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Jürgen Becker

Paris

Days in gray Marais
with terror between our swallowings
we parted ways wordlessly in the evening
me, half a good poet in wait,
until we found each other and drank
at tables of confused beauty
to the point of forgetting the cold
before the path back through the air

*Translated from the German
by Okla Elliott*

JÜRGEN BECKER

On Mouse's Way; Street Construction

The fence: it's written on the slats
of the construction fence all around the site,
and walking by every day, I believe
less and less that it's a fence.

*Translated from the German
by Okla Elliott*

JÜRGEN BECKER

Two Women

1

in the house of the vicar's wife, the telephone
was quiet, and she never knew anything
about the festivals down by the harbor;
on the edge of a field of porridge she stood
and held her dress tightly to her

2

moving even nearer to the window
the elder; until the soup is cold,
the grandmother crosses herself twice
because I have asked about the witch,
who with the whistle, sixteen and black

*Translated from the German
by Okla Elliott*

Partridge Boswell

Never the Twain

Perfect pearl suspended
in the crosshairs of my apotheosis
bright enough to read by

to do all the things
you dreamed in daylight
of doing but didn't dare

not with the sun there
glaring you have to be-
have under winged

surveillance unless yours is
one badass archangel
in wayfarers pomaded

Memphis rebel you can't quite put
your finger on something irresistible
& not to be trusted in his johnnyroy—

elvisjerry lee swagger & Lansky's
shirt gut-sure he'd sell you like
Sam Phillips down the muddy

river for vinyl immortality &
a stick of Beamans whereas mine
all corporate merger mumbles

into his lapel perched like secret
service on the U-haul building
across the street talons

poised to pry me from the wreckage
of another bombed out workday
we soar between supermarket

& supper wired to children's
babelsong our safe house
roof now googlable from space

remember that place? frozen
sparks & shadowmime juxta-
posed deep as artesian dreams

impervious to discovery
or possession & therefore ruin
in an hour maybe two

you'll return from your
separate well-lit country
after you've cleared their tables

collected tips I'll find wadded on
the bathroom counter come morning
the scent of last night's special

infused in your hair
you won't mind if I don't wait up
to watch this fallen

funambulist arc across
summer's final panel
the only clue to loss her

silent progress above the trees
subtle bling of constellations
dissolved in her domineering sheen

a gaudy surrogate backlighting
a recurring dream in which
we're both in the same place

at the same time
wedded to a dark uncertain thrill
before it dawned & became our life.

Herod's Night Out

O dear treetop angel of family dysfunction, calm my frayed nerves with tryptophan and sparkling wine, steel me for the onslaught of in-laws & older siblings. A new nightgown would be nice, but less practical than a rocket launcher.

Let us come & go over the river and through the woods like immune diplomats without major incident or trailing a bloody swath of hand-me-down self-reproach.

Elephantine in their sight, let me see the light of Boxing Day, their spiteful shirt sizes dispassionately to exchange.

When our multicultural guests arrive, may my mother's liberated porch monkey lie dormant in the calcified Mason-Dixonite of her antebellum brain.

May nieces and nephews acquire allergies to sugar & chocolate and find in the bottom of their stockings a rabid ferret.

Let us all be castaway in a sociological reality show. Let me lie convincingly through my teeth to survive. Let them exile me to the children's table where manners at least are salvaged.

May the four horsemen of the apocalypse posing as
our parents shelf their eternal paranoia of exogamy, recalling
their own messy little digressions that resulted in us.

Succor me to embrace the bedlam that inevitably ensues
crumpling our psyches like used crepe.
May the light of this one pathetic candle burn
brightly enough to torch our wanton excess

so we may rise the next day and join hands in our pajamas,
encircle the unadorned tree and raise our voices
in naïve, undogmatic praise to the hairy green
relative in each of us.

Let us warm ourselves by the fire and not be singed,
fly into the glowing pane and not be stunned.
Let not the Saint Nickel-&-dime-us.
Let the cannibals come.

Wang Fan-chih

Two Poems

I

That man and his lady, so romantic, in the yellow dusk . . .
No rice to cook and no wood to cook with . . .
A man and his lady with their bellies empty.
It's a good thing that fasting is holy!

II

Rotting corpses don't stop off to chat
once they start on their way away.
Quick! They get hauled to the fire.
Die young! There'll be no more taxes to pay,
and no more shit to take from the boss man.

*Translated from the Chinese
by J.P. Seaton*

Brent Fisk

After Jennie, Sunday Morning

Sweet gospel floats above the cornfields.
An owl settles in the shattered core of an oak.

The barking dog holds his ground
at the property line of sleep.

The morning is built with broken windows,
farmhouse-spare and distant.

Judith Harris

Grade School Punishments

Mrs. Hall drew a circle on the blackboard
and made us fit our noses in.
Mrs. Jackson's nylons scraped together
like sandpaper, punishment enough,
and ordered us to be still as paupers in stocks.

Mrs. Weekly, bored with her summer days,
handed out flavored "milk shakes":
Vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry—
shaking us harder and harder
until our brains rattled like moccasin beads.

Mr. Horseman made only the girls stay after,
chained to our desks, with our crackling slips
fluttering above knees, and rapped a ruler
so close it made our red ears ring.

All these we received
for our childhood misdemeanors,
doled out like medicine, a spoon at a time.
Still, the tulips bloomed regularly as face clocks
as we sat in our aisles, mortified,

over the years, writing the same
inverted commandment: "I will not"; "I will not"
our hands cramped, from chipping away
at the same rock of language,

JUDITH HARRIS

as the teacher stood with the flag,
clapping her erasers together, letting the dust free
to swim away into the sweet sounds
of her scolding, words firmer than pollen;
and stinging like honey bees.

JUDITH HARRIS

Talking to You

I couldn't find a single way
to explain the afterlife.

It would be a repetition
Of joy, on earth, everlasting.
It would be the way I talk to you

when my voice quivers
as if it had form:
a wave in ripples
blunted by the shoreline.

This is the way seeds burn
beyond themselves;
how roots travel
and combust into flowers.

An afterlife—Tell me the moment
it blooms.
And I will tell you the difference
between happiness and sorrow.

JUDITH HARRIS

Gathering Leaves in Grade School

There were smooth ovals,
and some the shade of potatoes—
some had been moth-eaten
or spotted, the maples
were starched, and crackled
like campfire.

We put them under tracing paper
and rubbed our crayons
over them, X-raying
the spread of their bones
and black, veined catacombs.

We colored them green and brown
and orange, and
cut them out along the edges,
labeling them deciduous
or evergreen.

All day, in the stuffy air of the classroom,
with its cockeyed globe,
and nautical maps of ocean floors,
I watched those leaves

lost in their own worlds
flap on the pins of the bulletin boards:
without branches or roots,
or even a sky to hold on to.

Patrick Hicks

The Wee Six

*On the tenth anniversary of peace in Northern Ireland,
one Irish-American looks back at what it can teach us about
cities at war.*

Gregory pulled up in his black taxi and waved me in. “Welcome back,” he said in a high, flat accent. “Good to see you again.”

It was the late 1980s and I hadn’t been in Belfast for a few years. As we pulled into traffic, I found it hard to believe that Northern Ireland had been at war with itself for almost twenty years—car bombs were still going off, random shootings filled the night, and punishment beatings were still taking place. But my mother was born here, which meant a part of me belonged to this country that was busy tearing itself apart.

Gregory was a friend of the family. He was in his late thirties and going prematurely grey. He drove a cab six days a week, and went to church on the seventh. When he found out I was coming back to Belfast he offered to drive me around. So now, with the meter off, we were moving away from City Hall. It was a bright blue day and people walked around with shopping bags. They laughed and talked. Little kids made faces in shop windows.

We drove towards an area of town called Ardoyne. Gregory grew up in this Catholic neighborhood during the 1970s and he has vivid memories of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) shooting at British soldiers. Large tank-like vehicles prowled the streets of his youth and helicopters shook the windowpanes as he tried to sleep. He told me about one fire-fight that lasted for over 48 hours. His family huddled in the kitchen while bullets cracked around their house. When it was finally over he went outside and collected bullets by the bucketful. It was the thing to do, he said. We traded the ones that were smashed or twisted.

Gregory drove a black cab, which was the most dangerous job in the city. Being a police officer or a soldier were safe by comparison because taxi drivers in Belfast were routinely robbed, shot at, and hijacked. The month before I arrived, someone put a pistol to the back of Gregory's head and told him to drive into the country. Instead of shooting him, which was the normal way of things, the man in sunglasses calmly told Gregory to get out and start walking towards the sea. The cab turned up a few days later on an empty road. It had been used for a drive-by shooting and then burnt to eliminate fingerprints.

"Nice cab," I said looking around.

"Brand new," Gregory smiled. "Hope to keep it awhile."

My mother immigrated to the States in her early twenties. She met my American father in the late 1960s and they settled in a sleepy rivertown outside of Minneapolis-Saint Paul. I grew up with a vague understanding of Belfast. It was a place where bullets went through heads, and people were blown to pieces when they went grocery shopping. It's not like that anymore. Things have changed a lot in Northern Ireland. The road to peace has been long, often very bumpy, but it has brought unprecedented economic prosperity to the region. The peace deal which brought both sides together is known as the "Good Friday Agreement" and it was signed in the early morning hours of April 10, 1998.

On this tenth anniversary it is natural, I suppose, to look backwards at what has been achieved. Peace has brought jobs, ushered in major reforms in education and policing, balanced political representation, and of course it has made the guns and bombs disappear. But as I look at how Northern Ireland has changed over the past decade, I find myself wondering how Northern Ireland has changed *me*, how it has shaped my understanding of the world, how it has crawled into my soul and made itself at home.

From the outside, Northern Ireland seems easy to understand. People started dying in 1969 because some of them wanted to be Irish and some of them wanted to be British. One flag versus another. Catholic versus Protestant. It wasn't that simple of course. Protestants had manipulated

the political system and created a two-tiered society; Catholics had been dispossessed from voting rights and education and job opportunities. Back when I was a teenager, I only knew that my ancestral homeland was at war with itself. My mother's side of the family had lived in the North of Ireland for over 300 years and, even now, it quiets me that I can trace a long vine of my DNA back to the year 1620.

On this tenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, I find myself thinking about that day I spent with Gregory, about what I saw and heard. Something changed inside of me that day and I've never looked at my mother's home quite the same. It all started when Gregory drove over the motorway towards the Mater Infirmorum Hospital, which locally is simply known as the "Mater." At the time, it was recognized around the world as a leader in re-attaching limbs and repairing kneecaps that had been shattered with bullets. We pulled into the taxi rank and Gregory pointed at the front door.

"Friend of mine was shot dead there last month."

He wiggled his finger at the road and mentioned that it divides a Protestant neighborhood from a Catholic one. Since the Mater was situated in a type of no-man's-land, it had recently become popular with Protestant thugs to do something they called *Ring a Taig* ("Taig" being a derogatory word for Catholic). It went like this: A group of men would call for a taxi, they'd watch it pull up to the hospital, and then they would spray the driver with machine gun fire. I imagined an invisible taxi in front of us and saw blood hit the windshield. The driver slumped forward, hitting the horn with his chest.

"A dead Catholic in thirty minutes or next one's free," Gregory said. "That's the joke anyway. Not a very good one. Especially if you're on the receiving end."

I asked him why he kept driving a taxi if it was so dangerous. He shrugged and said the money was good. Kids don't feed themselves, he added. And then we pulled away and moved towards his childhood home in Ardoyne.

