steps into the center of the room and poses his own questions, first in English, then in that other language, flipping easily back and forth and smiling at the staff while keeping his eyes on the older, more foreign version of himself. He asks whether his father still loves his mother, and whether he still enjoys spending time with her, and if he wants to do everything possible to help her and keep her alive, or if he agrees with the staff that she'd be better off dead. Immediately and simultaneously, the social worker and doctor protest, but the son silences them without even a glance, his hands raised like international stop signs. The husband coughs and smiles at the floor. A wheelchair squeaks in the hallway. Then the husband answers *Yes, Yes, Yes*, and *No*. What else can he say? He doesn't know what his wife would tell him if she could speak. He imagines, but he doesn't know.

**11: Rights and Priviledges**

With her healthy young son beside her, the woman looks like she's already dead. In the country they come from, she would be. So would her husband. Their children might even be dead, at least some of them. But this is America, and in America any person, rich or poor, can be kept alive even when they can't walk or talk, eat or think, even when they can't say *No, Please, Stop*, and especially when told, *Do everything*, by a man with a good job, good English, and good Italian shoes.

**12: The Score**

On his way out the door, the son nearly trips over a young man rolling down the corridor in a hospital gown, baggy jeans, and a backwards baseball cap. White cords dangle from the young man's ears and a McDonald's milkshake rests in his wheelchair cupholder. It's hard to tell from this one shot—and the woman's son doesn't notice—but this young man is working, and though the work he's doing is very different from the work of his nineteenth-century predecessors, it's the sort of work he's always done, a kind of work that on this particular day looks like this: a kid from outside slips him a knife in a 32-ounce milkshake cup and while the Building 7 social worker is at a family meeting, the young man, quadriplegic from a gunshot wound, uses the knife and his more functional hand to break into her office and steal her laptop computer. Next, the tidy chrome machine hidden beneath a blanket, he wheels himself down to the Total Care Unit kitchen where he sells it at one third its retail value to a woman who smells of garlic and dirty dishwater and barely speaks English but knows her kids need computers if they're going to have better lives. Then, unaware his photograph is taken as he pushes past a guy stepping out of one of the patient rooms like he owns the place, the young man heads to the Ambulatory Dementia Unit where he scores an A Bomb and some Baby T off one of the aides. Finally, he follows the painted green line along the cement walls of the underground tunnel system to the main building, takes the service elevator up to the lobby, and just beyond a tan vinyl chair with a rip in the upper left corner, enters a handicapped rest-

room with a functioning door lock and enough floor space for him to do a back-to-back and have a happy nod undisturbed by staff or security.

### **13: Local Color**

At the nurses' station on the Total Care Unit in Building 7, the doctor's left hand rests on a thick binder bearing the woman's name and her right hand reaches out toward a dispenser of round red stickers. An assortment of stickers in other colors already decorate the chart's spine: blue (incomunicado), purple (skin breakdown), and yellow (nothing by mouth), the latter two not quite obscuring the stickers they replaced eighteen months earlier: green (fall risk) and orange (danger to staff).

A nurse's thick pink fingers land briefly on the doctor's forearm. The red sticker means Do Not Resuscitate and the doctor cannot put it on this or any other chart without the family's approval.

### **14: The Gift**

After the others leave and long after his usual departure time, the husband opens a folding chair and sits down beside his wife. Her bed has silver bars along both sides but there's space enough between the slats for him to reach in without taking off his suit coat. For a while, he sits quietly, stroking her hair or shoulder, and then suddenly he leans forward and, at a just-audible level, begins to hum. As darkness replaces the grounds and city beyond the window across the room, he moves fluidly from one melody to the next, choosing tunes to ballads from their country, songs of love and longing that he used to tease her for singing, calling them silly and sentimental.

Except when he sings to her, the room is quiet. Except in the late mornings when he wraps her in blankets and takes her outside, his wife lies in this bed, bars up, wearing nothing more than a blue-and-white gown that ties at the neck and waist and a blanket the aides tuck beneath her chin. When she first moved to the institution, she sometimes also wore a vest that was green and yellow, zipped up in back, and had long straps that the nurses knotted around the silver bars, holding her firmly in place. But she hasn't needed the vest for a very long time.

She—they—did not ask to come to this country. They came for their children and their children's children and their grandchildren's children. They came willingly and without complaint. If he had to do it over, he'd do the same again, and this much he knows for sure: so would she.

**15: Nightfall**

The wide angle lens again, this shot offering a sunset bird's-eye view of jutting pallid buildings in the middle of a city, cars like forgotten toys in a giant parking lot, ceramic pots huddled as cockroaches might in the shadows on the terrace of the main entrance, and a huge swath of surrounding land, dark and menacing in the dusk. Invisible at this hour are the institution's *raisons-d'être*, the residents grouped in the eleven buildings by disease and functional status as if they'd been apprehended at the end of their lives striving for something large and ugly, a defining theme of the sort that would be accompanied by a very modern symphony, its scraping, screeching, and pounding punctuated at regular intervals by a prolonged and disturbing silence.

*Deborah Burnham*

In the Public Library Reading Room

1.

He's praying, laptop set on SLEEP, forehead  
pressed into the rug, facing east, that is  
New Jersey and its watery beyond.  
His murmurs shush the wordy quarrelling  
of all the books he has to read, books that  
argue with each other, with themselves,  
unlike his prayers that all say *Glory, Thanks,*  
*All Power*. I've seen him walking, panting  
in the cold, his breath still sending prayers  
in airy loops, like gulls, who pierce the frozen clouds.

2.

Swaying at the crook-legged desk, her cell phone's  
tiny mike dangling like an amulet  
on her chest, she's reading Keats, slowly  
as a spell: *season of mists and mellow*  
At the end, when the swallows twitter, rising,  
she says into her phone *no, swallows, birds,*  
*the ones who live in chimneys* and her hands  
rise in perfect imitation of their looping  
flight. *I love you too*; she puckers up,  
kisses the tiny screen that glows blue  
against her face. *Listen: O what can ail thee*

DEBORAH BURNHAM

## Migraine

1.

Before a headache, she feels thick, off-  
balance; there's no pain yet but she knows  
its practiced hand has sneaked inside her brain;  
She tries to warn her body that something  
waits, wants to hurt her, but her bones just laugh  
at her clear wisdom, and, as she predicted,  
pain's fist clenches, relaxes, in her skull,  
its thumb and finger pinching the soft pulp,  
pulling, twisting.

2.

Think of Cassandra, how Troy ignored her  
when she dreamed of sword points draped with bleeding  
sinew, when she said the tempting horse was stuffed  
with Greeks, when she saw towers flash and crumble  
into shards too small for memory. What if  
her visions filled her skull with pain, as if  
the tender flesh inside was wrapped with thorns?  
Did her headaches make her trust those dreams?  
The great horse opened; children lay with ashes  
floating on their hair.

*Vasile Garnet*

stamp (III)

mornings early when the light grows  
I have you in mind, Ioana  
open books on the table are giving off the whiff of intellect  
—multiple prescriptions for survival in  
“our leprosy land,” as you call it

it’s easier for two  
sometimes even and only the thought of you helps me

*Translated from the Romanian  
by Carrie Messenger*

*Andrew Grace*

Is To Say

For my words and their reluctance to rise  
for my right hand and its tenebrous circuit its one volt  
for the orchard for the hawk helix for the hunt  
for the held breath and the loosed note  
for the clock's cold soliloquy of numerals  
that sighs *recision* to the curtains *recision* to the grey dog  
for the dark I enlarge and the light I replace  
for the raw grain and shucked skins I've held in my arms  
for the road out for the road back  
for the X for the X for the X

*is to say*  
which is a headache at the back of the mouth  
which is to see the whirl of leaves in half-ceded winter  
and record it as a felt thing somewhere in the body  
a flickering charge of weather a seam of coal in bone  
is to trust what can't be trusted  
is to conjure with grammar of hawk and clock  
but what do you want except for darkness to enlarge  
do you want a painting of someone singing  
do you want to be that certain

*Laurence Klavan*

## Stray

She couldn't remember when she first heard the sound but once she had, that was all it took. Faye lived on the first floor of the Gleeeful Terrace apartment complex, a—even she acknowledged—somewhat shabby development in a town ninety miles north of New York. It had been inserted into fields that also played host to several houses similarly stuck into the countryside a few years before (like those long houses—hotels!—you stuck on a Monopoly square; that's how ill-fitting and arbitrary they looked, though just as in the game whomever had stuck them there did so as a symbol of success). Wildlife still roamed the area—mostly deer, raccoons and skunks—perplexed by the change in their surroundings and adapting to it only in the sense of now feeding on what their new human neighbors threw or left out instead of on the living prey that had been scared away. Less exotic creatures also ran around, some in fact not wild at all, some belonging to the people who'd moved in and merely let out to play and hunt frivolously, not to forage for food to survive—and by creatures she meant cats, because that's what she'd definitely heard crying. (Faye had had cats as a kid but not since then, so it had been a long time since she'd heard the sound and still hadn't forgotten it—probably close to thirty years, for she was thirty-four.)

And it wasn't the usual cat crying, which had a repetitive, automatic pilot or broken car alarm quality—"won't somebody shut that cat up?" and then a shoe would be flung out a tenement window into an alley in a cartoon, or was that when cats were mating? she wasn't sure. This one made a plaintive sound, broken up into what seemed words, with spaces in between them to suggest sentences being stopped and started. This was what she imagined, anyway, as if the cat were beseeching people and not just to "feed me!" or "house me!" or "please let me have sex with someone!" but pleading for something more complicated and unintelligible,

like that homeless woman she'd seen once on the street down in the city, talking at the top of her lungs in a language all her own. (They had a few homeless in town, too, but they were quieter, more discreet even in despair up here, it was just the way it was.) This confused Faye, for if the cat had been left out by a neighbor as so many others had and for the same reason—fun—why was it crying like a crazy person, that is to say someone homeless, or *something*, a stray?

“Well, that’s because it is,” explained her neighbor, Ed Koch (just like the old city mayor). “But it never used to be, it only became this way recently.”

She’d never met Ed before, but had seen him leave his car carrying a big bag of dry cat food, and so she assumed he’d know something and had stopped him in the parking lot.

“He was part of a litter that used to belong to someone here.”

Ed seemed about fifty but could have been any age, for he had a timeless disheveled look: straggly graying beard, comb-over, wrinkled checked shirt untucked over chinos above sneakers. He looked like a retired academic, though he seemed too young to be retired (but if he wasn’t, why was he at home in the afternoon mid-week?). Anyway, this was how he spoke, too, in a precise, learned sort of way, not snooty but smart and with a slight lisp that made him seem even smarter, though Fay knew that was silly; wearing glasses didn’t mean people were smart; she wore them, was supposed to, anyway, and she wasn’t smart, well, not book-smart, anyway.

“What do you mean, used to belong?” she asked, a little guilty that he stood there holding the cat food bag the whole time but he could have put it down, she wasn’t stopping him.

“Well, the recent young super—Ronnie, not the old super, Tim—”

“I moved in three months ago, right after Tim left, like he had one day to go, that’s when.”

“Well—and it wasn’t a family reason by the way, they just made Tim take the fall for the string of robberies here and then for the boiler explosion in the winter, though God knows they weren’t Tim’s fault.”

Faye was quiet. She hadn’t known about either thing—the real estate

broker hadn't mentioned them—and she felt a little annoyed and even a little scared hearing about them. Still, if nothing else, the information proved that Ed knew a lot about the complex and so could be trusted to tell her about the cat, and, frankly, she wished he'd get to it already.

“Then Ronnie, his replacement, only lasted six weeks, because they caught him selling ecstasy out of the back of his truck.”

“*Really?*” The unpleasant facts about her home kept coming, made better (more comforting) or worse (more disconcerting) by Ed's matter-of-fact delivery, she wasn't sure.

“Yes, and when they fired Ronnie—and I'm not sure if he's going to be prosecuted or was just told to skedaddle, you know—he left his cats behind.”

