



periphery
no. 1

a journal of word and image

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HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

periphery

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letter from the editor

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Periphery*, a journal of word and image. The idea for a literary journal housed at Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) arose from the Center's series on "Poetry, Philosophy, and Religion." This series has been described as aiming to explore "the porous boundaries between these modes of inquiry and utterance, and to consider the tense but productive relationship from antiquity until today." *Periphery*, both in its title and its contents, continues this exploration in the modes of literary and visual art.

Our first issue takes up the theme of Pain, with the understanding that it is the personal sense of pain, of discomfort and conflict, that has inspired philosophers, artists, and religious scholars to create the valuable heritage we have in these fields. The contents of this journal are a small investigation into the many ways both subtle and explicit that artists talk about what is vital to and reconciling in their lives. To put it simply, no good poem, no good story, exists without a kernel of conflict, a kernel of pain.

Though originating from the world and esthetic of poetry, our focus has expanded to include short fiction and visual art, and especially crossover genres like the prose poem, lyric essay, and photo essay. We hope to include more of these mixed formats in future issues. The editorial goal has been to allow individual voices to speak for themselves without the intervening imposition of a particular editorial slant to the writing style. I hope you enjoy the variety of voices that are collected here. Our submission process is open to all, and an important goal of the journal is to support and encourage creative work from new writers, especially those within and peripheral to the Harvard community.

Thanks are due to a number of people, beginning with Charles Stang, the director of CSWR and faculty advisor for this project; the journal would not exist without his inspiration. Thanks also to the staff at CSWR, to our volunteer editorial board, and to our submission readers. The journal has received much appreciated financial support from CSWR, the Harvard Divinity School Student Association, and the HDS Office of Student Life.

The theme for our next issue is Borders. I hope you will take up the creative challenge we propose here and consider submitting your creative work. Submissions may be sent to

PeripheryCSWR@gmail.com.

I look forward to reading new work.

Yours,
Byron
Editor, *Periphery Journal*

I Tried to Murder Tippi Hedren...

Michele Somerville

I tried to murder Tippi Hedren in Bodega Bay.
In Assisi, I perched upon the shoulder of Francesco.
I was a nightjar, I was a grackle
An iridescent rock dove, I generated wingtip vortices
 where I dwelled within the Apple.
Contrafactual, I, "Bird," I ditch the sheets and blow.
One of me in your hand is worth two in your bush,
Slay my sister and me with one rock.

I am a fish-eating sea-hawk with a cosmopolitan range.
I am the twelve-wired bird of paradise.
I am the thrice cock.
I am Angry Bird, but not Foghorn Leghorn.
I am a bird of prey, locate me at the sky-hole perimeter.
I am a peregrine falcon from 55 Water Street.
Pliny the Elder called me *Ossifraga* or "bone breaker."
I am Birdbrain who runs the world, the bald,
 puff-chest of the national crime family.

I am the eagle that carries a dove in its mouth.
I am the dove of the Holy Spirit.
I am the cardinal of the Holy Spirit.
I am the wheeling falcon Apollo dispatched.
I feast with flocks of swiftlets and swallows.

Did our power to fly evolve from the ground up?
Did our power emerge from wing-assisted running?
Or was it arboreal and downward?
We go back to the Meozoic Era.
We had gastroliths and air sacs in our bones.
Thanks to protein sequenators,
 we know the Coelurosaurus
 was a thing with feathers.

We slept with our heads tucked for warmth.

I fly in V formation.

At angles of attack my lift exceeds my drag.

When I fight in the basement, the men tie a shank to my beak.

My thighs and breasts are sumptuous.

As a raven in the Tower of London,

I pecked clean the eye-sockets of Ann Boleyn.

I am a 60's "girl."

I swan in a bevy and mate for life.

I am neither Peking Duck nor the Christmas Goose,

neither Leda nor the brute bird.

I am a thousand white Origami cranes for healing.

The Rambam says never take the eggs of the mother bird
before sending her away.

The Rambam says this is for the mercy on the mother bird.

The Ramban says it is done to perfect mercy.

My nest is translucent and made of hardened saliva.

My young are feeding themselves.