The row-houses were made of brick and each one had a small cement

patio of its own. Chimney pots marched towards the horizon and kids played football in the street. Gregory spun the wheel and we rode around a corner. He stopped and pointed at a brick wall.

“Man was shot dead there last night.”

He went on to tell me the man was a drug dealer—coke, speed, heroin—and that the IRA shot him after several warnings. They told him to get out of Northern Ireland, but he didn’t, so they gunned him down as he walked home from a pub. Drugs weren’t tolerated by the paramilitary groups on either side because they ruined the minds and bodies of potential recruits.

There were several holes in the wall and a dark stain on the sidewalk. I stared at it and found myself mentally repeating the phrase: *a man died there last night*. Twenty-four hours ago he was walking and eating and laughing and breathing, but now he was gone. Drug dealer or not, he was some mother’s son. I watched the bullets enter his head and crack into the wall. I almost saw his ghost stand up and look around, puzzled.

“Did you know him?” I asked.

Gregory shook his head. “Knew *of* him. Didn’t know him.”

We turned down the street and slowed past a pub that was used by the IRA. The front door had a cage around it with a camera and an elaborate intercom system—no one was getting in unless the bouncers wanted you inside. Later in the week, Gregory took me there for a pint of Guinness. Techno music beat out from the speakers and the air was thick with cigarette smoke. People were friendly. From the outside though, the pub was just a green building with caged windows.

We stopped in front of several murals that had been painted on the side of houses. They looked professional, they were massive, and they involved topics like the Irish Famine, Gaelic sports, and a red-headed woman releasing a dove. The Irish flag flew over a nearby house and there was a marble plaque on the wall with the names of IRA men who had died. It was a long list, and there was room for more names to be added.

Gregory pointed down an alleyway and mentioned that a young man was punished by the IRA a few weeks ago for stealing cars. They

kneecapped him, which meant that they put him against a wall and fired a single bullet into each of his knees. Kneecappings were scheduled events. If you showed up on time, an ambulance would be called to take you to the hospital. If you didn't show up, you would get kneecapped anyway, but no ambulance would be sent for you. Both sides used kneecappings as a form of punishment and social control. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)—one of many Protestant paramilitary groups—had kneecapped a man for stealing money from a shop that *they* routinely stole money from. My cousin once told me that if I saw young men walking with canes, they had almost certainly been kneecapped. After he mentioned this, I began to notice young men in Belfast walking awkwardly, as if they had suffered from polio as a child.

Gregory moved us up the street towards an intersection and then stopped the car. A Union Jack flapped from every light pole and a mural of a masked man with a machine gun stared back at us. Beneath him it read, *Kill all Irish. Fuck the Pope.*

“That’s Protestant there,” Gregory said. He flicked on the turn signal and mentioned that both sides are violent, Catholic and Protestant alike. Too much blood had been smeared across the country. There had been too many funerals. But Gregory also felt that the city had become used to it all, like a patient that has learned to live with a dull, constant, pain.

“It seems hopeless,” I said.

He shrugged and broke into a toothy smile. “How about some coffee?”

Later that same day, I waited for my uncle near Saint Anne’s Cathedral and thought about being in an area of Belfast called the “Murder Triangle.” It was here, during the span of three decades, that over 600 people stopped existing. When I think about this place I often imagine bundles of flowers on the ground where each life had been snuffed out. I see lilies and roses and gladioli on the sidewalk. They are propped up against brick walls. They quiver in the wind.

The first time I met my uncle he was dressed in a dark green uniform. He was a police officer in a largely Protestant organization known as the

Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). He was leaning against a fridge and he smoked cigarette after cigarette. His truncheon was on the kitchen table. His gun was wired to his belt and I kept looking at it. I'd never seen a handgun before. The bullets were shiny, and they slept in little chambers.

Tony didn't talk much about being a police officer. During the 1970s he was a high speed driver, which meant that he shuttled politicians and VIPs around the six counties of Northern Ireland. He often did this at speeds in excess of 110 mph. And then he switched to counter-intelligence. I didn't know it back then, but Tony helped root out IRA spies that had infiltrated the police force. Every time he used his car, he got down on his hands and knees to check for a bomb. It was something he always did before he put the key in the ignition. He even did this out of habit when he came to visit us in Minnesota. Now that I'm older, I wonder exactly what Tony did in the 1970s and 80s. It couldn't have been easy on him because he was a recovering alcoholic and he smoked several packs of cigarettes every day.

Tony pulled up to Saint Anne's Cathedral with his window rolled down and he told me to hop in. He was listening to traditional Irish music and he tapped the steering wheel in time with the beat of the *bodhrán*. "Welcome back," he said. "How's your mother?"

We peeled off down the street—Tony didn't like to keep the car in one place for too long—and we rolled through two red lights. I looked at the speedometer and noticed that we were going much faster than we should be. Tony played with his moustache and said that we'd go to the police station first, then he'd take me on a tour of the city, then we'd have lunch at, "a wee shop around the corner."

As the city scrolled by my window, it occurred to me yet again that some of Gregory's friends might try to kill Tony because he was an enemy of the IRA, because he was a police officer. Of course the opposite was equally true. Some of Tony's colleagues in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) would be involved in firefights against the IRA. The population of greater Belfast hovers around 700,000 souls, so it's little wonder that potential enemies might know each other.

We slowed for a roundabout and Tony gunned us down a street. We took a series of corners and stopped before two massive metal doors. This was the Musgrave RUC Station. It looked like a modern castle with high corrugated walls. Barbed-wire and machine gun nests bristled overhead. Tony waved at a camera, and the heavy doors began to judder open.

“Back in April,” he said pulling the car in, “I was sitting here with both windows down. I was waiting for these doors to open when my sunglasses came off. It felt like a ghost snatched them off my face.”

I nodded for him to continue.

“It was a bullet.” He held his thumb and index finger up to the bridge of his nose. “This much closer and I wouldn’t be here today.”

We went into an office block and Tony introduced me to everyone that crossed our path as we zig-zagged through brightly lit corridors. We came to a large room where guns were stacked in cases and riot shields leaned against cement walls. Guns of all sizes were everywhere. Tony pointed at something called a 7.62mm self-loading-rifle. The bullets were the size of my pinky. I’d never seen so many weapons before and I touched them carefully, feeling an electric charge in my fingertips. The room reeked of power and I felt strong and protected. As I think back on this now, I think about the heads that were cracked open with truncheons, the ribs that were splintered with plastic bullets, and the eyes that burned from CS gas. All of this equipment was meant to inflict pain. But back then it just looked really, really, cool.

We moved to the garage because Tony wanted to show me a Land Rover. I’d seen these armored police cars patrol the city. They had fat reinforced tires and they were painted grey, which made them hard to see at night. A metal grate could be raised over the windshield and the headlights were covered with a thick grill. They always reminded me of a rhinoceros because they were thick skinned and ready to charge.

The garage smelled of oil, and a pneumatic wrench shrieked against lug nuts in the corner. Tony opened up the rear doors of a nearby Rover and told me to hop in. Sandwich wrappers littered the floor and it smelled like a locker room. I looked through the bulletproof windshield and saw

a young policeman scrubbing paint-bombs off the outside of another Rover. He worked hard to remove the white and yellow splotches that had been thrown at it during a riot.

“We’d best get underway,” Tony said clapping his hands together. Then he got down on his hands and knees to check the underside of the Rover. He stood up and put the key in the ignition.

The engine had a deep growl and when we left the police station the world was distorted through the thick windshield. I felt safe in this little moving fortress and there was an undeniable sense of power in knowing that we were protected inside a steel box. We charged up a road and I realized that we were moving towards Ardoyne. Tony was busy talking about what he wanted to see when he came to visit the States again—a trip to Mount Rushmore seemed high on the list—and I didn’t want to interrupt him. Instead, I sat back and said nothing about my tour with Gregory a few hours earlier.

We slowed in front of the Mater and Tony told me about a cab driver that had been killed by the UVF a month earlier. We drove into Ardoyne and he stopped at a corner where a man had been shot by the Provisional IRA. Then we passed an IRA bar—“lots of nasty types in there,” Tony said—and we stopped at some murals about the Famine, Gaelic sports, and a red-headed woman releasing a dove. As we left Ardoyne, a teenager gave me the Irish equivalent of the finger.

Through it all, Tony talked about how the Catholics were oppressed by the IRA, how they had to pay protection money, and he mentioned a low crime rate in Northern Ireland *if*—he smiled at this—*if* you didn’t include political violence. I listened carefully and noticed subtle but important differences in the narratives that were being given to me.

Tony and Gregory are good men, but they had slightly different stories for exactly the same event. That’s the thing about Northern Ireland: two groups of people are competing for the right to narrate the land from a specific agenda. In this city where names have become uniforms, historical events are seen one way by a particular group, and from an entirely different perspective by another group. The heroes for one side are the vil-

lains for the other. On that day in Ardoyne, I saw exactly the same thing but through two different windshields.

When I went back to my aunt's house for an evening meal, we laughed and told stories to each other. The threat of violence seemed far away until we watched the evening news on UTV. Another man had been shot in the head as he stepped out to walk his dog. He left behind a three week old daughter. His wife, who was making dinner at the time, heard the gunshot. She heard footsteps running away into the night.

I eventually moved to Belfast in my early twenties. I got a small flat that was damp and under-heated, so I did a lot of reading in warm coffee shops. When Belfast was my home, I got caught in bomb scares, saw buses that had been set on fire, smelled charred rubber in the air, saw the aftermath of several murders, stumbled into riots, got stopped at Army checkpoints, and had trouble sleeping at night because of the military helicopters. I talked with men who were in the IRA, the UVF, soldiers in the British Army, women who had lost their sons and husbands and fathers. I talked to everybody and tried to understand the city. During it all, I also enjoyed good conversation, laughter, breathtaking hospitality, and a lot of wine. My life was normal. But there it is again: a duality of narrative and perspective. Belfast was vicious, yes, but Belfast was also peaceful and friendly and joyful.

There's a line from Seamus Heaney that I particularly like. It's from a poem of his called "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," and it's about silence and political allegiance. He describes the six counties of Northern Ireland as the "wee six," which makes the whole sociopolitical mess seem so small. And it is small when compared to the bloodletting that has happened in Rwanda, Darfur, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

I like that phrase—the wee six. Yes Seamus, in spite of it all, I too sing of the wee six. This explains why I return every year and why, in April 1998, when I was living in England, I stayed up all night to watch the news. The BBC had live coverage of the Good Friday Agreement and, at roughly four in the morning, it was announced that peace had finally come

to Northern Ireland. I smiled, and went to bed.

Now that peace has found Belfast, it's easier to see the goodness that has always lived in the city. But even during the Troubles—even during all that mayhem—it was still a city of love and possibility. It was just harder to see this back then. For every murder I heard about, I also knew that blood was still pumping through a network of fragile veins and precious limbs.

Over the years, Belfast has become more than just the city of my ancestors. I know the streets there better than I know the streets in my hometown. I'm not a tourist but I'm not exactly a resident either. The United States may be my home, but I miss the city, I feel the width of the Atlantic, and I sometimes search for cheap tickets on the internet or read the *Belfast Telegraph* over lunch. I'd like to call Belfast home again because it is now, amid new buildings and new possibilities, that the city is trying to stitch its lingering differences together. I've seen Belfast at war, and now—now that Belfast is out of the news because it is no longer interesting—I want to see Belfast at peace.