Faye was quiet again, this last imparted fact the most disturbing of all. Since it was obviously just the beginning of a longer, even more upsetting story, she braced herself for it, knowing she had to hear it even though she dreaded hearing—and, besides, with his detached and intellectual air, Ed didn't seem the type to avoid upsetting details to spare anyone's emotions, almost seemed to enjoy giving the awful specifics, rubbing his audience's nose in them—or was he rubbing his own? After all, he had hoisted the heavy cat food bag up on his shoulder instead of putting it down, so he could feel pain as he expressed someone else's?

“Ronnie had adopted a cat in his office. The cat had kittens. They were royalty for awhile. They had the run of the place. And when he got fired, he just abandoned them. Someone said they saw the mother cat dead by the highway; they said they could recognize her by her red-and-white stripe. Most of the offspring disappeared. A few were taken in—the friendly ones, savvy to the ways of humans, able to be fed and petted. But there's one that's stayed. It's red and male, skittish, frightened, hard to feed and, as a result, to keep alive. A shame.”

Ed gave a little half-smile, a wince, really, either in reaction to the sad events or to his—they must have been by now—aching arms, shoulder and hands, or both. Then, because Faye wasn't responding, he turned toward the path to his own building.

Faye was silent because she was shocked, to put it mildly. She couldn't imagine anyone being so cavalier about other living things, especially those that had trusted him and didn't have the mental capacity to understand the shift in their circumstances.

"Well," she finally blurted out, stopping Ed at the last second before his back was turned, "couldn't someone take him in? Couldn't *you*—"

"I already have three cats," he said, softly, but with the first small hint of an edge to his voice. "So I don't think that would be feasible. Besides, some have attempted it, and it's impossible."

"Well, what about just feeding him, what's—"

"I and others have tried that, too. But, as I've said, he's too frightened to even come close. But you're, you know, perfectly free to try."

He said it as if it were a project doomed to failure but one he found touching, endearing even, for her to attempt. Then, since this prompted no reply from Faye—who was still chewing over and trying to digest the nauseating account Ed had offered her—he disappeared inside with his bag of Dry Friskies.

"Funny," he said, or at least she could have sworn he said, for he was halfway through the door. "You're the only one who's ever heard him cry."

Faye knew that she identified with the cat, the scared one who couldn't come close. She assumed this was who—what—had been crying, or *was* it crying? begging. And the fact that she alone heard it—and she convinced herself that Ed had said so—confirmed their bond. She didn't go any further with this idea; her interest in psychology, especially her own, was small and tended to be self-aggrandizing, engaged in only to make her feel better. Faye had been hurt by men, all of whom had been unfaithful to her, or just as good as, often eyeing other women or watching certain movies with certain female stars in them—they didn't have to do that more than once or twice, and she was out of there!—and she didn't much feel like being hurt any more. She waited tables at Coco's, the local bar, and her interaction with the male customers tended to be flirtatious—was certainly more profitable in tips when it was—and this for the time being satisfied her in that regard (the way someone tells

himself he's worked out for the day by walking two or three blocks to the store instead of, say, actually, going to the gym). There was a younger female bartender who was obviously and aggressively interested in her, and Faye wasn't entirely against the idea, but Rita, the woman, seemed just about as bad as a man—hitting on lots of women—so why would it be any better with *her*? Maybe it would be more tender, she didn't know. (Rita had posed sucking a straw for a sexy highway billboard ad for Coco's, and the owners thought it was funny that male drivers ogled the picture when Rita would never have given them a second glance, but Faye just thought the whole thing was stupid, maybe because she was mad and hurt *she* hadn't been asked to pose. Faye looked almost child-like—shorter, flatter, and slighter than the curvy and half-Spanish Rita—and still had acne scars.) Still, she never even thought the word “lonely” and certainly would never have said it to anyone else.

Maybe that was why the cat sound plagued her—and the next time she heard it, it was even worse: a kind of loud, bitter cat shouting, if that were possible. It seemed someone else's utterance of what *she* was feeling, like a lyric in a song that puts into words what you can't express, except that these weren't even words, just cries that sort of sounded like words.

That night, Faye stood at the open glass back door of her apartment, looking out into the darkness of fields that were abbreviated by backyards but still retained to her a wildness, a sadness, and a sense of secrecy and threat. She had decided to follow Ed Koch's example and put food out, to see if she alone could lure the cat to nourishment, as she alone could hear him speak. She had bought the same brand as Ed, though a smaller bag for she was a smaller person.

When she got back from her shift—after midnight; this was why *she* was home during the day; *she* wasn't retired, no sir, and the way she was going, she might never be!—she poured the dry pellet-like food out onto the small asphalt square that the landlord pretended was her “patio” but which really looked more like a short stone continuation of her living room floor. Tonight, she felt that the floor passed through a dimension or a membrane—the glass door—and became somewhere else, some other world. When she opened the door, *she* entered it and by pouring the food,

she asked to be accepted in it; it was like an offering. Faye was usually exhausted when she came home and yet so keyed up that she sometimes—often—always!—smoked pot, and even then remained so restless that she'd stay up until two or three, watching TV. Tonight, though, she watched the show outside, finding the darkness more fascinating than any old movie or info-mercial, because they, after all, were other people's worlds, worlds others had made up, and this one was both real and invented by her. It was hard to explain, the pot made her fuzzy. At any rate, she sat up and waited for the cat to be beckoned by her and be saved.

No one—nothing—came. This hurt and disappointed Faye, especially because when she finally dozed off, she could swear she heard the cat crying again, louder than ever (or was it a dream?) and now felt he might be willfully and self-destructively avoiding the very thing that could save him. (Anorexics did this too; it was infuriating to others; they refused food placed—pushed!—in front of them. Faye had done it as a teenager and had had to move away from home to get back to a normal weight.) But these feelings reminded her of hopelessness, so she pretended to simply feel frustrated and by Ed Koch, not only because she disliked negative people but because she didn't want him to be right.

"Sorry," he shrugged, when he heard—why did she tell him? it was stupid—as their paths crossed again, she driving out of the parking lot, he carrying a bag of trash to the communal dumpster. "You did your best."

Since he owned cats, Faye figured he was probably a warm person, but he sounded so brusque and fatalistic that he appeared kind of cold. And didn't he ever *go* anywhere? Still, she always ran into him, so what did that say about her and her travels (besides going to work, she meant, and even now she was just going to get some paper towels, a carton of OJ, and some ant traps at the Buy 'n' Fly and coming right back)? So she put up her car window and, without another word, drove away.

That night, she tried again, tried harder, went farther. She stepped outside, stoned again (though she'd only had enough for one joint and the rolling paper was so old it crumbled in her hand, leaving a lot of the pot in her lap) wearing her PJ bottoms and T-shirt and stood without shoes or

socks on the cold asphalt, the food at her feet like small stones in a sacrificial ceremony. This time, she called the cat, made a welcoming sound, sent kisses out into the air. But just as when she used to playfully kiss over and over again into the necks of boys in high school and they would squirm away (what was the matter with men?) the cat kept his distance.

Faye fell asleep on the living room floor, inches away from the door she hadn't remembered closing. She hadn't pulled the drapes and the rising sun woke her up, heating and almost hurting her face. When she squinted to see outside, she had to stare to make sure. But it was true: most of the food was gone. The cat had come, eaten it, stayed alive. A fat little bluejay stood pecking at the few pellets left.

"It was probably just birds or squirrels." She bet that's what Ed Koch would have said, so she didn't tell him, she sped right past him the next early evening, when she saw him exiting his building at the exact same moment she was driving away from hers, their schedules again weirdly coinciding. (And *she* had actually called a co-worker she hardly knew and was going to see the sequel to a movie she hadn't even liked, *that's* how socially active *she* was; Ed was just planting a little tree in the complex's garden area.)

After the movie, Rita the bartender at Coco's—for this was whom she had called—stopped her car at a light on the highway going home.

"I'd like to go over there with you," Rita said, softly, pointing with her head. "I think that'd be really nice."

She had indicated a dark, as yet undeveloped field to their left, off the road, covered in tall, waving, camouflaging grass. (A sign nearby announced that condo building would start soon but hadn't yet.) Rita had spoken mischievously, not menacingly. She reached over and touched the back of Faye's head, drifting a few fingers under her hair onto her neck, with as gentle a touch as could be imagined. Faye felt a bubbling begin in her breast; she saw water starting to boil on a stove or something; it was a new feeling, she didn't have the words. But at the same moment a cloud moved away from the moon and it lit up a small muscle in Rita's right arm, which had tensed with the effort of moving her hand. It was as if nature, the world itself, was warning Faye, and she felt afraid.

“I think I’d just like to turn in,” she said, shaking her head, and ended it.

When she got home, Faye poured more food than ever on the cement, hoping perhaps foolishly that it would be an incentive—“More of the same thing at the exact same low price!” a strange supermarket sale—especially since the cat had clearly liked what he had consumed. She again made the sounds of love into the night, though her mouth was dry from after all the soda she’d had at the movie and the joint she’d just finished. (Rita had agreed to give her some of her own before letting her off; Faye had offered to pay and Rita had seemed offended, she didn’t know why. She could still taste the chocolate that had been on Rita’s tongue when she had kissed Faye goodnight, holding her chin still with surprisingly strong fingers and inserting it forcefully between Faye’s firmly closed lips before giving up. It had been from Milk Duds at the movies, Faye figured, and her memory of it faded along with the taste.)

This time, she dozed off on the patio, in a plastic lawn chair that had already been there when she moved in and which she hadn’t removed. Before she did and thought she might, she considered what the neighbors would think (and had she locked the glass door when she closed it? Could she not get back in? It would be almost funny to be stranded out there in her free Coco’s T-shirt and gym shorts—almost). But it was a warm August night, easy to get lost in, and soon she dreamed of someone, something, standing over her, a big paternal tree like the one in, what, *The Wizard of Oz*, with a knot for a mouth and crazy fat branches for arms.

She was awakened by the sound of a scraping across the stone. She squinted and saw the base of a steel table also left by the last tenant, without its glass top so it always looked to her nude or just strange, like a planet with its sky unscrewed and stolen. It now stood at an angle, had been shifted a little, just enough for her to notice. When Faye fully opened and focused her eyes, she saw what had done it, what had obviously sprung onto the patio and accidentally slapped it to the side.

The cat was there, eating the food. He was red, as Ed had said he would be, though she was surprised and alarmed by the dinginess of his color and the patches of fur that were missing from his coat, from fight-

ing, she guessed. He was thin, almost but not quite bony, and he had a long, handsome head with an equine—no, that was for horses, like hey—with whatever word meant impressive snout. He ate diligently and carefully, too proud to gobble and reveal his hunger, she thought. He did not seem to notice she was there.

Faye sat up in her chair, trying not to make a noise. She failed: the backs of her thighs had stuck to the plastic seat as she slept and now they made a little popping fart sound as she ever so slightly raised herself. The cat turned, suddenly. He stared at her with eyes at once wary and not hostile—inquisitive. He did not seem rattled. Maybe he was only sorry he had awakened her.

This projection of personality was as if she had added a sheer layer upon him, the way a soul “escapes” from a dying person in a movie, only with the film going backwards. To Faye, he now seemed coated by this extra protective impression, glowed with it even. It allowed her to approach him without fear.

Faye moved slowly on her knees across the cold stone to where he was. The second she came within reach, he sprang. He didn’t scratch her, didn’t hurt her in the least. Instead he placed his two front arms—legs? paws?—around her neck and hugged her, his mouth at her ear, softly and wetly whispering things that only she could hear but never understand (as it had been when she heard him cry), the words or whatever they were for thanks.

“Well, that’s very nice,” Ed said—she couldn’t help herself, she had had to tell him. Leaving her apartment the next morning, which was Friday, she had seen him wheeling a cart of clothes to the laundry room. She had immediately rushed back inside—figuring she’d buy mouthwash, a candy bar, and a box of tampons at Drugall’s later—got her own laundry and followed.

Luckily, Ed was alone there, leafing through an old seventies romance novel someone had left on the “Take a Book—Leave a Book” shelf.

“Nice?!” she said, and she couldn’t keep shock and even anger from her voice. It was such a condescending word, what you called a boy in high school you wouldn’t even consider kissing or a meal cooked by a

friend the effort of which you wanted to praise but which you never wanted to eat again. Ed didn't even look up when he said it; then he moved from skimming the book to a washer, where he started pouring in bleach.

"Yes. That certainly is very nice."