Soon I can stop defending my territories.

The river is moving. I must be flying.

The falconer is calling but what's it saying?

I can't quite make it out.

Monoglots

Anthony Immergluck

Because I don't speak
the beggars' language, may I
be let off the hook?

*

In ten languages,
I can say, "Actually,
I'm Canadian."

*

"But how could you hate
such a beautiful country?"
tourists often ask.

*

I'm rather pregnant
about how rusty I've let
my Spanish become.

*

I love all cultures,
including my own. But you
know how love can be.

Perennial

Emma De Lisle

Trust any question that swells in the ground.
The winter-blooming narcissus buckles
beneath its own reaching—become instead
an aperture. Leave your best words unsaid.

On This Side

Fatema Elbakoury

When Mother first moved into this apartment in Zeytoun, she had minded the dust of the street, the loud train that went by every other hour, the street vendors whose nasally voices sank into her ear drums every morning before she wanted to wake up. She had minded her neighbor upstairs who was a carpenter and who she could hear hacking away in his studio. But more than all these nuances was the enormous wooden fence encasing the patio. It extended well beyond her five-foot frame. She thought that when the workers came to remodel it to a more normal height, one that let the sun in, she'd feel better. And when they came, she sat back and watched them break apart the wooden panels. She watched the rays of sunlight make their way onto the concrete like piano keys slowly being pressed by long slender fingers. She hardly felt any better, but she told herself that this was good.

Twenty-three years later, homes renovated, new ones built on top of old ones, and her excursions so scarce she had vivid memories of each one, she still sat in the same spot every day to watch the sun rise after her prayers. In the past three years or so, Mother hardly befriended anyone. The friendships she had prior to these years tainted her need for people. She was kind to her neighbors, though fearful she was of the Rottweiler owned by the man living right across from her. They had moved in a little over a month ago. He didn't let it into his house, so every time she left her place to throw out the trash, she would see the dog staring back at her behind the steel bars surrounding the house. Its large dark eyes followed Mother as she set the bag down and turned around to reenter the home that was hardly a home anymore.

On most days, she would read. Or she would go through the things her mother left behind when she died a few months ago. She'd cook for herself, and her daughter, Samia, who came by a few times a week. Or she'd knit a new scarf for her to pick up. Some days, she would leave to buy the groceries instead of sending one of the homeless boys off with some pounds to do the shop-

ping for her. She hated seeing the people who had let her down years ago every time she chose to do the shopping. It was as if God had planned it, even though she always prayed to him before she left.

One time it was Doa, who she'd lent 1,300 pounds. Another time it was Alaa, who had taken her record player and never given it back despite Mother's incessant calls. Then there was Sana, who thought it was retributive to call Samia a slur Mother couldn't even repeat to herself. But it was more than vengeance: of all the injustices she'd faced, that was the one that rung with the most potential for truth, and it frightened her.

There were more women, but these were some of the people she'd let into her home, chosen to call family only to find out they were many other things.

* * *

One day, Mother decided to buy the groceries herself. She wrapped her veil tightly around her head, put on a loose pair of slacks and a tunic. She looked in the mirror and pinched her cheeks a little to give them life. Her tired eyes saddened her, so she averted her gaze from herself. All her wrinkles were forming in the wrong place, so she left before she could think about it any more. Mother locked the door to her house and turned around, prepared to face the Rottweiler. This time it was resting its head against its paws, about to fall asleep. When it peered up at her, she saw the fatigue she denied herself. For a moment she saw why this man might love this creature, but as she began walking away from it, the dog took its customary place in her memory as a beast.

Cairo in the spring was still inundated with rubble, dust, crowds, heavy traffic, and foul-mouthed taxi drivers. No season could change these streets. Recently]-, Samia got a job as a driver, and so when Mother heard the glaring screeches of tires as she walked, she pictured her daughter's ringed eyes widening with anger and frustration. Sometimes during her breaks, Samia would stop by to see Mother. Just yesterday she'd visited with some dates and baklava. Mother loved baklava. As she peeled back the tin foil lid and took a honeyed piece to her mouth, she noticed Samia watching her. Her eyes were a crisp brown, almost golden near the pupils. Just like her father's.