Maybe that's why I was such a fierce opponent of the Iraq War before it even started. I could see the sad repetition of Northern Ireland being played out in the sand, but instead of two sectarian groups that distrusted each other (Catholics and Protestants), there would now be three. An army with a lot of technology would get bogged down in a shooting match. There would be checkpoints and helicopters and a lot of dead bodies. Things would get much worse before they could get better.

Whenever I see car bombs detonating in Baghdad, I think of Belfast. Whenever I see bodies that have been dumped under a date tree, I think of Ardoyne or Shankill. At one time, it was assumed that Belfast could never find peace, and now people are saying the same thing about Baghdad. But someday a young woman will write an article just like this one. It will be the tenth anniversary of peace and she will write about what that means to her. For me, I know the nightmare in Baghdad will eventually come to an end. It has to. That's what nightmares do. They end.

And so, on this tenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, I'd like to sit on a park bench and watch Belfast glide around me. I want to

PATRICK HICKS

watch ghosts rise out of the ground. They stir now, surprised at how much has changed in their absence. They squint because they can hardly recognize this city they once called home.

Susanne Kort

All the Way Through (Virginia Woolf's Diaries)

what I was dying to learn was
what came at the end, the utter cusp, the last bit

set down—if I would have known had I known her, that is: was there any
discernable clue for those, you know, who knew

the Situation: the final morsel chewed on (what she ate or not)
the night before: was toothless Louie there, mopping the floor,

if the door of the shed where she did it (the stones I mean, I presume
she hoarded them up, kept them hidden) was ajar, there was always

the chance she'd change her mind
if the phone should ring, a fit of colic come on,

overtaking; such things happen
all the time; so often alter the course

as with a river (I thought she maybe might) when you fuss with its source
(I thought she might have maybe noticed some divinity, on her way, the kind

she was always running into: celestial dew
on nearby cabbages, waterbirds startling up: arresting: attesting to the

sun inside her)—Yes but oh the War, the godforsaken Jews, the very small beer
of living anymore I suppose perhaps; then there is Leonard always

she observes, to round it off: Just look at him
out there: subduing rhododendrons

Peter Munro

Under the Fish House

My sack full of hymns, the rain—
sparkled skin of the temple I am,
barked loud as a sea lion,
cried wild as a fish house gulled to the rafters
and streaked with guano. My hovel,
burdened with Heaven, staggered its load
between ling cod spines and halibut vertebra
beached among pilings at low tide.
My shack of worship worked the bones
into high ritual and mighty introit
and gulls climbed the staves it hymned,
screeched my praise, sodden under the dark.
Receiving a rain of gurry, night-blue mussels thrived
on pilings, their byssal threads taut as harp strings,
and my cockled chapel flew to sea with birds of praise,
skirled in a flock where skin suffers prayer to flow in a tempo
slow as the hunger of a sea star
forcing a mussel to open to its gullet.
Wild as a sea lion and loud as a gull-humbled fish house,
my bone-bag filled itself with sanctum sanctorum, repented
glory in the cathedral hidden under the dock,
safe to sing in the dark always rain.

Excerpted from "Hard Weather Prayers."

PETER MUNRO

Drought

Make me
a cathedral
from a shack stove in like a hull.
The wanter I am
the clearer your gulls fail my name
and slack water burns the gills in barnacles
and rain roasts clam siphons exposed to air.
The sea chews the snail's cast-off turban.
Kelp-tatters, strewn along the high-water berm,
gleam as the sky glides down. Tubes of polychaetes
gape, torn from pilings, drowning
in a drizzle sifted grey from clouds
until mist sweats one clear bead at a time.

What fails, the horizon, kelp blade and tube
worm, keel and feather and everything that carries me,
streets paved in gravel the color of shacks,
a grey more comforting than the desire to die, fails.
Rain cannot ease drought at out-tide.
I have worshiped on the flood and on the ebb.
Wind has flailed rain, sharp as prayer,
poisonous and altering as prayer,
and my shack up-tilts, slipping under,
poorly weathering the Scripture scrawled
by nimbus, the rain curling in,
my shack awash in gulls calls.

Excerpted from "Hard Weather Prayers."

PETER MUNRO

Breathing Into It

Plankton darken the sea's chill, afloat
in a wealth of dissolved oxygen.

Christ have mercy on all creatures
that drown in air. Christ have mercy,
all creatures drown in air.

I battled reason and Creation failed.
Aground among legacies of burned gills,
stove in among broken language, broken weather,
beached among the glass hulls of diatoms
cracked like green-stained grails,
I watched the sea pull back.

Kittiwake, glaucous-wing, and slatyback
mewl over the gale that sweeps my cheek.
The gulls bear the weight of nimbus on their shoulders,
navigating in the cadence of feather,
their wind-guile the measure of quill and fiber
and all the phrases I have failed
to weather.

Where gulls cry drought
and pry mussels up with inflections
cracked like diatoms' glass hulls, the cold
hardens, beckons shacks beached among driftwood,
their keels broken.

PETER MUNRO

Prayer breathed into my shack,
the color of wind, loud as a gull
and, hiding my shack along drift logs, among skirts
of torn root reaching like tentacles of kraken,
I heard my prayer dwindle
while rain fed me its clear gruel
and I learned to breathe the air.

Excerpted from "Hard Weather Prayers."

PETER MUNRO

Praise As a Mode of Hunger

Through snowfall I walked with snails
down cloisters paved in silt, paved in shell chipped
by the claws that crabs lever to their hunger.
Blurred among churches and bars,
chapels and taverns, I swam down the straits
of my town and glided Front Street,
silent as gills fanning, silent
as tentacled caverns of anemones.

Mussels closed steadily through snowfall.
I grazed the clustered, blue-black mollusks,
their lustrous valves clasping the shape of chapels.
Over the house held in place by gulls and rain
I have no praise. I had no praise.

All the dying mussels clamped their glory.
For love I dived through vertebra strung along a nerve.
I squabbled with gulls over slaughter—
shack gurry and all the dying barnacles
keeled along the swerve of my spine.
Through snowfall I heard myself
tell boisterous lessons in prayer.
To me.

Excerpted from "Hard Weather Prayers."

Andy Plattner

Cabana

Walter and Adriana sat at the Beau Rivage Hotel's glassed-in patio bar and watched the vivid afternoon storm blow in from the ocean. They drank steadily and Walter liked the look and sound of the rain as it arrived. It gave him the distinct feeling that while the world was meant for him, he really did not have a say in anything and in this way he was doing all that he could. Adriana, who had started off the day in a straw hat, bikini top and wraparound skirt, seemed to be affected by the weather. She had traveled down here with him to escape the lousy West Virginia winter, but for the moment there was nothing else to do but sit and drink. Walter had stopped trying to make conversation with her a half hour ago. The bartender, Murph, also seemed to be just barely alive.

Walter considered the splashing dimples in the hotel pool brought on by the rain and he wondered if it would be nice to live underwater and what he would miss most if he did. Then, from the corner of his eye, he spotted Kirby Hawkins, the six-and-a-half-foot-tall lifeguard in his uniform of pith helmet, white polo shirt, white shorts and sneakers, darting into the rain from the row of cabanas near the shallow end of the swimming pool. Kirby trotted gingerly alongside the pool for the row of cabanas beyond the deep end. The cabanas there did have awnings, so he was able to stay dry as he unlocked one door and began to set out furniture. Two chairs, a small table, a chaise lounge. These pieces had to be set tightly together so that they each could stay dry under the awning. It did not seem to be the right type of day for an open cabana and Walter couldn't help but wonder about it.

After a minute, Kirby jogged up to the bar where Adriana and Walter were sitting. He pulled off his pith helmet, held it away so the water would run off. He was dry otherwise, which seemed impossible and without a word, Murph put together a cranberry juice over ice for him. Kirby

was in his sixties, had thick white hair combed neatly to one side. His face was deeply tanned and heavily lined and his eyes were dewy. There were people who vacationed regularly here and Kirby kept up with the general details of their lives. It seemed to be part of the job. Yesterday, upon greeting Walter, Kirby had said, "So, how're things in Charleston?"

Now, Kirby was smiling faintly at Walter, like they both understood something. Walter swallowed and said, "Who'd want a cabana for a day like this one?"

Kirby said, "Why, Carla."

Carla was Walter's ex-wife and they had vacationed in Miami every year that they were married. Walter placed his hand on the side of his face, rested his elbow on a cocktail napkin. "Carla?" he said. "My Carla?"

Kirby's eyes went to Adriana, whom he had met for the first time yesterday. Adriana was in her mid-20s and she worked with Walter in an office back in Charleston. Very pretty, oval face. Almond shaped, blue-green eyes; thick, shoulder-length, black hair. Walter was in his early 40s and had been divorced from Carla for years. Adriana was the only person he was seeing these days. She was companionship for him, plus sex. For her, he was the guy with the apartment right on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach. Winters in West Virginia were cold, empty and difficult. Walter and Adriana might have meant more to each other, but they meant these things at least.

"Carla called," Kirby said. "She said she was going to be staying across the street, at the condo." He motioned vaguely in that direction. "Asked that a cabana be ready for her this afternoon. I told her it was going to rain, but she insisted."

"Oh, yeah," Walter said, after a second. "Well, that's Carla. We take turns." He shrugged. "Looks like somebody got their dates mixed up. I'll go see about it." He reached into the pocket of his shorts to pay the tab. Adriana and Walter had been sitting at the bar for two hours at least, and after they nodded their good-byes to Kirby and Murph, he walked quickly through the hotel lobby. When the glass doors at the hotel entrance slid open, Walter had to wait for Adriana. When she arrived, he grabbed her

hand and pulled her into the rain.

“Uh!” Adriana said as they trotted down the curving asphalt driveway toward Collins Avenue. By the time they reached the sidewalk the both of them were soaked. They had to wait for traffic to clear, and when a city bus sent an ocean wave of water at them, Walter jumped back. Adriana stayed put and laughed as the huge fan of water swept over her. Then she turned to him, with her arms held out to her sides, the water dripping like shredded wings. This alarmed him. He lunged forward, took her hand and they trotted onto the glassy road. Adriana pulled away as they crossed the yellow line and she stayed more than an arm’s length away. They made it to the apartment, and Adriana went directly for the back bedroom, where she’d done some unpacking the day before. Walter used the bathroom adjacent to the main bedroom, which they had shared last night.

This apartment was not Walter’s to use and Adriana already suspected as much. Walter had told Adriana that he time-shared it with his ex, but after they arrived yesterday morning and Adriana had done a quick tour of the place, the first thing she said was, “This doesn’t seem like you at all.”

To which Walter had said, “She likes pastels. It’s not worth fighting over.”

“She’s really pretty,” Adriana said. “Is this her, in all these pictures?” She motioned to a wall in the main bedroom. “You ought to put up something of yourself. I mean, if the place is half yours.” Walter had just shrugged at this. Adriana watched him a moment longer. They went to bed together that night, made love for the first time together in the dark, which she said she preferred. He had offered no objection. In the morning, when he awakened, he saw there was a space between them, room for another person at least.

Carla was everywhere in this apartment because it was her apartment. Carla’s family was wealthy and she had all the stuff. The divorce judge said the apartment would remain all hers, but Walter had kept his key. Carla wrote him about it a few months later, asked that he return the key, but he

didn't and didn't hear anything else about it. The first time he ventured down to Miami alone, he supposed she might have just changed the locks. But she hadn't. When his key was able to open the front door, it almost seemed to mean that something was still alive in their marriage.