Faye hadn't even started cleaning the clothes she brought in; they still sat overflowing from a bag in the corner. Now she forgot all about them and the supposed "coincidence" of running into him. She followed Ed back to the bookcase from the washer as she had followed him there in the first place, and she didn't care if he knew why she had come.

"No, it was more than *nice*. It was . . ." But how could she describe it? It was so intense—not just how glad it had made her feel to summon and help the cat, how proud she had been to be the only one who could—the physical sensation of his arms (legs? paws?) around her neck and that helpless, moist and mysterious communication in her ear. It had felt better than being with a baby, the times she had held and heard one—even her baby sister the first time she knew she no longer hated her as a child—and certainly better than it had ever felt with a man, the times with their tongues tickling at and then actually *in* her ear; whoever said that was so hot, it must have been a comedian, because that's what it had been like, a bad joke! How could she tell Ed, who now looked at her with an expression of being-happy-for-her so benign and bloodless it made her furious not to know the words for how wonderful—unforgettable—it had been?

"I only meant, you have a lot to be proud of," he said, trying to ramp up his praise but by his obvious insincerity making it worse.

Faye turned to go; so she wouldn't wash her clothes, let him laugh at her, let him tell all his friends—if he had any, which he obviously didn't. And it was about time Ed washed his clothes—she could smell the checked shirt he had on halfway across the room, that indescribable musty aroma that always meant lonely old loser. She started dragging her laundry bag, which was so stuffed that a pair of underpants fell out (which she noticed with horror had its own slight musty tang) and was bending to embarrassedly pick it up when he said, quietly, not calling but as if he were still standing right next to her,

“But don’t expect too much from him. I’d hate to see you get hurt.”

Faye turned, slowly, still bent over, shoving the panties viciously back into the bag, the way she had once seen a French farmer on TV force-feed a duck before slaughter. “What?”

“He’s a stray now, you know. He always will be.”

Faye took her time reaching her full height again. Now she understood. Ed wasn’t being judgmental or superior or even indifferent. He had a much more basic reason for trying to dismiss her accomplishment, for trying to deny her the first—and she suddenly understood what it was and was shocked even to *think* that it was this—feeling of love she had ever experienced.

“You left food out for him, too.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re just jealous.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re jealous that it was me and not you.”

That night, in bed, Faye remembered with pleasure the shocked look on Ed’s face—or maybe the look she imagined him having, for she had turned away and walked out right after speaking. Let him chew on *that*, she thought, the food idea meaningful because, wasn’t that what this was all about? She had provided crucial nourishment to someone, *something*, and received sustenance in return, and he had not. Her mind was especially sharp tonight for she hadn’t smoked, didn’t have any left to smoke, actually, but would not have if she did, she was totally sure. (She had hoped Rita might cough up some at work, but while Faye had smiled at her several times, the bartender had only winked back at her once, weirdly, camera-like, even made a little clicking sound with the side of her mouth, as if to officially record and forget her, and then ignored her entirely.)

After her new routine—pouring the food and puckering and puckering—Faye was determined to stay up and wait for the cat’s return. But in case she fell asleep, she set the alarm for three. Before she did indeed pass out, she could have sworn she heard the cry again, but only once and from

far away, and it might have been a fantasy or the whistle of a train, passing through and going away for good.

The sound faded into the beep of the cheap travel alarm clock on the floor by her bed. Faye slammed her hand down, missed, knocked it over, and kept chopping down blindly until she broke it, and it stopped. She rolled from bed, totally naked, for the sunset hadn't caused any cooling and she had feared the air conditioner racket might make her deaf to the cat's coming back. Squatting, lean, almost hairless and baby animal-like herself in the dark living room, Faye drew the drapes. Eyes shone back at her from the patio.

But they were not her cat's eyes. They were eyes surrounded by what children and TV commentators always call a mask, as in a burglar's mask—and that's what the raccoon seemed to her, a thief. Faye banged on the window to scare him off, yelling at him through the glass, though she knew it was pointless. The animal only looked up once, indifferently, and then went back to eating, using its paws in a weirdly efficient, human-like way.

The next night was even hotter, so she kept all the windows open and lay waiting nude above the covers. She watched a drop of sweat roll like a pinball from behind her ear (where the cat had held her), slip milkily from her nipples, fall down between her breasts, over her small flat belly and into her navel, where it pooled. As more balls emerged, she imagined herself a pinball *machine*—they had one at work—and shifted and squirmed ever so slightly to direct the sweat to the shallow hole, her behind tensing and sticking a little to the sheet as she did. Moving in this way—causing a fair amount of friction between her legs—began to make her dizzy, and soon Faye fell asleep to escape the feeling that was approaching, her last sight her own twitching hand poised to move from the side of her bare thigh.

She slowly came to, alerted not by a sound but by a smell. At first, she thought it was gas—the stove? no, stupid, it was electric; and wasn't there (didn't there have to be) a carbon monoxide thing, monitor, alarm, and besides, didn't that *have* no smell? She slowly understood that it was not a chemical odor or anything man-made, not something human even. It was coming from an animal yet it wasn't like the smells one perceives in passing on the road. It was different, lasted longer, was more piercing,

probably because it was closer, coming right through the screen on the window to her left. It could only be from a skunk, warning another animal away from food it saw and wanted.

Faye ran to the glass door again. She crouched small, nude, and sticky, a dewy faun, and looked out. She saw, to her dismay, that all the food was gone, the cat nowhere in sight.

Who else was there to tell? As much as she had hated—and the word was not too strong—the way Ed Koch reacted to her experiences, he was the only one who knew of them. The next late afternoon, which was Sunday, fearing the night that was ahead and what would and wouldn't happen, Faye found herself in the vestibule of the building from which he always emerged, checking the mailboxes and then banging desperately on his door.

It turned out that he, too, lived on the first floor, one door over from hers, a few buildings down. It reminded her of those pink and blue man-and-woman towels hanging side by side in bathrooms in old movies, and she didn't like the idea at all.

"Well . . . Well . . ." This time, he didn't know what to say, wasn't so fast with the condescending retort, was he? Of course, to be fair, Faye realized that first he had to accept the idea of her being in his apartment, on the verge of tears, so what she said might take some time to sink in.

Ed was in a bathrobe at five p.m. (though it was over his clothes—the same kind of clothes as ever), and his musty smell was indistinguishable from the one all over his apartment: this was where he got the smell. There were also the extra odors of cigarette smoke and, coming from Ed's surprised open mouth, red wine. They were especially strong on the couch where he put Faye, and she breathed through her lips.

"I'm afraid that something's happened to the cat," she said, blubbering now, she couldn't help it, it was so embarrassing. "Like he was hurt in a fight or, or—something worse," she couldn't say killed.

She looked up from her hands, which were joining and separating in her lap, and saw where she was. It was a living room filled with books, papers, and magazines. There was an old framed photo on a bookcase of

a woman with an infant; it could have been from ten or twenty or fifty years before. The place was decorated so darkly Ed's overhead light and standing lamps were defeated in their efforts to illuminate it. The best they could manage was a dim, exploratory glow, like lanterns shining in a cave—and, yes, this was how Ed's apartment felt to Faye, a lair. The air conditioning was on so high it was as cold as a refuge lost climbers find in rock formations, where sensation soon ceases. "Oh," Ed said, sitting beside her on the too-soft pillow. "I see, Well, that's possible. I'm afraid that's always been a—possibility."

His voice, his tone—they were again so unsentimental, so cavalierly accepting of life's cruelty—even appreciative of it—she hated them—why had she come? And why couldn't she stop talking, which would only make her hear them more?

"I hope it's only temporary," she said. "If he doesn't come back, I—I don't know what I'll do. If he had never come, it would have been one thing, I would have forgotten. But now that he has, it—it hurts so much."

There was silence for a time before Ed spoke again. "I know, I know. And I'm sorry."

It took Faye a second to realize that Ed's tone had changed. There was the tiniest bit of tenderness in it now; it was the tone he might have taken with a child.

Faye wasn't sure how it made her feel. Before she could decide, Ed's arm had wrapped gently around her shoulders. He began whispering to her, his words slurred and unintelligible, maybe meant to comfort, maybe not. It was an awful parody of the gesture and sound that had meant so much. Faye felt strangled and then frozen: her heart seemed to stop, not beat faster.

At the exact same moment, one of Ed's cats—he had three, she remembered now—climbed out of a pile of dirty clothing, made an awful effort to do so, for it was obviously emerging from hell, which she now knew was cold and not hot. It hissed at her, its eyes fried, and Faye couldn't stop screaming.

Nights followed with no more sign of her cat. Faye kept putting out

food, but slowly it began to resemble another ritual, lighting candles for the dead, one that conjures nothing and just commemorates. She began to avoid most travel, except to work and home again, began even to shop in bulk so she could emerge from her apartment less. (Though this was the way most sensible people shopped in town, doing so in short spurts had been a way to remind others of her existence and her of theirs, a way to say, here's one more chance to know each other, so she had stopped.)

She didn't mind, because Doug, the new waiter at work, had provided her with pills that were even better than pot (or made pot better when they were added to it). He had begun by *giving* them to her, but soon she realized he expected an exchange of services, so to speak, and that wasn't going to happen, no way. So he started charging, and now she had to take on extra shifts if she wanted more of them, and she did.

They were sedatives, not stimulants. Doug explained the most effective order in which to take them (or pieces of them, to be frugal): first, the Clonapin, then the Xanax, then Valium. Faye quickly forgot the names and went by their colors alone—first the blue, then the white, then the red; they were a mixed-up and ass-backwards America, Doug said, profoundly—going by simple signs, almost by instinct; if she could have just sniffed them before swallowing, she would have. And, in this way, she could finally relax at night, expect nothing, and sleep.

One night in early October, the seasons seemed to finally hint they were changing, as much as they ever did these days. Faye turned off the air conditioning, which she now used for the express purpose of drowning out sound. As she lay in bed, wearing only a T-shirt that wore its own layer of dust and smoke, she marveled at the quiet. It seemed strangely vital and interesting—though existing dimly, as if in another dimension, or like a (silent) song from a neighbor's apartment. In her new state, everything felt like this, far away yet compelling, and the quiet was just one more thing.

Soon, strangely, it was interrupted. A cry was cutting through it—it was familiar yet brand-new—it sounded like a cat but also the bay of a wolf, a baby, and an old man—all ages through the evolution of need. It drew Faye like a—what did they always call it, and what did it mean?—

siren song from her bed. She didn't walk but floated to the glass door, a vague memory of something she wanted propelling her.

Setting down again, Faye opened the door. She looked at the patio. There she saw, on all fours, Ed Koch, stuffing pellets of dry food into his mouth and spitting out the ones he could not fit. At the same time, impossibly, he was wailing in a language that was universal but that no one could ever understand.

*Michael Pearson*

## Western Dreams: Taos, Santa Fe, and Home

My dreams of New Mexico started when I was about ten years old. My mother, whose love of the Southwest sprung from her affection for Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, had given me a children's edition of a biography of Kit Carson. Later I discovered Carson was a character in the Cather novel, and together, the man and the novel, became the source of my imagined West. But the biography came first, sinking its roots deep into my soul. I read the book eight times in half as many months and lost myself in thoughts of high adventure and wanderlust with the mountain men of the frontier West, assuming, I suppose, that if a five-foot-four-inch scout could live such an exciting life, I could as well, despite the fact that I was small for my age and trapped in a borough of New York City even Ogden Nash satirized. I answered to my legal name with the same grudging acquiescence that I took out the trash. The stodgy apartment buildings and the smog-bleached sky of the Bronx disappeared, transforming themselves into unpretentious adobe houses and purpling New Mexican sunsets.

Now, all these many years later, in the wake of two recent journeys by ship around the world, in the spring of 2007, I was at the Wurlitzer Artists Colony in Taos and having a different kind of dream. My first night there, I dreamt of fiery crashes, vans flipping wildly into red-rocked canyons. I knew precisely why those dreams came. From the Albuquerque Airport I had gotten a ride on the Twin Hearts Express to Taos. I was concerned that the van would not make it to the main office of the Wurlitzer before it closed for the afternoon, but the young man sitting next to me, who had just been on his cell phone talking to a client in Saudi Arabia, said, "Don't worry, this guy goes fast." And he did. The driver wore a frayed Australian bush hat that blew in the wind from the cracked van window and talked enthusiastically and broadly about everything from Julia Roberts moving to town to the mental health benefits of LSD as we

careened around corners, two wheels lifting into the air and hovering briefly over a dry gulch bordering the two-lane mountain road.

What I initially saw of Taos that first cold night in late April seemed a hardscrabble town, rusted cars on cinder blocks in the side yards, snarling dogs snapping at gates, crushed beer cans banked against fences. But it had been a long day of treacherous and tiring travel, and I attributed the gloom to the kind of hallucination that was induced by exhaustion and the simple surprise that came from being alive. Snow fell the next morning, blanketing the dry ground. Ice clung to the bare boughs. The only sound I heard was the faint hum from my laptop. Outside the window above my writing desk, I could see the wind rustling the ice-covered branches, and it appeared to me to be a forlorn waving. I had been away from home little more than twenty-four hours, and I missed my wife, Jo-Ellen, already. I got a cold, hollow feeling in my stomach when I accepted the fact that she wouldn't fly out to be with me for six weeks. I realized exactly how pathetic I was. It was not the first time in our thirty-five-year marriage that we had been apart, but it was the first time that I was away from her by myself and for this long. She most likely suspected that I would be a lonely man without her, and when she dropped me off at the airport in Virginia, she looked at me with the half-mocking sadness of a mother with her little boy and said, "I feel like I'm sending you off to summer camp. Share your toys and play nicely." Then she looked at my left hand, and the married woman came out in her, "Not wearing your wedding ring?" I had lost two already, and my current one was slightly big. I was afraid I would lose it. "Be good," was all she said and then kissed me so that I would have no trouble remembering her.

At home, I often claimed that my writing life was circumscribed by my domestic one, but I was pretty certain now that was a lie a writer told himself when he had not accomplished what he wanted to in a given day. The truth was that even though I complained about interruptions in my writing time, I relished them. I charted my true story by those interruptions, by Jo-Ellen's calling out some question or news to me from another room in our house. By her sweeping into my office, blonde hair in beautiful tan-

gles and blue eyes flashing with irony, to share some oddity she had discovered in the world. I reckoned my life by her presence in it, by the feel of her warm body against mine at night, by her laughter, her stories, by her proximity. The farther away she was the less air there was to breathe.

There was nothing to do, though, but miss her and work on the story at hand. I decided that one smart move would be to turn off my iPod which had been playing over and over again Lucinda Williams singing in her heartbreaking twang, “Come out west and see . . .” As much as I loved Williams and her sad, gravel-strewn voice, I knew that if I heard the song one more time, I would be searching for the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge in Taos that the garrulous Twin Hearts driver had mentioned as the best place in town to commit suicide. In a fit of what I’m sure was wind-blown exaggeration, he had said, “At least once a week someone flies off the bridge looking for someplace else to be.”

Even in my lonely first days there, Taos and New Mexico, in general, never made me contemplate suicide. For a number of reasons, it seemed like the right place for me to be after two journeys around the world that took me to many places I had never expected to see—among them Vietnam, Burma, Indonesia, Egypt, and Turkey. The biography of Kit Carson had been what had originally sent me out into the world as a boy to find stories to tell. Taos was his home ground. The rest of New Mexico, especially Santa Fe, had been locked into my soul because *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by Willa Cather had been one of my mother’s favorite books. My mom had passed away, a few days shy of her 90th birthday, with what seemed to me a sad sigh shortly after 9-11. New Mexico had been in a significant way, the locus of Willa Cather’s imagination, as someone said, “her artistic birthplace.” I had grown to love the novel over the years as much as my mother had, found its heart in the parched yellow landscape speckled with junipers and fragrant sagebrush, the red clay soil, the tumbleweeds blowing across empty roads, and in Cather’s “hard, empty blue sky” stretching out without comment or answer like time itself. For Cather, one of the great American writers of place, the land became a character as much as any strong woman or gentle man described

in her fictions. She understood the land, and she also knew that it was stories that sent us out into the world. “The books we read when we were children,” she once said, “shaped our lives, at least they shaped our imaginings, and it is with our imaginings that we live.” So, for me, New Mexico, although a landscape in ways as foreign as Vietnam or Burma, was a place I associated with my boyhood and my mother and with imagination itself. And, for me, the imagination was inextricably linked to Jo-Ellen. We had left the Bronx together as teenagers, and for always I would associate all the unexplored possibilities in the world with my love for her.

Carson’s ghost nudging me forward, I got to test Cather’s theory of our early stories shaping our way of being in the world. For weeks, each day after I finished writing, whether it snowed or rained or the sun burned brilliantly in the sky, I was the walking man of Taos. Every afternoon I tramped down Burch Street, past the open fields and dirt driveways, the adobe houses and barking dogs and the majestic ridged trunks of the hundred-year-old cottonwoods that lined the way, to Los Pandos and onto Paseo del Pueblo until I got to La Placita and the Sustaining Cultures Café, where I got free internet, live flute music, and more varieties of tofu than I knew existed. It was the kind of old hippie establishment in which women in long flowered dresses consulted Viking runes at coffee tables and men with grey pony tails signed petitions against sweatshops. It reminded me of the places Jo-Ellen and I had frequented in Berkeley in our first year of marriage. The bumper stickers on the walls said things like, “Where have all the hippies gone?” The café had a good-natured otherworldliness, and where else could a weary traveler or a trust fund hippie get a wheatgrass shot for \$2? The Taza Café, a few streets away, where I could use my laptop for free, didn’t have wheatgrass shots, but it generally had someone playing classical music on the piano and being accompanied by a friend on a cello or a guitar.

When I wasn’t listening to flute music or the piano at one of the cafés, I was walking down Kit Carson Road to the circle of Kit Carson Park and Cemetery, the snow-capped, cloud-shrouded Sangre de Cristos, the Blood of Christ Mountains, hovering over me, the earthy smell of piñón smoke

in the air. At the entrance to the cemetery I would always stop, a bit confounded by the macabre Western monument that stood there to Arthur Rochford Manby, a transplanted Englishman—educated in architecture, painting, and mining—who came to New Mexico in the 1880's. He was a swindler, probably a murderer, and he ended up dead and decapitated on July 4, 1929, most likely a victim of one of his elaborate con games. For some reason, the town fathers thought it a good idea to put up a marker and a plaque to his name. I would then pass the graves of Carson and his wife, Maria Josefa, nod in bemusement, and wonder if this were not the story of the West, hero and villain side by side. But also, it seemed, the story of the West was the story of Kit and Maria, the imagination transforming adventure into love.

Some days I'd hike up to the Taos Pueblo, the oldest continuously habited pueblo in America. I bought enough fry bread and silver jewelry to make some of the residents smile broadly when they saw me coming. Even the mangy dogs appeared to know I was an easy mark and gathered around me as soon as they saw a piece of puckered, honeyed bread in my hand. Occasionally I would hike out to the foothills past the Pueblo, making my way across plains so swarming with sagebrush that I swam in a pungent pine scent as sweet as any flowers on earth.

I grew to love Taos, even though I missed Jo-Ellen. The town had little of the gentrified prissiness of Santa Fe. It had all the tourist stores on the Plaza, and the scattering of massage and new age therapy shops that catered to the retired and arthritic ex-hippies, but for a town of fewer than 7,000 residents, it also had four bookstores (one of them—Moby Dickens—as memorable as Powell's in Oregon or Square Books in Mississippi), some fascinating art galleries and museums, appetizing restaurants, live music with no cover charge every night at the cozy and quirky Adobe Bar of the Taos Inn, and an organic grocery store, Cid's, that was better than anything that served the nearly one million people in my present home in the Hampton Roads of Virginia.

But essentially Taos had kept its tough, old Western feel. Cowboys and Indians, Hispanos and Anglos, Mexicans and Americanos, all living in

the shadow of the Sangre de Cristos. It took me less than a week to grow fond of the feel of gravel under my feet on the dirt paths and the smell of horse shit in the fields. I grew to expect seeing the prairie dogs scurrying into their holes when they saw me walking near them. Once I returned to the big city, I was going to long for the curve of the holy mountains against the never-ending turquoise sky. I was going to miss my afternoons on the Plaza trying to understand Johnson, the harmless but snarling village drunk, and listening to the ardent tones of Clint, the street musician who, on his breaks, talked to me about the novel he had just written—a *metaphysical fantasy about the reincarnation of Tyrannosaurus Rex*. I was going to miss watching people cruise around the Plaza in cars and on foot as dark clouds gathered over the distant peaks. I had grown used to reading the weekly events in *The Taos News*, especially the Police Blotter, which listed each call for the week—“Neighbor’s dog has been barking for three hours” or “Two individuals with dreadlocks and backpacks reported stealing some chips in a convenience store.” I knew that New Mexico had its problems with crime and alcoholism, but every time I read the Taos Police Blotter it made me think how innocent things seemed there compared to what I was used to in the big city. I would remember fondly Eric Noskayi, a construction worker, who would sit next to me each Sunday afternoon at Ogleville’s Bar to watch the Phoenix Suns play the Los Angeles Lakers and tell me stories of growing up on the Navajo Reservation and what it felt like to be Bilagaani-Dine, half German and half Indian. After five or six beers, around the time the waitress said she could not serve him any more alcohol unless he ate something, he would regale me with stories about panhandling for two years in Phoenix and San Diego, making up to \$1,500 a week.

“Always dress decently and ask a couple for gas money,” he advised me, perhaps suspecting my writing career could use subsidizing. “The women always say, ‘Honey, don’t give him five. Give him ten.’ I had pride, though. I wouldn’t take even a dollar from anyone who looked like Kit Carson.” Eric was a tiny man with a soft handshake and myriad tattoos. His height he most likely inherited from his mother. The handshake and

his hatred of Carson from his father, the Navajo. The tattoos must have come from San Diego.

Taos is a quiet little place, fixed unobtrusively in its own past. Kit Carson is everywhere—at his former home (now a museum), on the streets named after him, the propane company, the electric cooperative, the park. Carson haunts the village the way Mark Twain haunts Hannibal, Missouri, but probably because much of the Indian population views Carson the way unforgiving Southerners still view Sherman, Carson’s name is not marketed with the same furious vulgarity that Twain’s is in Hannibal. But the history of Taos is still inextricably linked to the image of Carson.

Kit Carson probably first came to Taos in the late 1820s as a runaway apprentice, a teenager who did not care to spend his life making saddles. Like Huck Finn, he lit out for the territories, which for Carson put him on the Santa Fe Trail and the unmapped world of the Western mountains. But he did not move to Taos permanently until 1843 at the age of 33 when he married his third wife, Maria Josefa Jaramillo, eighteen years his junior. He had already lived enough to count for a few lifetimes of adventure as a mountain man. Eventually, he became for the American public the real-life Pathfinder, in the words of Hampton Sides, “a field agent for Manifest Destiny,” the man who went beyond the edge of civilization to where “the existential wilderness began.”

By most accounts, Carson was decent and humble, uncomfortable with celebrity when he finally realized it had descended upon him. He was a legend while he was alive, in a strange way almost a precursor of Andy Warhol’s notion about fame. The difference between Carson and one of Warhol’s acolytes was that Carson had no hand in the marketing of his own myth. He was a simple man, illiterate, principled, and compassionate. He was honest and loyal, an individual for whom courage and duty were paramount. According to one biographer, he was a “hero who deprecated his own legend,” and in the words of another, he was “a dashing good Samaritan,” but also “a natural born killer.” Even Willa Cather, who lionized Carson in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* called him “misguided” and said, “Carson was a soldier under orders, and he did a soldier’s brutal

work.” Because of his military skill, nine thousand Navajos were forced to go on the tragic Long Walk that killed 500 of them and took the rest away from their cherished homeland among the four holy mountains, a march that one historian described as “a forced relocation of biblical proportions.” Vilified by some and lionized by others, Carson, like most mortals, was both hero and villain.