Walter made use of the apartment at least once every year since their divorce. Carla had moved to Richmond, to run one of the family companies there. She could set her own hours, her own vacation times. Walter had to be careful. He always visited Miami during the off-season, during the late spring and summer. This winter, however, Walter had found out that Carla was taking a trip to Paris. She had told him this during their annual holiday phone conversation where they wished one another a happy new year and good luck.

Paris in winter? He tried to picture Carla walking along the Champs-Élysées. He pictured her in an ankle-length dark topcoat, a cherry red beret. He could hear her blocks clocking softly over the sidewalk. Walter had a sinking feeling then. He was to never get over Carla. Even if he was positive that she had long gotten over him.

Now, he showered fast, dried off, dressed in different clothes, and combed his hair. He went to the spare bedroom, tapped on the door and there was Adriana, in dry underwear, loose wet hair, laying out on top of the bed covers, reading a magazine. She began snapping pages. Finally, Adriana said, "What, you are afraid of your ex-wife? You're a grown man, for heaven's sake."

He said, "Not at all."

"You tried to hustle me through in the rain," she said, sounding even younger than she was. "I saw your face." He wondered if he should tell her the truth, if somehow being able to tell the truth would make him seem like a man with greater possibilities. She said, "You are divorced, right? I mean, goddamnit, if I'm the other woman . . ."

"I'm divorced," he said. "Jesus. We share this place, okay? She has the dates mixed up. It's okay." He thought about things for a time, about how he could best put them. "Adriana," he said and he didn't say anything else, not until she looked at him. "Have you ever been married?" She did not

answer. "There's a lot of history between two married people."

"Don't talk to me like I am a child," she said. "I'm already sick of this. This boy toy thing . . . honestly, I'm already tired of the way you look at me."

"How do I look at you?"

She stared at him and while staring at him, she waved her hand in front of her chest and then her panties.

Walter bowed his head at this. "Maybe you should put on more clothes."

"And then what?" her voice said. "Who is going to invite me to Miami then?"

He said, "Look, I can put us up at a hotel down the beach, two rooms, you can have your own."

"Why do we have to leave?" she said. "We got here first."

She does know, he thought. She knows whose place this is.

Walter wondered what it would be like with Adriana when they got back to Charleston. Everyone in the office knew they were vacationing together. Everyone knew that Adriana was an unhappy woman. Now, to them, Walter would be a man who had taken advantage of that. Before he left he could have cared less what his officemates thought. But now it felt like what they thought was all the world was going to know about him.

"What would you say to having your own room at the Casablanca Inn?" he said.

"Where would that be?" she said. "Up the beach, where the old people are?"

He bowed his head again, felt himself nod once, then walked over to the bed. Rain swept against the windows, though he could not see what was outside with the blinds closed. Walter sat on the edge of the bed. "I am very sorry I brought you here," he said. "I took advantage of you, Adriana." His listened to the rainstorm for a moment and then he said, "Let me salvage this, please. Let me save this much."

"Relax," she said. "Jesus Christ."

His eyes turned on her. "What's wrong with you?" he said. "Why won't you let me do the right thing?" His hands rose slightly, and his

palms were up, facing the ceiling.

“If you’d invited me to Virginia or Kentucky or someplace like that, I wouldn’t have gone with you,” she said. “You don’t need to apologize . . . okay? Just fuck it. I already know you’re not in love with me. When I saw your face when that guy said your wife’s . . . look, paradise week is over. Nobody owes me an explanation. What I’m doing now is just thinking I have to start making better trades. It’s nothing personal, but you’re a history guy. I didn’t realize it until now. But I should have known sooner.” Her voice trailed off. “I just wanted to get down here, see what it’s like. The big time, you know?”

“What are you learning?” he said, his voice empty.

“I have a sense today that I should be expecting more,” she said.

“That’s good,” he said, his voice quiet. Walter was about to reach over and wiggle her foot, but the way she was looking at him suggested that he should not. He thought it would be nice if it looked like they were getting along when Carla arrived. But when Walter studied Adriana’s face for a moment longer, he supposed that it didn’t matter. She was young and that was all Carla was going to see. “You are smart, Adriana,” he said. “I’m grateful for that now. I’ll feel less worse about this.”

Adriana folded the magazine and dropped it over the side of the bed. She lay on her stomach and he studied the back of her. He felt like placing his hands flat on her shoulder blades and holding them there in a gentle way. “I’m not here to make you feel bad,” she said. This did not interrupt his thoughts. “You know what I did this morning? Hey,” she said.

“What?” he said.

“I took a walk down to Neiman Marcus and I asked them if they were hiring, if there was an application people fill out. Isn’t that crazy? I’ve been here for just two days. But I so felt alive in that store last evening . . . Why do people stay in West Virginia?” she said.

“I really don’t know the answer to that,” he said, responding right away.

“I just wish I was eighteen again,” she said. “You know?” Walter didn’t answer this. This wasn’t a conversation between two people. “Tell me some-

thing wonderful about myself . . . please?"

Walter had to think, but he didn't want to think for too long. "You belong at a place like Neiman Marcus," he said. "With colorful, wonderful things." She turned her head quickly to get a look at him, his expression. His eyebrows went up. "You need to be around people who are used to being around good things," he said.

"That's lovely," she said, in a quiet way, a moment later.

He didn't say anything, just gave a nod, supposed it was a good time to step out.

"What do you want to do right now?" she said.

"I'd like to lie down for a few minutes," he said. Then, he turned his eyes to her. "I think I'd like to lie down and go to sleep with you. Sleep," he said. "Drying off has made me tired."

"I'll lay with you until you fall asleep," she said.

In a minute, he was curled up alongside Adriana. He wrapped his arms loosely around her and she did not object. He wondered about Carla, if the weather had delayed her travel. He wondered if he really wanted to see her. Adriana felt so young to him now. He could feel her heart beating under his forearm.

Adriana and Walter were in that bed sleeping, when he heard someone else in the apartment. The voice out there was loud. "Hello, who is it? Who's there? Who is here with me?" Adriana was already sitting up, her eyes large and Walter pushed himself up at the exact moment when Carla opened the door. Carla's mouth was open and after a moment, she swayed to one side, used the sill of the door to balance herself. "You have got to be kidding me," she said, her voice heavy. She drew a long breath, closed her eyes. Then, she closed the door again behind her.

Following this, Adriana and Walter stayed in bed together. Now, his heart was racing. Neither of them said anything. He laid on his back and she watched his profile for a time. "That really wasn't so bad," he said.

"You wanted her to see us like this, didn't you?" she whispered.

"No," he said. "I don't know. Maybe."

“You did,” she said, in a quiet way. “*You* are weird.”

“I’m going out there in a minute,” he said. But he stayed with Adriana longer than that. “Maybe there is something to you and me,” he said.

She watched him. “Don’t get confused, Walter,” her voice said.

When he stood in the doorway, he turned to Adriana and she fluttered her fingers in a wave good-bye. “See ya,” she said.

Carla was not out in the living room, so Walter went to the main bedroom, tapped on the door and when he received no answer, he opened it a crack. She was laid out on the middle of the king-sized bed, shoeless, in black Capri pants and a sleeveless black blouse. Two huge, soft-looking pillows were placed under her head. She was a tall woman, slender, with small round shoulders, triangular face, light-brown beauty parlor hair and blue eyes. Very fair skin. She laid there with her hands folded over her stomach, kept her eyes closed. He couldn’t tell what, if anything, she was doing on purpose. She did like black, anyway. She usually looked good in it. He closed the door behind him.

“Carla?” he said.

“Yes?” she said.

He waited, then said, “How are you?”

“I’m fine, sweetheart, how are you?” Her eyes remained shut.

“Why are you here?”

“Why, I was about to ask you the same thing.” She slithered her shoulders a bit, shifted her weight in this way. “Who is that? That is my bedroom, you know. My father used to read me bedtime stories in there.”

“Adriana Corbett.”

“Adriana Corbett. Well, how about that?”

“We were just trying to get out of the cold weather.”

“Have you been here for a while?”

“No,” he said. He stepped in the direction of the bed, then sat on a corner of it. One of her eyes opened at this and then closed again. “We were going nuts, I guess,” he said. “I found the key to this place in my desk drawer and I thought what the heck.”

“Liar,” she said. “Try again, please.”

“I’ve had the key for years,” he said. “All right, okay, you’ve got me.” He laughed at that, wanted her to smile at least. Which she did not. “This is the first time I’ve brought someone with me.”

Carla wiggled slightly. “Walter, you can’t bring other women to this apartment. I know you have been here since the divorce.”

“How?”

“How he asks,” she said, after a silence. “How wouldn’t I? Any time I plan on visiting there, I call the condo manager. You know this, Walter. I ask Homero to walk through the apartment, check. . . when I don’t call and he sees a light on in this place, he watches. He calls me. The first time it happened, he said, ‘I think it’s Mister Walt.’ I told him to just leave you alone. Maybe you weren’t there to trash the place.” Carla’s eyes opened at this and she turned them right on him. “But you are returning that key now, pally. Another woman . . . and so. . . youthful. Why, you are practically a card-carrying monkey.”

He said, “You knew I was here, huh?”

“Not this time, I didn’t. I was in Paris. I just had a number for emergencies. That was the point of going to Paris.”

“In the winter?”

“I wanted to see the snow on the ground there. I wanted to see young French girls walking up the snowy sidewalks to the Gare St. Lazare, see their pink cheeks, watch them laugh.”

“Really?”

“You know exactly what I mean, Walter. I did see something like that and when I did I understood that was what I’d gone there to see.”

“Girls don’t laugh in Richmond?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Are you questioning me? Are you suggesting that I shouldn’t go to Paris whenever I damn well please?”

“No.”

Her eyes watched the ceiling for a moment, then turned them on him. “You don’t know anything about paradise, sweetheart,” she said.

“You seeing anyone in Richmond?” he said.

“Yes, I am. He might fly down here to stay with me for a few days.

He didn't want any part of the snow in Paris project. He also is confused about beautiful weather. No man can keep up with me. What's her name again . . . in the other room?"

"Adriana."

"I think I might get up and warn her about all this."

"My guess is that she already knows," Walter said. Her eyes went to him. "Or she suspects at least." Carla blinked once, then smiled and blinked again. She nodded. "We have a mess here, Walter. Your mess, yours to clean." She smiled more brightly, turned her head towards the ceiling and closed her eyes. It stayed quiet for a while.

"Well, I guess we'll just pack up and go over to the Beau Rivage. Or probably something further up the beach."

"I'm thinking about the penthouse of the Eden Roc," she said. "Down there on 19th Street. I went to a party there once while I was still in college. I think I might just go there for a few days. You can pay for it, of course."

"I'm afraid I don't have that kind of money," he said.

"Hmm," she said.

He began to speak and she held up her hand. Her eyes were still closed. Carla said, "I think I'll just stay at the Beau Rivage for a day or two. The top floors there are nice. I don't need all these memories today . . . It'll be nice, I'll get a better rate on the cabana. I do like the cabana life so. There's so little to tend to . . . Besides, I don't want anyone to say I'm meddling in the affairs of my ex, preventing him from finding true happiness . . . Sometimes I like the Beau Rivage. I slightly enjoy their silly piano bar at night. I do have a heart, you know . . . I'll send you the bill, all right?" Walter didn't say anything, so she wound up looking at him again. "What's wrong with you? You can stay here. What is it?" She continued watching him.

"The key," he said.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to hang onto that."

Her mouth opened and then it closed again as she watched him. "Honestly . . ."

“If it’s okay.”

“Walter. Look at me.”