In my weeks in Taos, I felt Carson’s presence; it was a tough old town. The snows still fell in late April, the temperature dropped down into the twenties at night, and the West of Carson’s days did not seem unimaginably far away as I gazed at the uninhabited snow-bound slopes. Walking past his old adobe house one chill afternoon on the eve of May, I recalled Willa Cather’s description of Bishop Latour’s first meeting with Carson: “As he stood there in his buckskin clothes one felt in him standards, loyalties, a code which is not easily put into words but which is instantly felt when two men who live by it come together by chance.” The town seemed to have its own code, cherishing what was left of its isolation and promising to protect the natural beauty that surrounded it, keeping something of its original character amidst the encroachment of hippies, tourists, retirees, land developers, and artists. There were moments for me in Taos when the town became a point of convergence for dreams and experience, for what I knew and didn’t understand about myself and my own country. It was the complex American past and future, all its hope and shame, struggling to make its way into the 21st century without discarding its history.

In the last week before Jo-Ellen arrived, I rambled as far as I could outside of town on foot and by whimsical Wurlitzer bike. One day, with two visual artists who were staying on the Foundation grounds, I headed northwest to the plains outside of Taos near the Rio Grande Gorge and the hot springs at the base near the river. On our way there we saw a few people on foot, usually with three or four dogs in tow, and a couple of women on horseback. The switchback trail to the floor of the Gorge was deep rutted with dry, cracked earth, a path that spiraled down 350 feet to the river. A bit farther upstream the Gorge was over 900 feet deep. The trail itself was narrow and rock-strewn, bordered by sage, juniper, and

pinon, and the dry air was filled with their compatible fragrances. At the bottom of the canyon, the Rio Grande, on its 2,000-mile course from the Rocky Mountains in Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico, was a fast moving pale green gash in the layered red rocks. The river water was so bracing cold that it made me appreciate the warmth of the four hot springs a few feet above river level. I found out later that we had been soaking at the Manby Springs. He had built a bridge at that spot, and once there was an inn, as well. The inn was now a pile of rocks, and the bridge had washed away long ago. But Manby's name lived on in the place, just as it had at the cemetery, and his claim that the springs were magic spots used by the Aztecs before they started their journey south seemed cogent enough when I was relaxing in them—even if it was just another one of his cons. There was not a sound at the hot springs, not even of the wind rustling, and not a house in sight. There were just the canyon and the river, as they had looked, I suspected, to Kit Carson or Manuelito. At least, there was still a place to be found that let one conjure what it might have looked like before civilization carved its inroads.

Of course, I knew above the Gorge there were houses punctuating the plains, but there were not too many yet, and most of them, flat-roofed adobes, blended into the red-brown earth almost as inconspicuously as Navajo hogans. In describing the Indians' relationship to their environment in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather said, "it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like a fish through water, or birds through air." In my experience, most people who were not Native Americans did not seem to hold this value. Houses in most places in the United States were built to stand out aggressively. In most eastern cities, leaving traces meant you were successful. Here, in the backcountry outside of Taos, even the one bed and breakfast we discovered—the Dobson House—was a 7,000-square foot earthship that seemed to grow from and into the arid ground itself. Like many of the houses nearby, it was built mostly of recycled materials – 20,000 aluminum cans, 2,000 discarded tires packed with dirt, 34 tons of red sandstone, thousands of recovered bottles—all made into a

museum-quality house, half underground, with 360 degree views of the Rio Grande Valley and the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range from its immense glass-walled common room. Similar to many of the homes on the plains outside of Taos, the house was passive solar, relying on the sun for much of its energy needs. The wide skies and sage plains, like the ocean, compelled contemplation—how do I want to live, what should my home be like, am I master of the land or its servant? In a water-starved land like New Mexico, perhaps it was a matter of life and death to discover how to live in companionship with the earth.

I had come to associate Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with the landscape of New Mexico, with the essential story of America, and with the spirit of my mother, with my deep friendship and companionship with my wife. In addition, I had come to regard the novel as one of the great American fictions of the twentieth century, a quiet classic that had been dismissed from the required reading lists for college survey courses in modern American literature. I sensed why my mother cared so deeply for the book. It was a story of two ordinary men—Jean Latour and Joseph Vaillant (fictional representations of the historical figures Jean Baptiste Lamy and Joseph Machebeuf)—priests who met the wild land they encountered with the same honesty and courage that scouts like Kit Carson had. They were men of integrity, dedication, and purpose. They were examples of deep spirituality but simple humanity, as well. In his biography of Cather, James Woodress speaks to this subject: "Their lives renew faith in human possibilities." In its essence, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a story of deep friendship, a chronicle of love. Love, like art, is always about the power of the imagination, the ability to see. As Archbishop Latour says in the novel, "Where there is great love there are always miracles . . . our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always." In those two priests, I saw Cather's view of all art, built on faith and a belief in the promise of the human spirit. Art and religion, as she knew, were the same thing.

Years ago, I had traveled to Northern Arizona to hike into Canyon de Chelly with Cather's novel in hand. The canyon was imbued with a deep

mystery and spirituality, and immediately I saw why Cather had ended her book with a description of it. Near the conclusion of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the indomitable Manuelito tells Latour, “Their country . . . was part of their religion.” The Navajo origin myth had it that their original parents came on Shiprock to their sacred land and found their paradise in Canyon de Chelly. For the Navajos, to leave their home ground was to die. The land *was* their religion, just as the land was the essence of Cather’s art. What Carson’s life and Cather’s story had helped me to see was that the American narrative was no less a split consciousness than that of Orhan Pamuk’s Turkey or Haruki Murakami’s Japan. Like their countries, mine had an elusive story of history and myth, experience and perception, a geography as rich and foreign as any I would ever find.

Eventually, Jo-Ellen arrived and, after a week in Taos, we went to Santa Fe to see the homeground of Cather’s archbishop. We skipped the art galleries on Canyon Road and went to the cathedral built by Jean Lamy. It was Mother’s Day, six years after my mother had died, and we went to Mass at St. Francis Cathedral, the Romanesque church envisioned and started by the Archbishop in 1869. In his sermon, the priest talked of the Holy Trinity, and I thought I saw him hesitate as if he sensed the entire congregation, not only me, was pondering the irony of our proximity to the other Trinity in nearby Los Alamos, as if we were caught on the bloody ground between faith and violence. But the kindly old priest looked like the statue of Jean Lamy that stood in front of the church. He had a thin French face, kind eyes. He made me think of my own mother and a scene in the final chapter of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* which reminded me of her. My memory of my mother and that scene from the novel intersected in my imagination as if they had always existed together. Memory is ever an absence and a presence, a sorrow and a sweetness, in the same moment. In the section of the novel I recalled, Archbishop Latour is old and retired, and the young priest who is caring for him worries about his catching a cold and dying. The Archbishop’s wry response suggests his contentment and wisdom: “The old man smiled: ‘I shall not die of a cold, my son. I shall die of having lived.’” The Archbishop’s les-

MICHAEL PEARSON

son was my mother's, as well, the lesson that any wayfarer should learn—when our time comes, we all want to die of having lived fully.

From Santa Fe, the city of holy faith, Jo-Ellen and I headed back east, toward *home*. After traveling twice around the world, I might not have been perfectly sure where *home* was or what it meant, but I had my own sort of faith that the only chance of finding it was to seek it with someone I loved. In that respect, like Carson or Cather's priests or my mother, in the seeking, I would always be at home.

## Epilogue: Where Stories Come From, Where They Take Us

I had a dream the other night, one of the vivid kind that makes you question whether you had been asleep or were just remembering something that actually happened and you had forgotten all about it until that very moment. My dream was about a guy I had not seen for a quarter of a century. I dreamt of that long-ago friend, Rip, and his father. I had met his father only once or twice when I was a teenager, but I saw him in precise detail in my sleep. He was distinguished, clean shaven, with neatly barbered silver hair, a sky blue collared shirt, and an expensive gold watch. When I opened my eyes fully to the daylight, I realized that such a description probably didn't even resemble Rip's father, Mr. Slevin. The truth was I couldn't picture him at all. That man existed only in my dream. His son, Tommy, the boy and man all my friends called Rip, would always look the same to me, in dreams or memory, spindle legs and branch-thin arms, a bush of unkempt hair, and sad, faraway eyes.

A while back I wrote a story about Rip and the legend of how he acquired his nickname. I thought the essay was funny and spoke about the Bronx, where we had grown up, the place we had all dreamed of running from, but when I wrote the story, I never imagined how Rip's tale would end. I thought the end was in the dreaming, but that was only the beginning. The dream is hardly ever the end of a true story.

Thomas Slevin's story went something like this. In the summertime the Bronx was filled with dreams. The days flowed indiscernibly, a sluggish stream, one day moving unnoticed into the next, all part of the long, lazy drift of time. The apartment buildings, rectangles of frozen brick in the winter, seemed to thaw and then sway in the shimmering summer heat. Faces softened, people slowed their gaits, and children sat in the slivers of shade on the stoops, imagining their golden futures. Even the sweat-soaked adults who plodded back across the Grand Concourse in the early evening after exiting the trains had a look of dreamy contemplation.

Everyone appeared to be thinking of another place, another time.

We were fourteen years old and uncertain what our dreams should be, what dreams were any longer possible, but we roamed like wide-eyed wolves, at turns loping and lethargic, needing each other's company, but never sure why.

It was a day late in June in 1964, seven months after the murder of John F. Kennedy, and the sun burned down on the Bronx. The air turned thick and sullen, workers slumped resignedly in their subway seats, and playgrounds looked bleached and useless. The atmosphere was so heavy that it seemed opaque and the future impossibly distant.

On that day, Thomas Slevin lost his name and found a new one.

Slevin hung out with a crowd from Bainbridge Avenue, a group of boys that gathered along the metal fence railing that stretched the length of Mosholu Parkway. They perched there like birds on a wire, staring at the stone walls of P. S. 8 and at the empty playground beyond it, sighing and hoping for some threat or seduction. On that day, there seemed little chance of either.

Elbows resting on knees, chins cupped in their palms, the five boys sat, waiting. In a way, they looked as if they were half formed, pieces that needed to be fitted together to make a whole. Vinnie they called "Pork": he was short and fat, but the nickname may have had more to do with the bristly hairs covering his body, jutting out like quills in the moist air, than with his slovenly eating habits. As he sat there, the sun glinted off shiny streams of mustard and chocolate ice cream that veined his tee-shirt and crusted like glue in the dark hairs of his forearms. Fitz, who was a head taller than Pork, sat next to him, smiling handsomely at an imagined audience, one hand caressing his tensed triceps, the other fondly massaging his crotch. Johnny was called "Fleas," but no one had even a remote idea why. He was all angles and smirks, proud of the fact that he had never been caught saying a serious word since he was in the fifth grade. All anyone knew about him for certain was that he always wore white socks, even with his dress pants and fancy shoes to school. "I got the fungus," he explained, but the word sounded funny to them and they considered this

might be another one of his jokes. Al was small and blond, a year younger than the rest. He was smart and had the face of an altar boy, two traits that ordinarily would have gotten someone beaten up on a regular basis, but, instead, everyone wanted to protect him, as if he were a smart kid brother who would never refuse to help you solve a difficult math problem. If you didn't like Al, people suspected something was the matter with you.

Tommy Slevin sat slumped next to Al, and of all the boys he appeared to be the most unfinished. His limbs were as thin as pipe stems. His reddish-brown hair had the texture of a Brillo pad and the shape of a dented hubcap. His green eyes popped out just enough to give him a slight but permanently dazed expression, and his freckled mouth twisted ironically, a combination that confused most people, making them wonder if he were arrogant or simple-minded.

No one was sure exactly what to make of him. He was odd, but his oddities were not easily defined. So, he remained un-named except for the ordinary "Tom" given to him by his parents. But these ordinary names meant little to most of us who had spent eight years at St. Philip Neri Elementary School together. It wasn't Bruce Wayne that captured our imagination but Batman. Nicknames were laced with meaning. They were earned, for good or ill. So, along with the generic associations—greaseball, potato eater, yiddle—were the personal namings: Frankie Bartoletti was Bart the Fart, Johnny DeCaprio was Miser, and Steve Tarnok was Levite. We knew a little about basic human instincts, a lot about bodily functions, and we had even learned something about the Old Testament in those years at St. Philip's. Those names and others were sometimes picked up for small misdeeds, often for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but most typically they were earned, and they stuck like a scarlet letter, for the unpardonable sin—failing to be inconspicuous. Our Bronx was the Catholic Bronx, our apartments looked alike, our prayers floated up to heaven in the same Latin bursts to God (who for some reason appreciated us not translating our thoughts into ordinary English); we were taught silence and obedience, to learn by rote, to stand quietly in line, to be part of the flock.