“I am looking at you.”

“You can keep the key,” she said, her voice quiet. “But I’m telling Homero to change the locks next week . . . Walter,” she said.

After a second, he said, “I know.”

“I can turn you into ashes over this.” For the first time, she did reach in his direction. It was simply a gesture. He was sitting too far away and did not move. “Buck up, kid,” she said.

“I will,” he said. “But, it’s hard.”

“You’re better than this,” she said. “We both know that.”

“I’m panicking more now. I’m getting older.” She didn’t respond and when he looked her way again, Carla’s expression seemed to have lost its sharpness. “Paris, huh?” he said. “I bet you looked beautiful in the snow.”

“I’m sure I did,” she said, her voice dry.

He didn’t say anything else. He sat quietly with his hands folded, hanging there beyond his knees.

She puffed her cheeks, exhaled a long, slow breath. “Okay,” she said. She drew in another breath, after facing the ceiling again. “We’ll go over there after it stops raining. You can tend to my suitcases if you’d like.”

“Of course.”

“All right,” she said.

He said, “I’ll miss you, Carla.”

“It’s going to be raining for a while,” she said.

“I’ll be all right,” he said.

Walter thought that he might have heard soft footsteps moving away from outside the door after he stood to leave. He was in no hurry to get to the door and, after he’d opened it, there was no one there. The door to the other bedroom was closing.

Carla did not actually appear from the bedroom for another two hours. When she did, she had a small rolling suitcase behind her, and a purse over her forearm. Adriana and Walter sat in chairs near the living room win-

dows that looked out onto the street. They had the curtains pulled back. For whatever reason, it seemed as though Adriana wanted to make a good impression on Carla; Adriana had changed into a khaki skirt and a sleeveless royal blue blouse, even put on her choker of faux pearls.

Across Collins Avenue, the powder blue Beau Rivage neon on the roof of the hotel was illuminated. For a time, the sky beyond it had kept changing colors. But it was a very dark sky currently and everything seemed to be shimmering after the rain had stopped. Adriana and Walter had not talked much, but when they had, they'd kept their voices low. Now, she and Walter both stood and once Carla had made it to the middle of the big room, she stopped and nodded to them. "Hello, Adriana," she said.

"Hello . . ."

"Carla, darling. Just call me Carla."

"Thank you."

"Well," Carla said. She considered them a moment longer. "Let's go." Her larger suitcases, surely carried in by her cab driver, were still right by the door. Each case had rollers, so Walter could handle two of them by himself. Adriana grabbed the handle of the remaining one. When the three of them stepped outside, the wind was blowing and a car alarm had gone off. They moved in a small parade up the sidewalk with Carla and her small case leading the way. Adriana was ahead of Walter, seemingly trying to keep up with Carla. The droplets of water that jumped from the suitcase rollers seemed like tiny diamonds. Walter had to keep the two cases he was pulling right together, side by side, so their rollers could stay on the sidewalk. As a result, he was the slowest of them all. He tried to keep the cases together. The women continued to get further away.

Arthur Rimbaud

Oh Castles, Oh Holidays!

Oh castles, oh holidays!
On every soul some sorrow preys!

Oh castles, oh holidays!

I know the magic force of fate,
it's something nobody can fight.

I hail that power every time
the Gallic rooster hails the night.

The Spell of fate rules over me,
there's nothing left for me to do,

my soul and body in its grips
and my will gone, I am through.

While it holds me as its prey
I wordlessly just melt away

like castles on a holiday!

And should my luck ever run out,
disgrace will crown my punishment.

ARTHUR RIMBAUD

Forgetting this at any time
would surely mean my early end.

Oh castles, oh holidays!
On every soul some sorrow preys!

*Translated from the French
by Paul Sohar*

Song About the Tallest Tower

In harness and yoke
the lazy, wasted youth!
I threw away my life so
as not to seem uncouth!

May other times and other games
engulf my heart with flames!

I may fib to myself that
it's best to be seen less.
Deprived of the promise
of towering happiness,

it's best to employ your feet
in a magnificent retreat.

I kept on waiting and bearing
my fate's every painful stroke
until my pains and worries
have all gone up in smoke.

A chronic thirst eats my cells,
in my veins darkness dwells.

That's what an empty lot
is like without a house,
abandoned and forgot
except by weeds and cows,

ARTHUR RIMBAUD

with dung beetles also there
to buzz the rancid air.

The poor abandoned soul,
a thousand times a widower,
one woman is left to him,
he can only turn to Her:

can he ever embrace
The Heavenly Mother's face?

In harness and yoke
the lazy, wasted youth!
I threw away my life so
as not to seem uncouth!

May other times and other games
engulf my heart with flames!

*Translated from the French
by Paul Sohar*

Eternity

Discovered it again!
What? Eternity.
Sunrays melting into
the breakers of the sea.

Sentinel, you pure soul,
let us now recite
the shrift of a flaming day
and a sightless night.

Whatever is human
and ties you to the ground
has melted down and left you
free to float unbound . . .

Sunken embers' glow
on the skyline cast
with Command and Will,
and none to say: at last.

No more *orietur**,
hope scattered in crumbs.
Wisely-suffering,
true atonement comes.

*Translator's Note: *Orietur* is Latin for "Let us pray" from Catholic liturgy.

ARTHUR RIMBAUD

Discovered it again!
What? Eternity!
Sunrays melting into
the breakers of the sea.

*Translated from the French
by Paul Sohar*

Adam Strauss

Eggs

There aren't birds here anymore;
If flight happens it'll be

Ripping—aloft on a gale.
Turtles might lay eggs here if watts

Didn't flare—riotous—onshore.
I reabsorb my confession

As a mother turned away from beaching.
The bleached boney coral's like pretty

Platinum brooches in this silvery
Atmosphere—quick—quick—

I feel slow—attention quickening
To a quicksilver I can't translate.

ADAM STRAUSS

The Very Fabric of Life

They bend. They amend. Dust's displaced. Atoms
Aggregate. He was ever disobedient in hopes of turns merman.
The history not given in detention. Dust to Dante. Dimmity's
Conviction. Swallow pips in last week's ashes. Atoms
Flow not flies. Bluebottles. Arc described bleeding.
Détente seems barely matters. Generally in this
Country Dante's all story; how do we hear with his
Sound so diminished? I like beastly obeisance. Eye
Swallows. I have no hope for a singing career. Twenty
Miles from here wind bends tindery grasses.
No halo nor rainbow but sparks repairing cars.

Gladys Swan

Riding the Chicken Bus to San Juan Chamelco

There is no room—the bus will hold
no more; yet more come,
baskets and bundles on their heads:
orchids and bananas, carrots and beans,
whatever they have brought to or from
the market. The men in their sombreros
carry lengths of rope, tools and wire.

Know them by their colors, conferred
by their conquerors—their village,
their identity—to keep track of them:
now part of the design of things
by which they have kept their ways—
patterns of rain and sun, the divinity
of maize on the outward garments
of their lives. Men and women:
forms for a frieze, a procession
with their crop of glowing children,
yielded up as though in endless
ripening from the tropical mud.

Only the chicken, head poking out
from beneath the covering sack,
makes its plaint about
the lurching of the bus, the crowded,
uncertain ride, feet bound,
whatever it is called to look at
with its red-rimmed eye.

Aryeh Tepper

Facts on the Ground

Here is a fact on the ground. Poised like a pen, a missile in the barrel of a cannon, it takes aim at the sun and the moon, and the sphere of the fixed stars, and the active intellect contemplating the heavens, and the earth, and, in turn, the blessed pointlessness of contemplating: a house. A red-roofed (settler's) house.

Here are some facts on the ground, brown and chalky and rolling with brush, turning with a Summer wadi: a man, a woman, a child and their olive tree huddled in the shadow of a Salvador Dali-style clock. The clock marks time in generations, the hours marked by *fors*, as in, this is the time for Salah al-Din, although it's been the time for Salah al-Din for as long as anyone can remember in these parts.

Maimonides, they say, served as Salah al-Din's personal physician, but you won't find that fact written in the Laws of Kings and Their Wars.

And there, next to where the Israeli soldier stands in his olive-green uniform, to his right, where the Palestinians are lined up in a row,

Bar-Cochva's soldiers fell in the Jewish
rebellion against the Roman occupation, 2000
years ago.

This too the active intellect, desiring only to
understand, revenge a distraction,
contemplates: how the earth turns upon its
axis, and facts take to the air, and linger there

Jen Town

Someone Else's Mail

I keep getting Della Swartz's mail. Catalogues mostly, for plus-sized women. I look through them, wondering why on earth big women wear such garish colors. Does being big make you colorblind, too?

Della Swartz was enrolled in the fruit-of-the-month club at some point. I get glossy pamphlets for that, too. I like the exotic pears the best. I want a whole basket of them, delivered to my doorway straight from South America, a basket with a blue ribbon on it, like I won them in a carnival. And this makes me think of the fish I did win at the carnival when I was six, the one my sister flushed down the toilet alive because I had done something evil to her. I like to think that all my future problems stem from that one moment, but I know life is hardly that simple.

When I get the mail, everyday at 5 p.m., my neighbor Samuel is always there, sorting through his. We give each other a nod. I can see him glancing over my mail as I pull it out of my mailbox. Today, when I flip through the catalogue for plus-size women, he says, "Della, oh I remember Della," in a sort of longing way, the way one might say they missed their mother's scrambled eggs or French toast or something.

"You know, you should write 'return to sender' on that and put it back in your box. She might be waiting for it."

"Thanks, Sam," I say, tucking my mail up into my armpit. "I'll think about it."

When I get back to my apartment, I flip on the overhead light and sort through the mail again, putting bills in the bill box, discarding junk mail, setting my mother's neatly handwritten notes on the desk to read later. I look at the catalogues last. The plus-size women don't really look all that plus-size to me. In fact, they look pretty average, maybe a little prettier than average. The clothes are expensive. Most of us living in this apartment building couldn't afford clothes like this and I wonder how Della

could, retired as she must have been. I imagine her as retired. I figure she wears glasses, and gets her hair permed once a month, on the same day, by the same woman, who tells her all she'd ever want to know and then some about her personal life. Della is very polite, because that's how she was brought up, back in the 1940s, and always tips her \$3, pressing the money into her hand with a smile. Somehow I get the feeling Della makes really good sugar cookies. My kitchen still smells like baking, I think. The floor still has a patina of flour. The kitchen counter is a shade darker where the mixer sat for the fifteen or twenty years she lived here. I don't spend a lot of time, really, thinking about this anymore. It's just the story that is always there whenever I get Della Swartz's mail. Some days I get a new piece, a magazine for gardening, maybe, though the apartment building doesn't have a yard, and the story is extended. Della's secret wish, I think: to have a garden.

Geraldine comes up to me and rubs against my leg. She's been chasing ants around the kitchen, those large black ones. She never actually catches them, isn't really trying to, just bats them around a little. We both like to watch them scurry across the kitchen floor. Sometimes I use my feet to deflect them back toward her. After we tire of that game, she crawls up onto the window sill, and oversees the parking lot.

At 6 p.m., the landlady walks to the front of the building and locks the door. She's wearing what my mother would describe as a "housedress." It's shapeless, flowered, with ruffles for sleeves. Her arms look like leavened bread dough. She walks as if in a trance. She is the same age as I imagine Della would be. But she is nothing like I imagine Della. Della would never go out in a housedress like this. The catalogues she gets don't even sell them, though the colors and pattern are something like what I've seen advertised.

After a quick dinner, I walk a few blocks to the nearest bar, the Hey Hey Bar in German Village. I order whatever's on tap. There's a few good ol' boys in here today, still in their mechanic uniforms, their names embroidered in black to their pockets. They're playing pool in the backroom. There's a boy with them who looks to be about 18 or 19, probably

one of the men's son. All the men call him "Junior" affectionately. I down half my beer, make my way over to the back of the bar, where I stand, beer in hand. I try to look like I belong there, somehow. There are newspapers on a table near where they are playing, and I sit down and shuffle through them. The beer sweats onto the pages.

The men ignore me, except to ask me to move when their pool sticks are in danger of whacking me in the head. They rack the pool balls again, and "Junior" breaks them, so that two of the striped balls roll straight into corner pockets. The men clap and yell out "Attaboy."

Then a group of young women walk in, college students at the nearby state university, and I turn my head. They avoid my gaze, though they know I am looking at them. They like it that I look, like it that I don't have a chance in hell. One time I told a girl I liked her skirt, not that I have much of an eye for fashion, and she said thanks in a monotone voice, like she was one of those automated answering machines you always get when you call the doctor's office after hours.

One of the young women comes up behind Junior, wraps her arms around his waist, and kisses his ear, rubbing his stomach with a manicured hand. She's sweet-talking him into something, and the other guys smirk at him, tell him he's "whipped." I can smell her perfume from where I sit, the sports section open in front of me. After a few minutes, they leave together, the other men whistling and laughing.

I walk back home then, thinking of Della and her catalogues, of her waiting for mail that never arrives. When I get back to the apartment, I bundle up everything with the name "Della" on it. I take a brown paper bag, slide all 30 catalogues or so in there, and tape the bag shut. I write in black marker "Della Swartz" and then I don't know what to do. If the postman doesn't know where she lives, I sure as hell don't. I sit, staring at the bag. Geraldine watches the couple who live above me unload their groceries. It is so still in the apartment building, everyone out for the evening or sleeping, tired from the work week.

I think that maybe Sam knows her address. And since it was Sam's idea in the first place . . . I walk across the hall, knock on the door. There's

the sound of a TV playing low, so low the human voices sound like bubbles. I ring the door bell and an obnoxious buzzing sound echoes through the building—like one of those fly zappers you see advertised in lawn care magazines. When Sam comes to the door in his boxers, I hold up the brown package as proof of my intentions.

“I just need her address. You wouldn’t happen to have it, would you?” He shakes his head, but walks over to a cluttered desk, pulls open a drawer. He hands me a slip of paper. *Della*, it says, and then a phone number underneath.

“That’s all I got,” he says. “You can’t keep it.”

I copy the phone number onto an advertisement for Moon Chinese Buffet that I find littering the hallway, and hand him back the slip of paper. I have this feeling in my stomach like I’ve eaten too much on a hot day. “Thanks,” I tell him.

The door shuts, and I walk back into my apartment. I set the number on the table, grab a beer from the fridge, sit down on the couch. I pull out the only magazine I subscribe to, *The Sportsman’s Guide to Hunting*. I like to look at the pictures of guns, though I haven’t held one in years. When I was a kid I used to go shooting with my stepfather in the backyard of the cabin he owned. We’d shoot at Pepsi cans until dark. Then he’d let me have a beer, but only one. Sometimes I cut the pictures of the shotguns out and stick them up on the fridge the way mothers do their children’s stick drawings. The magazine has articles on what to wear, what to bring to eat, the right shelter to have. I flip through the magazine, trying to calm my nerves. Then I reach for the phone.

Della’s number is a simple sequence of eights and fives and threes, a local number. I call three times: the first and second time I hear the timber of a man’s gruff voice, rasping “Yello? Yello?” before hanging up. Finally, a woman’s voice answers the phone. She sounds like she’s just woken up. She sounds younger than I imagined, 40ish. I listen to her say “Hello? Hello?” *I have your catalogues*, I think. I open my mouth. But then she curses. “Asshole,” she calls me, and hangs up the phone.

I tear open the package and lay the catalogues out on the floor. I can

almost cover the entire carpet with them. They represent a whole year's worth of fashion catalogues. I select one, a spring issue, with a large blonde woman on the front, and start flipping through. There's a woman with gleaming gray hair, a sweet smile, on page 47. I grab my scissors, and it takes me a few minutes of careful cutting to free her full-bodied from the page. Then I flip through and select a few dresses I think Della would have liked: light-hearted florals, a pretty mint green suit dress made of linen. I spend the rest of the night dressing the doll.

Cintio Vitier

The Instant

The instant passes now,
burns through my hands,
the spent, the forgotten
laughing gift.

Indescribable cornucopia
of my millionaire being:
animals, constellations,
joy, sin.

One instant, another,
life is their rosary,
yet I know that moment comes
I'll have no power to live.

To the hushed wave
I'll extend my hand,
poor, infinitely poor,
and it shall have no reach:

Instant that the others
will be lavishing
unmindful that I die
of its brilliance.

*Translated from the Spanish
by Kathleen Weaver*

CINTIO VITIER

The Word

In the past words flowed
from the enchantment in things,
or leapt in a dark blood jet,
or their ravenous fires snapped at hands
that longed to entrap them;
or they flitted past like birds
or deer in sunlit forest clearings.

Now, when a word arrives
—solitary, vast, singular, lost,
like a messenger who has somehow got across
the widest, most barren places—
I shall receive it like a royal guest,
fling wide the doors, light the lamps
and wait in silence until that word,
incapable of lies, falls asleep,
and once more is confounded with the rocks.

July 15, 1961

*Translated from Spanish
by Kathleen Weaver*

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James Bradley Wells

The Founding

Beyond the backyard, rapacious bramble with ripe raspberries,
a pasture spring to clear, thriving beehives, a grove
of birches where deer and foxes dodge the neighbors
when at dawn they traipse over the damp knoll—a hometown playground
in South Beloit has a more rugged rhetoric of space
than this.

The sewage treatment plant discharges its blend
of sludge and blanched water. There, the Rock River traces
the terrain's western boundary. The east end is a grass lot behind
a house on Hayes Avenue. In Hobo Jungle along
the riverbank, nettles cramp fetid humus. Shabby
trees have gnarled bark and a film of mud watermarks. Along
the tree line, three sets of railroad tracks. Graded
acres of black sand, going east of the tracks, cover
a landfill of foundry waste, chunks of smelter ore,
pig iron ingots, and slag piles. Nearest the grassy
lot there used to be a gaunt copse, before they bulldozed
it, scavenger brush and young trees on the rim of a black sand pit.
Kids from the neighborhood played hide-and-seek and built forts
there among dozens of boulder-size slag-chunks deposited in rows.
They spent summer afternoons hammering off chips of counterfeit
obsidian from the slag or scratching in the sand for pyrite.
Between the grassy lot and where the gaunt copse used
to be, is a trench where sewers empty rain
and melting snow, contaminated with soot and garbage

JAMES BRADLEY WELLS

washed from asphalt. Heavy summer rains
turn the grass lot into a marsh. The water's stench
clings to tennis shoes and pant legs when kids
wade in to catch tadpoles. Mosquitoes swarm and breed.

Still, I give you splendor.

The green feathers of a dead mallard
shine in autumn's sun. The fall air is overgrown.

Nancy White

Between Testaments

I want my tribes to vanish, the faces
in a heavy tide rush away. No sound
but my voice, the void beautiful, softly
turning. Without weather. No sky to hide in,
no soil souring, no stain. Lighter
than a frond against my skin, just breath,
the world unwound. Anything I do make
will be so small even I won't be able to see it.
Hissing like sand through the dark, I
will move particulate, precise as justice
and wide, before there's law, before error.

Editors' Choices

Mark Budman and Tom Hazuka, eds. *You Have Time for This: Contemporary American Short-Short Stories*.

Portland, OR: Ooligan Press, 2007.

In *You Have Time for This: Contemporary American Short-Short Stories*, compiled and edited by Mark Budman and Tom Hazuka, the narratives deal with death, depression, emotional frigidity, a gang killing, the Vietnam war, wife abuse, sex, suicide, cross-dressing, the rapture, and child abuse. It is these obviously difficult subjects which make them engaging. Although each story is markedly short, "500 words or less," Mark Budman writes in his introduction:

Flash fiction has to be brief . . . and the focus . . . on target . . . Pay careful attention . . . every word is important. . . . Anyone has time to read a one-or-two-page story. When it is well crafted . . . it works its magic in a flash.

In "Family Therapy," Pamela Painter depicts a particularly dicey situation. Of the husband, Painter writes:

To be here, my husband needed to inform his secretary to hold this time open, to arrange a continuance on the Haythorpe case, to leave work without a bulging briefcase that keeps him in our downstairs study past my bedtime, preparing briefs and citing precedent past midnight most nights, lights blazing.

With few words, the author shows us a man who is a hard working, high-achieving lawyer, important enough to have a personal secretary. Not only does he work hard at the office, he brings so much work home that he rarely has time to go to bed with his wife. What does that say about their sex life? We are lead to believe that this is the main issue, but it turns out that sex is not foremost in the therapist's mind. The last line tells us "I want each of you to know: you have all seen the ghost." Although the therapist may have to deal, eventually, with this couple's sex life, in the end a ghost, which exists in the family's home, occupies both the therapist and readers. And, as enlightened as we may be in our lives, we have probably

never thought about having to deal with a ghost. North American folklore doesn't provide straightforward solutions for dispensing with a ghost. Even if it did, would the family feel somehow bereaved and in need of a therapist if the ghost disappeared? This story's lack of solutions adds to its engaging quality.

"Damn Irene," by Susan O'Neill, also deals with a complex dilemma. Harry is following his leader, Toni, in a canoe in deep fog. Harry's wife, Irene, steers the canoe from the rear seat. As Harry struggles to paddle, he thinks, "Damn Irene. She never tried. She'd seemed so eager to please . . . when they were dating. Then he'd married her. What a mistake." This thought and the words from Irene, "I told you, the right pedal works—but not the left . . . My left pedal's broke," set the reader up for Harry saying, "Turn this kayak left. *Now*." We suspect he is an abusive husband who blames his wife and minimizes her physical abilities. She tentatively responds to his order with "Turn it yourself . . . Honey," and the story ends with "The kayak buckled, rolled over; grey water grabbed up for him," and "arm-strokes, surprisingly strong, receding, fading, gone. His face bobbed under, up; his paddle knocked the hull, dodged his shivering fingers, floated away. 'Damn, Irene!' Up; under. *'Treeeb?!?'* But there was only the far-off gong of the buoy." This story is only 1 ¾-pages long, yet it is effecting and terrifying, depicting an abuse so real we are glad to not be actually involved.

"The House and the Homeowner," by L.E. Leone, presents another captivating situation in very few words. The unlikely speakers here are a house and its owner. Upon discovering that his house would not be owned, the owner says, "But I paid for you . . . I went to work, every day, and I hated my job. See?" and he shows the house the mortgage papers. The house responds with "What are these sheets of paper to my four-by-eight posts, to my beams and joists and two-by-four studs? What's your investment to my concrete foundation, your so-called equity to my earthquake retrofit?" In return, the homeowner must fight back with, "but I paid for that retrofit . . . My children grew up in this house. This is the house they grew up in, see?" The house retorts, "But what . . . are your

children to my tree?” and continues to harp about the tree. The house ends with “*You own me? You own me? I fucking contain you, Sir Homeowner,*” and the homeowner is so angry that he goes outside. He resorts, finally, to talking to his car. “‘I own you,’ he said to his car.” It is a testament to the craft of this story that we are able to suspend our disbelief and accept that the house argues in a well-spoken manner with the homeowner and wins the argument.