Despite his alien hairdo and bemused expression, Thomas Slevin was

inconspicuous, as indistinguishable as one sheep from another. In his eight years at St. Philip's, he was known as Tommy, or he was barely recognized at all. In the eighth grade class there were fifty-four squirming boys, seated not according to height or alphabetical order, but according to demonstrated academic ability. This left Tommy in the last row, along the edge of the jalousie windows, gazing out at the buses and cars on the boulevard. His daydreams, I suspect, took him anywhere but into math and history, and he was rarely snapped out of his slack-jawed ruminations because Brother Bruce and Brother Placid had more interesting cases of deviancy to hold their attention.

Behind Tommy sat three or four boys who seemed to us then to defy all but the most inventive definitions of blockheadedness. Even Brother Boniface, who had perpetual faith, it seemed, in all forms of depravity and stupidity, was at times pleasantly surprised by the amorphous dullness he discovered in Jimmy Keane or John Knecht, who competed for the last seat in the last row. Their apparent obtuseness clearly made him happy. These two young men were capable of forgetting how to spell *cat*, would not always associate Christmas Day with December 25, and could not say for sure who was buried in Grant's Tomb. Deep down, Brother Boniface loved them for the opportunities they provided for sarcasm and a sort of sadism only certain prison guards and private school teachers ever truly appreciate. Nothing could make Brother Boniface's disdainful eyes glitter or provoke the preening flutter of his hands like a wrong answer. His smile turned into a scimitar then and the look on his round face was something close to religious ecstasy. Most of us appreciated Keane and Knecht too, but for different reasons. We saw them as a kind sort of pod people: they inhabited our world without ever seeming to take the same desperate interest in it that we did. And, more important to us, they took most of the attention we didn't want. In retrospect, I'm not sure if they were our intellectual inferiors or our moral superiors, refusing to answer obediently and correctly as we always did. We had learned our religious lessons well and were content to have our smiling martyrs a few feet away in the last row of the classroom.

Tommy Slevin was not that dull and probably not that good natured, either. Compared with Jimmy Keane, he appeared to be a thinker as profound as Søren Kierkegaard. Held next to John Knecht, who smoked two packs of unfiltered Chesterfields a day, drank a few beers on the weekends, had been left back three times, and looked withered before the bloom of the confirmation slap was off his cheek in the fourth grade, Slevin was positively handsome. He was not an athlete, which was a serious defect in the insular world of the Catholic Bronx, but he didn't compound that error by being studious as well. For all practical purposes, he was unnoticed. He didn't exist. He slipped from one grade to another without anyone's paying much attention, always near the top of the last row, anonymous, a boy with no future but with no past either.

On that June day, Tommy sat on the metal fence along Mosholu Parkway, brown eyes narrowed in the sunlight, and no one more surprised than he, it seemed, when he broke the silence.

"Shit, this is boring," he said, nearly falling off the rusted railing as if the words tripped a delicate balance.

No one appeared to hear him. Nobody turned a head in his direction.

"Let's go to the RKO Fordham," Fleas suggested. "I hear they got *Topkapi* playing there. It's advertised on all the buses."

"What the hell's *Topkapi*?" Pork asked. "*My Fair Lady*'s playing at the Loew's Paradise . . ." Before the words had even fully formed as sound, Pork realized he had made a big mistake, said something foolish, allowed himself to be conspicuous. But it was too late. Fitz stroked his chin and started the onslaught.

"*My Fair Lady*, eh Pork? I bet you'd love to see that. Anything to do with fairies, huh?"

For the next few minutes Pork's masculinity was loudly called into question. But much of the conversation was nothing more than a ritual, a sort of irreligious litany, a familiar chant and response that went this way:

"Suck on it."

"Whip it out."

"You wish I would."

“You couldn’t find it.”

“You’re such a faggot.”

“You wish I was.”

“I know.”

“You blow.”

“You wish I did.”

“You wish you could.”

“You couldn’t even find it.”

“Your mother found it.”

Usually when someone’s mother was invoked, it signaled the end of the conversation. It meant the boys were running out of ideas. For them, the ultimate disgrace was not stupidity, lack of coordination, or even effeminacy, but rather any question of a mother’s virtue. The word *mother* foreshadowed the end of the discussion, but before a shoving match or the metallic challenge of zipper opening, the boys’ attention turned to a Volkswagen rattling up to the stop sign at the end of the street.

The driver turned toward them, a flash of long dirty blond hair, yellow beard, unfocused eyes. His smile flashed but he seemed unaware that they were a few feet from him. His radio was just loud enough for Peter, Paul, and Mary’s “Blowing in the Wind” to drift incongruously into the Angel’s whining “My boyfriend’s back and there’s gonna be trouble” which came from an open window of the apartment across the street where two pre-teen girls were practicing the Watusi and the Frug. The boys watched the Volkswagen sputter off, but none of them took notice of the clashing sounds. The past didn’t make much sense to them, but the future was a dark continent they would never see. So they settled back and sighed. It was the year of the Beatles, but it was also the year of the Four Seasons, Bobby Vinton, and the Singing Nun.

For a while they discussed all the possibilities the day offered them—hopping a bus to Yonkers and hiking the rest of the way to Tibbets Brook Pool, playing knock hockey at the public school rec center, having an egg cream at Lou and Art’s Candy Store. But after an hour, Al had gone home and the four remaining were still stuck on the fence. It was Pork, with a

photographic memory for every movie theater timetable in the city, who brought up the idea of going to see a porno film in Manhattan. The boys decided on the World Theater on Forty-ninth Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. Tommy was the first one to lift himself from the fence. He had been sitting there, backside on the top railing, feet on the lower railing, and head bent so that his body resembled a question mark. He straightened up, stretched, and the other boys did the same. But before they could screw their courage to the act, they got one of the older boys in the neighborhood to buy them a six-pack of beer. They each drank one and shared the last two as they walked along the Bedford Park Boulevard underpass, a gaping passage that led to the Independent Subway line. Under the bridge, the whoosh of cars turned loud and threatening, and the filth seemed dark and sad. Scrawled over the entrance to the subway was the word "Beware," and, right next to it, "Kiss my ass." The boys bounced the empty cans off the last two S's, urine-colored drops of beer splashing against the wall, the cans clanking into the road.

The subway was gray and empty. Every sound echoed through the silence. In a rush, without planning it, the four of them jumped the turnstiles, laughing, leaping down the steps to the subway platform, barely hearing the deep, featureless voice from the booth, "Hey, you damned kids, get back here." The D train screeched into the station, and they jumped on, pushing their way through to the first car.

Soon the gentle rocking of the subway car lulled them into stillness. Their laughter became smiles, and their smiles turned to dull stares as they gazed out the front glass near the engineer's booth. The train careened through the tunnels, incandescent lights and pulsing red and green signals, occasionally piercing the darkness, in a frightening flash making it clear how close the walls were to the hurtling cars. It was a flickering psychedelic ride, darkness washing over them and the rhythmic clicks of the wheels spinning them backwards, it seemed, away from the world, the light, the present. By the time they reached Fiftieth Street and Sixth Avenue, they would have been content to keep riding the train indefinitely, remaining in a pleasant half-wakefulness. But one moved, then the next,

and before they realized it, the sunlight struck them hard between the eyes. Each one raised his hand to ward off the blow.

Squint-eyed to the sun, they snaked their way through the lunch crowds near Rockefeller Plaza, past the skating rink, an iceless crater guarded by a golden Atlas, near Radio City Music Hall, where the dancers in old shorts and tattered T-shirts rehearsed for their evening performance, and across Broadway. On Eighth Avenue a gauntlet of prostitutes in tight red shorts and purple halters asked them with a genteel mockery if they would “like a date, honey?” The boys smiled awkwardly, scared speechless by the used, skeletal faces in the stark daylight. They pushed on toward the side entrance to the movie theater as one of the prostitutes called to a young sailor across the street.

Fitz, who looked older than the rest, bought a ticket and headed for the side door after telling the usher that someone was getting sick in the bathroom. In an instant, the other three were inside the unlit movie theater, invisible in the darkness. Only four or five seats were taken by shadowy, slumped figures, but the boys sat in the next-to-last row, whispering, elbowing one another, their attention fixed on the movie in progress. They tried to appear nonchalant, making whispered jokes and sarcastic remarks about the actors and actresses, but their hearts pounded, and their eyes were riveted to the screen.

The story concerned a group of women who had enslaved the men on their island, killing all but those who could perform with exceptional sexual dexterity. The plot, they knew, was thin despite the allusion to mythology, but the action was thick and fast. Soon, the boys’ jokes stopped, and they lost track of one another in the dark heat of their own separate worlds. They also lost a hold on time amidst the moans and screams, and Fitz wasn’t certain how long they had been there when he turned to his right and saw Tommy Slevin slouched in his seat, his eyes apparently closed. Fitz nudged Pork and nodded to Fleas, who was just then emerging from his own smoky dreams. One of them reached over and waved a hand in front of Slevin’s face. Another snapped his fingers.

He was asleep. The boys couldn’t quite believe their eyes: Slevin had

fallen asleep during a pornographic movie. If it could be explained by some spell or narcoleptic fit, they might have nudged him awake, but instead they slowly, quietly rose from their seats and made their way up the aisle, leaving him lying there like a kid who had dozed off at the end of geography class.

“Let’s get out of here,” one of them said, and before they could discuss it, they were running through the harsh daylight toward the train back to the Bronx. On the ride home they may have wondered what powerful drowsiness could have overcome him when all their senses were shot through with heat and blood, when the whole world seemed unendurably awake. They might have envied him the innocent dreams that could have accompanied such a sleep. When they returned to Bedford Park Station at 200th Street, they waited by the pizza place for a time, watching line after line of subway passengers pulse from the tunnel. As the sky turned from purple to black, they headed home, wondering, perhaps, if Slevin would ever return to the Bronx.

He did, much later. Somehow he had lost one shoe, and from his apartment window one of the boys saw Tommy limp along Bainbridge Avenue on a moonless night that seemed to cast shadows everywhere, changing the shapes of trees and buildings, changing even him.

By the next day he was someone else. He was no longer Tommy Slevin, but Rip. No one was sure who coined the name, but it stuck so fast that in a few years many people who knew Rip had no idea what his legal name was. He had gone to sleep as Tommy Slevin and awakened as Rip, a different person, from that moment conspicuous, the center of attention. He had been transformed by a few hours and would never be the same. Within a couple of years, he was spending all of his nights at Darby O’Gill’s Bar doing imitations of Mick Jagger or at a friend’s house lounging lazily until the beer ran out. Then he would sit up, his skeletal frame rattling, and say, “Let’s shoot out for some tastes.”

It was as if he fell in love with being noticed. It was as if he fell in love with the sleep he had slipped into like a new country. He had brought back nothing but more dreams. Nevertheless, he had crossed some thresh-

old, and the Bronx made us all think about moving on. All the roads seemed to lead away from what we knew, away from who we were. So, no matter how much we wanted to hold onto some fragment of our identity, we wanted even more to be transformed.

Of course, sometimes it's wise not to wish too much for certain things because occasionally we get what we want. Rip's smile began to tilt even more crazily, a postmodernist Cheshire grin. He got skinnier than his hero, Mick Jagger. Even his lips appeared to swell. His hair bloomed wildly, mushrooming from his forehead like an atomic blast. Stories began to spring from him, flapping around him like paper butterflies in a cartoon. As the years went by, his friends went to college or off to the service, but Rip stayed put and became a legend. Despite the fact that he seemed to work off and on and date occasionally, he always had time to hang out with his friends, to drink a few beers, to drift along idly.

When he was twenty or so, he was arrested for peeing on the ground-level window of an elderly woman's apartment. She might have thought the water streaming against her kitchen window was an abrupt downpour, but Rip was also screaming out the lyrics to "Midnight Rambler" as he relieved himself. When the woman opened her blinds, she gasped at the jumble of images she saw—a wild man howling at the moon, a waterfall against her window, scuffed shoes, hairy appendages.