It is also a tribute to these and other short-shorts found in *You Have Time For This* that their themes can be dealt with so intensely. As the writers cannot take advantage of a longer build up, a fuller middle, or a more drawn out denouement, the complex issues are saturated and more effecting. The stories are so well crafted that despite their uncomfortable topics they are satisfying to read. With only a few words, each piece in this collection creates true magic on the page.

Janet Calcaterra

Steve Davenport. *Uncontainable Noise*.

Columbus, OH: Pavement Saw Press, 2006.

Is it wrong to suggest in early spring, as the lawns around town begin to green, that couch grass is a drunken cowboy in the garden? What would that mean? And what would it have to do with Steve Davenport's collection of poems *Uncontainable Noise*?

A more accurate metaphor might be one with a potato or an orchid in it, but we'll get to that later. First, I want to say that couch grass is a rhizome, which means it has a horizontal, decentralized, subterranean root system which races off in all directions, which makes it, unlike a tree, for instance, not something you can kill by simply cutting it down. A rhizome proliferates in such a way as to make each shoot self-sufficient though the plant itself remains densely and complexly—think of the brain's matrix of synapses—interwoven. A rhizome is, almost by definition, something uncontainable, which makes it a lot like a cowboy and which also makes it a lot like the poems in this collection, which often turn back on one another, “everything always melting,” dependent and independent, each made of the same stuff (the same words often) and each made in the same way (usually a sonnet) but each different, and the narrative, though at times half-buried, still advancing.

I don't know enough about Cowboy Poetry to say if what Steve Davenport writes is Cowboy Poetry, but I deeply doubt it, though the speaker in the poems calls himself a cowboy and there is at least one sharp-shooter and a pair of lizard boots and a blue horse. There is the sun-bleached, empty-skull imagery of Georgia O'Keeffe's West (not to mention O'Keeffe herself) and an aspect to each of us called Tonto, “a name we give to unchecked desire.” And there is certainly plenty of mash to fuel that desire, along with a warning that that liquor, which accompanies so many of the Cowboy's actions, “keeps a hard ledger.” But, still, there is Wallace Stevens and a system of syllabics. And then there is *L'Amour Fou* of Breton splashed over the other “sea-smooth bones” of the western canon, from Berryman to Rimbaud. In the opening poem, Gerard Manley

Hopkins meets Adrienne Rich.

What there is though of the cowboy in these poems is an attitude which transcends the simple and violent lexicon of Remingtons and bullets; it is an archetypal outlaw spirit, a resistance and resilience, that passionate, uncontainable style of being in the world that makes the cowboy so very dark, both darkly irresistible and darkly dangerous.

While Davenport employs the hard cowboy nouns and verbs we recognize, some single-syllabled and four-lettered, he shuttles between these and the redemption that a self-conscious self-reflection affords. Caught in a brutal marriage in which each partner seems both perpetrator and victim, the Cowboy speaks in a sonnet that is itself one nearly uncontainable sentence, concluding:

. . . all I mean is too big,
too scattered, so I send this three-word burst, poor ink,
repeating: I want out, I want out, I want out.

One adjective describing the rhizome is expansive, but another, equally apt, is claustrophobic. One of the many recurring images in the collection is the box: the marriage box, the divorce box. We might think, too, of the poem, and even each word, as a box; each stanza, another crash-pad:

Mattress in the middle of the room.
Divorce boxes. Books.
Bottle and glass on the floor.
A clock.

In this way, form mimics the emotional state of its speaker. Confronted with the limitations of language and the confinement—as though it were an exhausted motel room—of having to work within an inherited tradition (here not only the daunting and deadening expectations set up by the speaker's obvious awareness of so much of the poetry that has come before, but also those expectations inevitably encoded within language itself, the conventions of masculinity perhaps most of all), the Cowboy

breaks the rules. The opening poem of *Uncontainable Noise* prepares us for “sonnetry/like shrapnel, like bricks through the living room window.” Yet far away from all of this, somewhere, there is “a yonder” in which words break out of the corral of singular definitions and syntactical sense. There is another frontier, the possibility of an expressive “untranslatable something,” noise, Whitman’s yawp, a howl, the yodel. And it is, it seems, only at this extreme, or at this depth, that love finally breaks open, though not as a frail flower into bloom, but as a “Meat-Axe,” which somehow both can and cannot excise from us the weighty baggage of ourselves which threatens to pull us under. This is the gift we must learn to wield—potent and violent and full of sex—in order to turn the wild prairie into a field in which, and upon which, we might hope to live.

Which brings us to potatoes and orchids. To say rhizome around the English Department is not to conjure, as the Cowboy does, Montana, but Gilles Deleuze, the linguistic philosopher who proposed that this is how things are, rhizomic—not just how language is but also systems of power and our sense of ourselves. Almost nothing can be said succinctly about Deleuze’s thinking, though it is important to say that for him couch grass is only one example of the rhizome. The potato, that great, good comfort food, is another, and better yet is the orchid, which actually cannot reproduce itself alone. It needs the wasp, and their interdependence becomes, in his mind, its own rhizome. “There is,” he writes, describing their beautiful and mutually exploitative symbiosis, “neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight . . .” I’m not going to pretend to be able to unpack the dynamic box of that sentence (which is, no doubt, something like the untranslatable nonetheless translated into English from the French), but it seems like the perfect metaphor for the relationships Davenport seeks to cultivate and praise. Not only the “Happy ending” marriage of the Cowboy to a sharp-shooter on a blue horse that brings into being so many daughters but also the way the poems of the past make fertile the soil for the poems of the future:

Cowboy writes another line, something about somewhere over Ohio
or Indiana, corn field this, bean field that, the heart taking on weight,

EDITORS' CHOICES

a torso, then the bodies of poets, living and dead, tucked like books
under the arms it sprouts.

“Drunkness,” Deleuze writes, though he is himself apparently quoting someone else now, is “a triumphant irruption of the plant in us.” And perhaps it is also a metaphor for some part of the poetic, when creativity seems to manifest itself in an almost green excitation.

Uncontainable Noise has an epigraph from Michael Ondaatje in which Wallace Stevens “in his suit / is thinking chaos is thinking fences.” If, and Steve Davenport seems at times to almost shout it, the chaos of our universe is as undeniable and frightening and blossoming, as receding and alluring, as the myth of the American West, it is all of that because it is the very stuff (the Deleuzian virtual) from which the creative life-urge rises. And if there also must be, simply for our own survival and sanity, fences here—some necessary and potentially wrong-headed brand of order—may they become, finally, for all of us, as they do for this Cowboy, white picket ones.

Kathleen Graber

Paola Corso. *Giovanna's 86 Circles*.

Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

A woman trying on her deceased mother's clothes magically slips into her mother's life. A young girl working in a hospital's laundry room foresees an impending birth and death. A reporter covering an unlikely story realizes the power of faith.

In her Pushcart-nominated, short story collection, *Giovanna's 86 Circles*, Paola Corso masterfully combines traditional religious and ethnic beliefs of her Italian-American characters with superstitions, dreams, and legends to create magical atmospheres that transcend the otherwise mundane settings. The typical limitations of location and time are suspended through the use of such magical elements, and instead the significance and meanings of the stories are enhanced. In short, Corso uses magical realism to create allegorical structures that impart truths all readers can relate to despite how different their lives may be from those of the particular characters that inhabit Corso's stories.

In "Yesterday's News," Corso conjures magical elements through the connection between a thirty-seven-year-old woman and her late mother. While dropping off a bag of her mother's clothes at a thrift shop, Denise is compelled by the eccentric store owner to try on a few pieces. Denise initially protests, not believing they will fit, but finally relents and is amazed at how easily she slips into her mother's outfits, and, then, magically, into her mother's life. "After squeezing into a few things, I have the courage to try on the green car coat with the rabbit lining. It doesn't matter that it's tight. I'm my mother, Beverly DeMurio, and I'm behind the wheel of the family car." Corso uses this transformation—in which Denise examines the true nature of her relationship with her mother—to illustrate the enduring quality of maternal bonds.

In "Between the Sheets," Corso uses steam in a hospital's laundry room to envelop the story with a mystical quality. A tenth grader folds sheets alongside her co-worker, Pina, whose hospitalized husband believes he will die the next time the nurses change his sheets. Through the mist

the tenth grader witnesses the color in the washing machine turn “from a sudsy white to red. Pure red.” It is a sheet marked by “the color of blood” that has caused this red swirl, and although it is white when she sees it again, she has a vision that it will be the one upon which Gus dies—and also the one upon which another co-worker will eventually give birth. The spiritual beliefs of the characters within the steamy atmosphere of the laundry room create a magical environment through which Corso illustrates how life’s plan can often reveal itself in the most ordinary circumstances.

Corso again utilizes spiritual elements to create a believable tale of otherwise extraordinary occurrences in “Raw Egg in Beer.” A reporter whose Catholic faith has waned is sent to cover the self-proclaimed impending death of the city’s religious mayor. She meets the mayor at the local tavern he visits every evening for a drink—a beer with a raw egg. As the two chat and exchange stories about their relatives—who were believers in the power of eggs (in this case symbolizing life)—the reporter realizes they are more alike than she thought, and she, too, consumes a raw egg in her beer. Filled with a renewed sense of life, she bounces home and in the morning receives word confirming what she already knows: The mayor has died in his sleep. In this instance, Corso shows how a person can become connected to life’s hidden elements and wondrous possibilities through a leap of faith.

Most of the stories in Corso’s collection contain characteristics that would allow them to be considered “magical realist,” while others without such extraordinary elements are still able to impart a fanciful feel. This latter category is exemplified in “Roman Arches” where a grown-up daughter, Arabella, returns home to visit her mother Rose and finds that not much has changed: Rose still believes she is Lucy Ricardo, and she inhabits this fantasy with increasing frequency. Her delusion takes a dangerous turn when she stomps grapes in a tub to make wine, a storyline borrowed from an *I Love Lucy* episode, and falls, breaking her foot. As Rose sleeps in her hospital bed, without any “Lucy” make-up or props, Arabella finally recognizes her as the mother she once knew. She first

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attempts to wake her by quoting an *I Love Lucy* line, but when this is unsuccessful, arouses her by simply calling out to her as “Mom.” As her mother awakens, Arabella feels “as though shades are drawn, and a big picture window allows [her] to see [her] mother for the first time.” In this poignant tale, Corso adds a creative twist to the magical realist realm, expressing fanciful elements through the actions of a disoriented character and the ripple effects they have on her daughter. Despite the existence of the alter ego, Arabella is still able to relate to her mother and learns to savor the time she spends with her.

Corso reveals magical elements in many unlikely places, from a thrift store to a laundry room to a local bar. Combining commonplace settings, spiritual beliefs, and strong family bonds with extraordinary occurrences, she achieves a believable intermingling of reality and magic. However, it is when the specific settings and characters are shown to be secondary to the universal lessons the stories impart that Corso’s true “magic” is revealed.

Karen Lenar

Pamela Erens. *The Understory*.
Forest Hills, NY: Ironweed Press, 2007.

What is it to be someone? Pamela Erens poses this question in her novel *The Understory* through the perspective of Jack Gorse, a middle-aged man barely surviving on a monthly stipend left to him in his parents' will. His ordinary life takes a strange turn when an uncle passes away. Telling his aunt he will clean out the vacated apartment, Gorse secretly moves in, and begins a bizarre self-purging ritual:

When I got to my uncle's place, carrying one large suitcase, there was little work for me to do. [. . .] There seemed to be only one of everything: one overcoat, one pot, one wooden spoon. I spent an afternoon boxing up the clothing—too small for me—and taking it to the post office. Everything else I kept, including the bedding and kitchen items. I wrote my aunt that I had donated these to Goodwill. I slept that night on the sheets my uncle had spent his last night on and felt that in this rather ghoulish way I was earning my right to be there, to inhabit this place.

"This place" is a double-edged phrase. On a literal level, it could mean "apartment." However, Gorse soon finds it's easier to hold on to the apartment by rescinding his given name to that of his dead uncle. With this gesture, he now inhabits the person his uncle used to be.

It isn't enough for Gorse to reduce himself to a dead man's duplicate. He is human and subject to loneliness but, in keeping up his disguise, Gorse is unable to form a meaningful human connection. Who is he after years of pretending to be someone else? When we meet Gorse, he is struggling to keep the lie alive while feeling trapped within it.

And it's no wonder: Gorse's life is a routine. He visits Egret Books each morning before breakfasting at the same diner. His daily inspection of the plant life in Central Park's Ramble has left him capable of predicting the sprouting patterns of weeds. He walks for hours until reaching the bridge where he gazes at Brooklyn, then takes the subway home. Only the

connections he feels are implicit in repeated encounters make the routine bearable. When describing his nightly companions on the subway ride home, Gorse mentions a short-haired woman a few seats away:

Long ago I had decided this woman made this trip uptown every few nights to see a lover, a man who met with her before going home to his family for the evening. The man meant more to her than she meant to him. The pinched and anxious lines between the woman's eyes were what made me think so [...] The woman always behaved as if she had never seen me before.

His belief in his fabricated friend is convoluted. He is incredulous that she acts as if she doesn't know him even while acknowledging, in a backwards sense, she *doesn't*. Perhaps it isn't even a matter of imagining friends where there are none. It could be that he wards off loneliness by feeling that *he* knows *her*. That the "knowing" isn't mutual may not be of psychological importance.

Gorse describes a similar relationship with Carl, the owner of Egret Books, the used bookstore he visits on his daily sojourn. Conceding that "much of its stock consisted of predictable secondhand leftovers," Gorse is a regular only at Egret. He says, "I felt comfortable there. White-haired, hunching Carl never bothered me with conversation or seemed to mind that I did not buy anything. He hardly seemed to register that I was there." Gorse can relax in Carl's perceived company because he is not expected to be himself—or anyone else, for that matter.

The issue of identity is central in this psychologically driven novel. Gorse has a particular affinity for identical twins; he is placated by the notion that, in his perfect world, identical twins will always be understood, accepted, loved. An excerpt from a favorite scientific magazine article often soothes him to sleep:

Ultrasound, the author wrote, shows that many pregnancies start out as twin pregnancies. Long before quickening the twins merge, one absorbing the other or being absorbed by the placenta. Up to fifteen percent

of us might actually be the surviving half of a twin pair. I imagine that I am one of those conjoined creatures, two souls wrapped into one [...].

Gorse also mentions his favorite passage in Plato's *Symposium*, where Aristophanes describes humans as once being creatures with doubled appendages and organs, who were split in half as punishment by the gods. Aristophanes says that, ever since, humans have been in agony, searching for "our lost other halves, the beings or bodies that would complete us."

Toward the outset of the novel, the apartment building Gorse has been illegally occupying, posing as his uncle, is bought by a new owner who decides to gut the building. One by one he has forced the tenants to leave—first by turning the heat off in mid-winter, then by (we are led to suspect) committing arson on the property. Obstinate to the end, Gorse refuses to leave, even if that means waking in the morning frostbitten and with the inside of his mouth thick with soot.

During this time, Gorse meets Patrick Allegra, a Buddhist architect hired to supervise the demolition and reconstruction of the building. Gorse finds himself immediately attracted to Allegra but knows he can't form the connection he desires without putting an end to the charade. Agonizing over his situation, he recalls an excerpt from a book read shortly after his parents' death:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations.

Did Gorse already use up that once-in-a-lifetime chance to start over when he usurped his uncle's identity? What do all these years of deception amount to, considering Gorse never took the chance to become himself in the first place?

Gorse cannot have a connection—a twinship—with Allegra or anyone else he encounters simply because *he is no one*. The idea of giving up

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his uncle's identity was all the more terrifying knowing it never belonged to him in the first place—like the short-haired adulteress on the subway, or the twin he could never know did not exist.

Lisa Voltolina

Contributors

Jürgen Becker is the author of over thirty books—novels, story collections, poetry collections, and plays—all published by Germany’s premier publisher, Suhrkamp. He has won numerous prizes in Germany, including the Heinrich Böll Prize, the Uwe Johnson Prize, and the Hermann Lenz Prize, among others.

Partridge Boswell produces live music, theater, dance, and spoken-word performances as director of Pentangle Council of the Arts in Woodstock, Vermont. He is a trustee of Harbor Mountain Press and an editor of the online journal *poetryfish*.

Janet Calcaterra has worked as a teacher, archivist, and curator and published fiction, travel, and gardening pieces. Currently, she is taking an MFA in Creative Writing from Fairleigh Dickinson University. She lives with her husband in North Bay, ON where she writes and teaches part-time at Canadore College.

Wang Fan-chih was most likely the pseudonym of a number of different otherwise anonymous poets, urban “guerilla” Buddhist missionary graffiti artists numerous among them.

Brent Fisk is a writer from Bowling Green, Kentucky. His work has appeared in over 200 magazines the last few years including recent issues of *Rattle*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Southeast Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. In 2007 he won the Willow Award from *Willow Review*, the Sam Ragan Prize from *Crucible*, and honorable mention in *Boulevard’s* Emerging Poets Contest.

Kathleen Graber is the author of *Correspondence*, the winner of the 2005 Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize. She was a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University in 2007-08 and has also received fellowships from The Rona Jaffe Foundation and The New Jersey State Council on the Arts. New poems are forthcoming in *The American Poetry Review* and *The Georgia Review*.

Judith Harris is the author of *The Bad Secret*, published by LSU Press (2006), *Atonement* (LSU Press, 2000), and a critical book on poetry and psychoanalysis, *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self Through Writing* (SUNY Press, 2003). Her recent poems have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The American Scholar*, *Southwest Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattle*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and *Boulevard*.

Patrick Hicks is Writer-in-Residence at Augustana College and his work has appeared in scores of international publications, including *Ploughshares*, *The Utne Reader*, *Indiana Review*, *Commonweal*, *Glimmer Train*, and *Nimrod*. His most recent book is *Finding the Gossamer* (Salmon Poetry, 2008).

Susanne Kort is a psychotherapist practicing in Jalisco, Mexico. Her poems have appeared in the *Seneca Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Grand Street*, *the Iowa Review*, *Seattle Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, and others in the U.S., and in journals in Canada, Ireland, and England.

Karen Lenar, a graduate of the MFA program at Fairleigh Dickinson University, is finalizing her first collection of short stories. She resides with her husband in Boston, Massachusetts, where she works as a critical care nurse.

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Andy Plattner has forthcoming fiction in *Georgetown Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Ledge Magazine*. Previously, he won the Flannery O'Connor Award for short fiction, as well as a Henfield Prize.

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) was one of the most significant poets of the Symbolist movement.

Adam Strauss lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, adores the work of Melvin Tolson and Gwendolyn Brooks, and has recent work in *Glitterpony* and *Otoliths*. The poems here are from a manuscript titled *From Feminism*.

Gladys Swan is the author of eight books of fiction, the two latest being *News from the Volcano*, nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award (University of Missouri Press, 2000) and *A Garden Amid Fires* (BkMk Press, 2007). Her novels include *Carnival of the Gods* (Vintage, 1986) and *Ghost Dance: A Play of Voices* (Louisiana State University Press, 1992), and her other story collections are *On the Edge of the Desert*, (University of Illinois Press, 1980), *Do You Believe in Cabeza de Vaca* (University of Missouri Press, 1991), *Of Memory and Desire* (Louisiana State University Press 1989), and *A Visit to Strangers* (University of Missouri Press, 1996). Her short stories have appeared in *Sewanee Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Green Mountains Review*, *New Letters*, *The Ohio Review*, *Other Voices*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, *Southwest Review*, and *Chelsea*.

Aryeh Tepper is writing his doctoral thesis on Leo Strauss' later writings on Maimonides at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has published prose poetry and essays in English and Hebrew.

Jen Town's poetry has appeared in *Epoch*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Rhino*, and *Third Coast*, among others. Her chapbook of poems, *Carnival*, was a finalist for the 2007 Wick Chapbook Competition and the 2008 *Laurel Review* Midwest Chapbook Series. She recently graduated with her MFA in Creative Writing from Ohio State University. She lives and works in Columbus, OH.

Cintio Vitier is a major figure in Cuban letters, a poet, literary critic, anthologist and editor. In 2002 he received Mexico's prestigious Juan Rulfo Award; the jury described him as "one of the most important writers of his generation." His career emerged within the legendary *Origenes* group that formed around José Lezama Lima in the 1940s.

Lisa Voltolina is an Editorial and Marketing Assistant at *Poetry Northwest* magazine in Portland, OR. She is a freelance copy editor at Gramlee.com and volunteer event coordinator for Portland's annual Wordstock Festival, sponsored by Community of Writers. Her reviews have appeared in *Web Del Sol Review of Books* and *The Literary Review*, where she has been a reader for six years.

James Bradley Wells teaches classics at Hamilton College. His book *Registers of the Autograph* was a finalist for Four Way Books' 2007 Levis Poetry Prize.

Nancy White's first book, *Sun, Moon, Salt*, won the Washington Prize for Poetry. Her work appears in *The Antioch Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *FIELD*, *Ploughshares*, *Rattle*, *Seneca Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and others. She teaches at Adirondack Community College, and currently is working on a book of poems about making a living off the land, supported in part by a grant from NYSCA's decentralization program.

George Young is a retired physician living in Boulder, Colorado. A collection of his poems, *Spinoza's Mouse*, won the Washington Prize and was published by Word Works.

Translators

Okla Elliott is an assistant professor at Ohio Wesleyan University. His non-fiction, poetry, short fiction, and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *Blue Mesa Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Indiana Review*, *International Poetry Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *The Rambler*, and the *Sewanee Theological Review*, among others, and his journalistic writings have appeared in several newspapers. His plays have been produced at Ohio State University and Louisiana Tech University. His books include a limited edition poetry collection, *The Mutable Wheel* (illustrated by Brian Zegeer, MFA, University of Pennsylvania), published with funding from the NC Arts Council and the United Arts Council of Greensboro, and a chapbook, *Lucid Bodies and Other Poems* (MSR Press, 2006). He is also co-editor, with Kyle Minor, of *The Other Chekhov*.

J.P. Seaton is America's most widely anthologized translator of Chinese poetry. His most recent book is *The Shambhala Anthology of Chinese Poetry*.

Paul Sohar has published nine books of translations, prose and poetry (*Homing Poems*, Iniquity Press, 2005) while on disability from his day job in chemistry. His work has appeared in *Chelsea*, *Kenyon Review*, *Rattle*, *The Literary Review*, among others.

Kathleen Weaver's recent work, *Peruvian Rebel, The World of Magda Portal, with Selected Poems*, is forthcoming from Penn State University Press. She is a poet, anthologist, and translator from Spanish.