The cops arrived before he was fully zipped. When he was brought down to the 52nd Precinct, the desk sergeant explained to him, "You're being booked for peeping Tommery." Rip smiled up at him sadly, held himself unsteadily against the desk, and said, "Thank you, sir. You're the first person who's called me Tom in years."

Shortly after that, rumor had it he came home one night and found a note taped to the kitchen sink. His parents had moved to Florida. Supposedly, they forgot to leave a forwarding address.

Perhaps, he found them, though. He must have, for when I saw him again twenty years later, he was a sunbaked real estate salesman living in Florida, somewhere near St. Augustine. He mentioned to me the houses he owned, the deals he was making, the trips he took, but his clothes

looked threadbare, his shoes worn thin, his eyes streaked with red. He reminded me of the Bronx, of those dream-laden summer days when we all gazed longingly into the distance. As he talked, one hand rested on his hip, the other pointed freely—one more imitation, it seemed to me, of Mick Jagger—and his eyelids looked heavy with an ambiguous memory, as if he had never fully awakened from some enigmatic sleep.

In October of 2005, I got an e-mail from one of those boys from the Bronx. He attached a story from a Florida newspaper with this sentence beneath the headline: “St. Petersburg detectives on Tuesday found the body of Thomas Slevin, 56, inside the home he shared with his brother.” From all accounts, Tommy’s brother Robert, eight years younger than he, had stabbed him three times in the chest and then left his body in the house to decay for over a month. The odor of the decomposing body is what tipped the police off to the crime.

So, Tommy’s history seemed to end there, years after my narrative reshaping of it. The newspaper article concluded by saying, “The brothers each had arrest records, Thomas for marijuana possession, shoplifting, and indecent exposure, and Robert for marijuana possession and domestic battery. That last charge came in 1992 and was dismissed, according to state records.” But that allusion to “indecent exposure” confused me. The newspaper reporter had left something important out. He had forgotten to say what Tommy’s true name was. He had failed to explain how Rip had gotten his name and how it was connected to the truth. Rip’s story was not merely about the facts that led to the end of his life. It was about the dreams that fueled it. Stories—even nonfiction ones—are always about dreams, and facts rarely discover those verities of the human heart.

*Simon Perchik*

\*

You have nothing to say, point  
and in a straight line  
each stone gives up its home

finds a small place for the Earth  
that lays down alongside  
the way moonlight still caresses

the name that fired all stone  
with shade on both sides—you point  
and though it's thirst

you have no mouth, nothing  
for these flowers bending over  
the meadow you opened then closed.

*Rabindra K. Swain*

The Musk of the Four Walls

Here nothing helps you  
Find your ways.  
Not even that certainty  
Of picking up a Heaney you want  
From the familiar shelf in the dark.  
Indulgent in the musk of your misery  
You scurry like a musk rat  
Around the four walls  
Yet not move to the center  
Or to the fore.  
Living on periphery  
Is perhaps your destiny.

*Daniela Tordi*

## The Panther

It all started with a small notice in a local newspaper, which—after some time—took on the proportions of a national news item:

### **PATHER TERRORIZES LIVORNO**

*Hunt Commenced Four Days Ago. Many Animals Attacked.*

The panther was first seen by a driver in the district of Parrana San Martino. After raising its head from behind a hedge, the panther arched its back and stretched. It had already eaten a dozen chickens and slaughtered two dogs and several goats belonging to farms situated in the surrounding hills. The hunt was initiated soon thereafter, with participants including forest rangers and both urban and state police, as well as private citizens armed to the teeth for this singular safari. Bearing pistols, knives, and rifles loaded with tranquilizing darts, they combed an area of approximately twenty-five square miles. However, day after day, having seen neither hide nor hair of the beast, the hunters returned to their homes and barracks where, fearful of the near and present danger, they left the lights burning in their gardens and courtyards.

The Prefecture of Livorno sent warnings to Pisa, Grosseto, and Sienna. Meanwhile experts arrived to examine the slaughtered dogs. They concluded that the killer must be an unusually large feline, agile and potent and able to jump over high enclosures, that then carried its prey far to consume their corpses in peace. According to the local police chief, it was probably an escaped exotic animal imported from Africa or Asia, and belonging to some collector, who abandoned it. As a matter of fact, two months earlier, at Castiglioncello by the sea, a hunter had reported seeing an enormous cat at the edge of the local highway, gripping the carcass of a pheasant in its teeth.

I was in my studio in front of the large glass window facing out into my back yard. Having tried in vain to sleep, I remembered some changes I needed to make in a report to the congress of hematology, and so I got up. I checked the windows to make sure they were secured against the storm. While doing so, I noticed the tree branches swaying under the influence of the cold winds and rains of that particularly bitter January. Having stood for a while at the foot of the staircase with ears pricked, listening to the sounds of night, I sat at my desk and bent my head over thirty pages riddled with scrawled and scratched-out notes.

I carried in my mind the exact program of the days to follow, and felt exhausted in advance by the precision and punctuality demanded by the routines of academic life. Over the last few months I'd lived that life as though it were a prudently calculated investment, measuring my energies and motives with the same fussy precision with which I had filigreed the text of my report with periods, commas, colons, and semi-colons. Even the asterisks (referring to meticulous experiments to underline their data and procedures) reminded me of conversations I'd been having with friends and acquaintances: explanations logical, justifications unimpeachable, and arguments so flawless they left no room for appeal. For my rigid and regimented way of life no one had ever chastised me, not even my mother, with whom I spoke by telephone twice a week, and who seemed happy to hear me so taken with my work and students. I found myself wondering if something or someone in this world might lift me off this chessboard of a life, if only long enough for me to forget the rules of the game.

While the blue light of my computer washed over the objects that, at two o'clock in the morning, defined my horizons—the marble mortar that I used as a paperweight, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, the small frame holding the only photograph of Mario that I had saved since his departure—my eyes gazed beyond them, as if searching in the dark for a more open space. Tiredness still hadn't found me, and in the apparent stillness I felt animated by a curious excitation, as if the novelty of abandonment that I felt suddenly predisposed to had altered the constant measure of my sens-

es, altering the frequency that my mind normally transmitted. The calmness that I experienced at that moment was nonetheless filled with tension.

Under my heavy nightgown the silk pajamas I wore crackled like a second skin, returning to me, piece by piece, the forgotten sense of my own body. In the unvaried storm of those events at the center of which I had existed for so long, I'd inhabited a neutral zone in which the development of my cerebral functions was unbalanced by physiological sensations: no pain, no pleasure, far from hunger and thermal extremes, secure in the limbo of endless days spent in my studio, or at the laboratory. The thought made me laugh: I saw myself as a white mouse in an experiment, or a bacterium isolated and extracted for cultivation, a virus incubated for long and patient study. And though I felt no one looking at me, still, I remained perfectly inert, absent of even the slightest vibration.

At that moment, just as my vision had grown accustomed to the dark, a vague mass moved past the window, moving slowly—animating, in a perfect play of lights, the cockeyed slits of my wooden shutters, realigning them. Through the wider fissures a lucid shadow projected into the room, like a stretched wet, black cloth. No sound, just the rhythmic pattering of water from the gutter now that the storm had ceased. A moment later, as I tried to understand what I'd just seen, the scene repeated itself, this time from the opposite direction: a large, compact shape gliding from right to left, reaching a height of no less than one meter. The impression was that of a solid corpus passing at a constant gait. I assumed it must be a large dog.

I was about to get up when suddenly a loud crash took my breath away. Fear immobilized me for some time before I approached the window without hesitation. With my forehead to the glass, breathing shallowly so as not to fog it, I saw at once the large flowerpot that had fallen from the staircase descending to the tiled garden. Since the air was still, as it usually is in the middle of the night, I was sure someone had knocked it down. In the space left empty by the incident I felt a presence. I remembered having read in the newspaper only a week before an item about a panther having mysteriously appeared in the vicinity of Livorno. As the details of the article rose in my memory, my vision was drawn a hundred and eighty

degrees to the right and I saw precisely what I had been imagining.

Sitting motionless with its back to me, as if guarding my house, the beast sniffed the air, its whiskers and ears pearled by the moonlight diffused through the sparse clouds. I felt certain that the slightest sound would have broken the spell of that vigilant, haughty pose; I even worried that the beast might hear the beating of my heart. I tried to form a reasonable thought to go with this fantastic apparition, but I was too disoriented by the fear the presence of a live panther transmitted at that hour and at that place.

I spent a long time standing there that way, looking, an interval divided into smaller units in which my consciousness waxed and waned. In that interval I was put in mind of a discussion my husband Mario and I had had more than once by telephone. "I don't like the thought of you all alone in that house," he had said, "so isolated. I wish you'd consider moving back to the city." If I had called him at that moment and explained what I was seeing, he would surely have thought that I had propitiated yet one more strange and incomprehensible incident, like the time I almost vanished before his eyes thanks to an Arab aboard a ship traveling down the Nile. It's hard to say, ultimately, which events in our lives are causally linked and which are fortuitous. All things considered, I have to agree with my husband that there exists in life a flux of logically concatenated circumstances beyond our capacity to comprehend or even to recognize them. But a panther sitting on my front doormat challenged any effort to temper absurdity with rational thought.

Just as the shadow of panic swept over me, I burst out laughing; I couldn't help it. The panther turned. Through the shutters, despite the darkness, I swear it saw me in that frozen moment. I was paralyzed by stupor; nevertheless, a part of me wanted to go out there, to get close, to reestablish my contact with the world starting with that specter. I felt a challenge growing in me, inviting me to unhinge my mind from the shallow plane of things obvious and reasonable, to trust myself to a deeper unity, one that would only be arrived at by way of events exceptional and mysterious. I thought of those hunters who had pursued the panther for

days, and of the fear they and others must have naturally felt. I knew I'd have to resolve myself to do what had to be done: a phone call to the ranger whose command post happened to be located nearby. But the prolonged solitude to which I'd grown so accustomed underscored my sense of myself as a singular individual confronted by a singular event. Then and there, with a clear conscience, I abandoned myself to the forgotten pleasure of adventure.

As the panther stretched itself out between the shadows cast by a pair of enormous amphorae on either side of my doorway, I reached into the room where I had installed my refrigerator and took out the frozen carcass of a turkey that my neighbors had given to me during the holidays. I hadn't cooked it since at the last moment the friends that I had invited to dinner—a couple from Sienna—called to cancel, and it was far too big for one person. Now I smiled at the odd silhouette that crossed the corridor before me, the shadow of a ghost wearing a nightgown and carrying the drumsticks of a frozen turkey. I was bound for my studio, where I would open my window and enter into the longest night of my life.

The panther's eyes burned yellow; they projected from the empty space like laser beams, sweeping away all the banal securities that texture our everyday lives. From the domesticated pride with which zoo lions gaze through the bars of their cages, by sheer accident I'd arrived at the limpid abstraction of a vision free, vigilant, and undermined by an infallible instinct. I'd never before experienced so strong a sense of continuity between myself and my surroundings as I did now, in front of the panther which, having appreciated the diner that I'd offered it, turned away again toward the hedges and hills. Then, without the slightest regard for my presence, the panther wedged itself back into the darkness again, its tense muscles wrapped harmoniously around its slender limbs, indiscernibly exhausted by days and days of hungry drifting.

While standing next to her, my own limbs grown rigid with the increasing coldness of the hour, slowly, in a way as simple as it was certain, I understood what it meant to live, to be alive. And as the panther moved away, I gathered by the sluggishness of its movements that it was

an old beast. I kept watching him, leaning against the exterior wall of my house, slouched under the burden of an enormous tiredness borne of the effort I'd expended in ignoring my own fears. Meanwhile like a well-mannered guest the panther strutted down the walkway, passing—without hesitation—in front of the Citroën parked beyond the stakes marking the entrance to my property. As if to assure me I hadn't been seeing a ghost, the panther smeared his reflection across the car's paint and chrome.

I could have stumbled headlong into the current—like that of magnetic waves—generated by the stillness of that night; I could have surrendered the sense of my long and laborious days. But those same mute eyes that had sounded the space of my existence had also loosened my grip on the float to which I had been clinging my whole life, pulling me down into an unknown—but not totally ignored—destination.

When I awoke the next morning I knew immediately that I hadn't been dreaming. I felt refreshed as if I'd slept soundly for days after a long, wearying insomnia. I launched my arms and legs into the air with a renewed sense of their proportions. As I stepped down into my kitchen—like a mariner descending into the galley after hours spent fighting the open seas on deck—I rediscovered the pleasures of soft morning light, and of the soft warm odors that emanated from my cupboards. With renewed vision I measured the distance and closeness of all things.

*Translated from the Italian  
by Peter Selgin*

*Lisa VanAuken*

Tom Kennedy Tells a Story

I've seen this before.  
The pretty soprano, who  
after the quartet's finale,  
raises her singular chin.  
The boy violinist, who  
after Bach's Chaconne,  
bows like he gave us  
body and blood.  
And Tom, who has strong shoulders  
but gray hair, sits on a barstool, and  
begins a story not quite his.  
We pause at the bar's farthest ends.  
God, how my heart loves  
his ducal entitlement  
and lyric motherly lilt.  
His hand suspended, midair,  
as if to protect a candle  
from wind.  
The story goes: Then Brigit Bardot said, *hello*.  
And for one word, Tom is pure naked starlet;  
Never mind that we're here too.  
One wonders if such generosity  
can be taught.  
Or if not taught, *bestowed*—  
    a king crowning a pauper  
    who is also a king.

## *Editors' Choices*

Minister Faust. *From the Notebooks of Dr. Brain*.

New York: Del Rey, 2007.

Early in *From the Notebooks of Dr. Brain* by Minister Faust, an important character dies, which creates the mystery: who did it and why? Is this the set-up to a familiar detective story? It might have been. But when the deceased is thought to be an immortal (or nearly so) omnipotent being and the suspects are likewise, this graphic novel without the graphics (a new genre awaiting its name) careens energetically into a strange world of superheroes and villains. And when our guide through it all is the self-absorbed, self-help-peddling psychotherapist, Dr. Eva Brain-Silverman, the eponymous Dr. Brain, even familiar mystery story elements seem fresh. As one generation of superheroes—the likes of Lady Liberty, Gil Gamoid and the N-Kid, Captain Manifest Destiny—retires, a new one rises to take its place. Leadership of the Fantastic Order of Justice (aka F\*O\*O\*J in a book that teems with acronyms) is at stake, and The Flying Squirrel and X-Man, with radically different agendas, vie for Director of Operations. But Dr. Brain foreshadows: “[T]here was a surprise buried beneath the election field like a land mine in a miniature golf course.” The book is filled with important generational, racial, class, and moral questions. What is a superhero for? To protect a nation’s economic system and private property? To protect people, regardless of wealth? To enforce an ideology?

For *Dr. Brain*, Faust has studied the genre of the psychological self-help book and has revved its engines to produce the choking cloud of sanity-inducing fumes that fill the book. Dr. Brain explains the central conflict of the novel in her typically profound-esque psycho-drivel:

Facing this complex interconnection of social, political, and psychemo-tional chaos, none of which could be resolved by teleportation, spirit-gems, kraton beams, or an old-fashioned “dustup,” I charged my six sanity supplicants with a new mission. That mission was for them to come to terms with the very ordinary, very fragile defining human

experience: fundamental emptiness and limitless fear of meaninglessness, or what I call the “Crisis of Infinite Dearth.” If your own identity is mission rooted, how could you not be confused as to who you really are?

But that is far from the only conflict that plays out in this novel. There are several minor characters whose stories get thrown into the mix: The Flying Squirrel’s nemesis is X-Man, former leader of LAB (League of Angry Blackmen) and the world’s greatest detective whose words instantly become reality: he says “banana,” and a banana (black, of course) appears; Iron Lass, a Norse goddess known for her god-like moral inflexibility; Brotherfly, formerly a poor black man, can wisecrack his way out of trouble—usually; Omnipotent Man is like Superman, only dumber and countrified, and is likely to say “aw shucks, twernt nuthin” when he throws one planet into another; and Power Grrrl’s superabilities I’ll let you discover on your own.

Dr. Brain, as an untrustworthy narrator with an agenda that becomes clearer as the book unfolds, occupies a unique position in the novel. X-Man often reminds her that she is not a reliable source of information. Indeed, we get so wrapped up in her highly subjective perspective that it becomes difficult to doubt the authority of her words, no matter how outlandish they are, without feeling the tug of what Dr. Brain calls “antihappiness.” To read paranoia into Dr. Brain’s point of view is easy; in fact, Faust practically invites this by placing his story into what feels like a post 9-11 world. Like many self-help texts (and also like many political movements), Dr. Brain’s methods seem designed not to cause greater independence but, on the contrary, to foster in her patients (and readers) greater dependency on her authority. Big Brother is again watching you, this time with an Id Smasher.

In a Faust novel, names are opportunities for humor. Supervillains include: The Infinity Farmer and his Time Tractor, Robot-Stalin, MicroCrip and his Nanogangstas, the Iron Eunuch, Sarah Bellum, X-Stacy and the Ravers, the Specially Relative Einstein Baboons, and the

EDITORS' CHOICES

horrific Menton the Destroyer. Even names of minor characters, those tossed onto the great pile of names, are pop culture allusions. Take the warden on the prison asteroid, for example. His name? Dr. Rudy Wells. Of course, Rudy Wells was the doctor who modified both Steve Austin and Jamie Sommers—the Bionic Man and Woman. But beyond that kind of initial laugh of recognition, some of the allusions don't seem particularly charged with meaning. For example, the city in which the heroes operate is Los Ditkos, an homage to Steve Ditko, creator at Marvel Comics of Spider-Man.

Despite this novel's deep cynicism about the marriage of corporate power and militarism, there is an innocence in Faust's writing, a purity of spirit present in the best of science fiction. Best thing to do is read it with some friends. It is the kind of book guaranteed to leave you with lots to talk about when you're done.

*Bill Gillard*

Shu Jiang Lu. *When Huai Flowers Bloom*.

Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 2007.

Huai blossoms appear in the Chinese spring, dangling off twisted branches like streamers. But they're not only visually appealing, writes Shu Jiang Lu in *When Huai Flowers Bloom*, a Cultural Revolution memoir that mingles fact and fantasy. Children "shoveled them into their mouths, from which a rivulet of fragrance trickled out, winding up and down through the boughs, and encircling the hill with an intoxicating sweetness." The aroma of pulverized petals appetized, despite the grisly history of the Huai tree, which sprouted directly from the burial ground of a family killed in war, a tomb of sorts.

Lu's account elegantly argues that a modern Chinese citizen, like the Huai tree, springs from old soil, a foundation rich with recollection—a thesis at odds with the Cultural Revolution's efforts to efface the past, standardize individuals, and silence storytellers. Lu dwells on her family history and on the tales her elders told to show how the past haunts the Chinese landscape. Throughout, her narrative hops from myth to memory, sometimes obscuring which is which. Like Hamlet, Lu maintains a complex relationship with ghosts: "Whether they were real or not, it didn't matter," she opines about one group of spirits, all the while hinting they had stirred up a storm to save a place called Pear Flower Alley from government destruction. Whether or not Lu truly believes in ghosts, the possibility of her credulity only affirms her connection with Chinese tradition.

And ghosts belong, if anywhere, in Pear Flower Alley, which brims with craftspeople seeming to date from another era. Lu's meditation on this alley reveals the poetry lurking in what might have seemed, in other times, prosaic elements of Chinese culture. Based on its evocative name (which has somehow survived Mao's renaming campaign), the urban walkway seems to Lu an orchard overflowing with fruit trees and flowers. "The fruit trees were the various stalls lining both sides of the alley," she writes, "and the flowers were the residents standing behind the stalls." In the alley, unlike in China as a whole—where storytellers like Lu were sub-

ject to public punishment—imagination reigns over intimidation. One merchant addresses her in a metaphorical mode (“There is always a road that can take you out of a mountain. A cart can always find its way to turn the corner.”) Another folds paper cups to resemble boats and big-bellied bunnies.

Lu peppers her pages with spaces that, like the alley, boast both literal and metaphorical depth—another is the locked bookcase loaded with her father’s library, Western works ranging from Molière to Melville, that the family plasters with a poster of Mao to conceal its contents. Lu, like everyone she knows, engages in similar acts of deception, responding to the impossible demand that “one’s exterior precisely reflect one’s interior”; yet her Communist Youth League badge does not stop stories from simmering in her mind, just as the Mao poster does not eliminate the literature inside the bookcase. Lu clearly intends to show that her characters run as deep as Pear Flower Alley, and often succeeds; only occasionally do they, and Lu’s language more generally, come off as a trifle sugary.

Lu devotes considerable space to mourning lost loved ones, which may help explain this issue, and which also makes this volume—like the ground beneath the Huai tree, like the alley with its roaming ghosts — its own kind of tomb. She revisits the lives and deaths of an aunt, friend, father, grandfather. Out of a culture of silence and forgetting, Lu speaks for her dead, sometimes slipping into first-person to let them speak for themselves.

She concludes by dwelling on what is gone and what remains. Lu and her young daughter attend a ceremony honoring deceased family members, and when her daughter asks, “Can they talk to us? Can we see them? Can we hear them?” Lu responds with an unequivocal “Yes.” *When Huai Flowers Bloom* argues for the continuing relevance of the dead or otherwise invisible, and in defending the personal, the historical, the fictional, and the fanciful, it fights for the very makings of the stories Lu grew up forbidden to share. In so doing, this memoir subtly subverts the politics that would never have permitted its publication.

*Abigail Deutsch*

## Contributors

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**Bill Gillard** teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Wisconsin. His writing has appeared (or will shortly) in *Writer's Chronicle*, *SNReview*, *Alimentum*, *Paradigm*, *Review Americana*, *Dark Sky*, *The Leading Edge*, *Slow Trains*, *The Literary Review*, *Poetry Bay*, *Surprising Stories*, *Spitball*, *Star Line*, and *Aphelion*, among others. He is also the general editor of *Fox Cry Review*, a regional print literary magazine from the University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley. He has an MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University.

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**Laurence Klavan** wrote the novels *The Cutting Room* and *The Shooting Script* (Ballantine) and the libretto to "Bed and Sofa" (Vineyard Theater). His graphic novels, *Germantown* and *The Fielding Course*, co-written with Susan Kim, will soon be

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**Michael Pearson** has written five books—a novel re-imagining the story of the real-life Huck Finn, *Shohola Falls* (2003) and four books of nonfiction—*Imagined Places: Journeys into Literary America* (1991), *A Place That's Known: Essays* (1994), *John McPhee* (1997), and *Dreaming of Columbus: A Boyhood in the Bronx* (1999). His new book, *Innocents Abroad Too: Journeys Around the World 2002 and 2006*, will be published in 2008. He has published articles, stories, and essays in many magazines, journals, and newspapers—*The Southern Quarterly*, *The Southern Literary Journal*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, and *The Washington Post*, among many others. He is a professor in the graduate program in Creative Writing at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, teaching courses in travel writing, narrative non-fiction, and American literature.

**Simon Perchik** is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Literary Review*, and elsewhere. *Rafts* (Parsifal Editions) is his most recent collection. For more information, including his essay “Magic, Illusion and Other Realities” and a complete bibliography, visit his website at [www.geocities.com/simonthepoet](http://www.geocities.com/simonthepoet).

**Rabindra K. Swain's** latest book of poems *Susurrus in the Skull* is published from Authorspress, New Delhi. His poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Ariel*, etc. His translation and critical works include Sachi Raut-Roy's story collection *The Cemetery Flower* and *Silent Tongues: Writings in Contemporary Indian Poetry*. He is managing editor of *Chandrabbaga*.

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**Carrie Messenger's** translations from Romanian have appeared most recently in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Circumference*, *Salmagundi*, and the anthology *Words Without Borders: The World Through the Eyes of Writers*.

**Peter Selgin's** first book of short stories, *Drowning Lessons*, won this year's Flannery O'Connor Award and will be published by the University of Georgia Press in the Fall of 2008. His book on fiction writing, *By Cunning & Craft: Sound Advice and Practical Wisdom for Fiction Writers*, was published by Writer's Digest Books, 2007. His autobiographical work, *Life Goes to the Movies*, will be published by Dzanc Books. His stories and essays have appeared in over 50 publications. He edits the journal *Alimentum: The Literature of Food*.