"So what are your plans for this week?" she asked. She was wearing a tight pair of jeans, Nike shoes, and a box cut T-shirt that wasn't as long as Mother would have liked. Her eyes lingered long enough on the shirt before Samia crossed her arms, daring Mother to speak anything other than what she said next.

"The same," Mother answered.

"You're just going to sit around like that?"

"Don't talk to me like that. It's my house." The pain she felt when her daughter spoke to her as if they were equals was one she never accepted.

"Sorry." It was a perfunctory apology, but it made Mother feel better. In that vein, she spoke again.

"I think I'm going to go grocery shopping tomorrow."

"Really? What happened to Ramadan?"

“Nothing. He’s fine. I just wanted to leave the house.”

“Okay.”

Mother could see that her daughter was trying to figure out what was going on.

“Aren’t you afraid?” she asked after a period of silence between them.

“No.” Mother wrapped the baklava and stood up to put it away. She felt her daughter’s eyes on her as she opened the refrigerator. Then she heard her say:

“Yes you are.”

When she turned around, she saw her daughter’s arms were crossed again and her brow was furrowed. The bags under her eyes were sharper than Mother remembered.

“You’re always afraid,” she continued, “Then you call me frantically because you saw Doa or Sana or God knows who else. All those people who hurt you. You keep thinking you’ll be delivered for being good to people. But now you’re just poor...” Her daughter had a habit of clenching her fists when she was searching for the right words.

“...And stuck,” she finally said. “And trapped. And lonely.”

These words were the same ones her daughter used when Mother wouldn’t leave the house. But now she was leaving, and her daughter was repeating them.

“What’s the matter? It’s not my fault all those women hurt me...”

Samia sighed. She stood up, walked around the table and rubbed Mother’s shoulders. She wrapped her arms around Mother’s neck; her cold hands grazed Mother’s. Samia lowered her voice and Mother looked away. When her eyes rested on the window facing the street, she saw the Rottweiler following the owner as the man cleared the dust from his entry way.

“Hey. Look at me,” she heard Samia say.

Mother begrudgingly turned around. Every day she saw more of her husband in Samia. He too would make her look at him when he spoke. He too told her to stop praying and start doing something. His last words to her before passing were, “I know you’re going to do it anyway, but don’t wait until you’re with me.”

She would wait anyway.

“I’m happy you’re leaving,” Samia said, “But I know that when you go out there and see someone you don’t want to see, you’ll think you were right to stay inside. You can’t live like this. They need to see you too.”

Mother stayed silent.

“Have you ever thought of going somewhere other than this market?” her daughter asked.

“No. This is the closest one. My legs can’t carry me that far anymore.”

* * *

Mother was almost at the town market. She walked down Mounir, turned onto Al Kassim, and on Sobhy she arrived. The lane was a small one, which made it perfect for an outdoor market. She made her way through the vegetables—turnips, tomatoes, carrots, parsley, asparagus. When she reached the fruits she felt her sweet tooth tingle. Bananas, cherries, and peaches. The

mangoes looked especially plump and ripe, so she took half a dozen for herself, and a few extra in case Samia came by again. She had made her way to the end of the row and was about to turn around to buy some beans when she saw Doa walking down El Farik.

The woman looked at least ten years younger. Hair dyed a light brown shade teetering on blonde. She was dressed in the careful pastel monochrome of a mother who studied the wardrobes of women much younger than her. She looked lighter, smaller, and better kept than Mother could remember. The patterned floral veil she used to vaguely wrap around her head was now a mere knot on her leather tote bag. She was holding her daughter's hand, yelling something to her son who had run several meters in front of her. Mother had always liked Doa's children. They were so young when the two women first met, but now they were taller, longer hair bouncing with each step. She watched the boy as he kicked at a group of pigeons that scurried in his wake. Mother felt a slight longing in her chest when she saw the glee in his eyes—she wanted to be there with him—but she turned around before Doa could see her.

“Madame! You didn't pay!” the seller yelled.

She hadn't even noticed that she'd begun to walk away. It was instinct to run. Mother took a deep breath, and kept walking. She held her bag tightly before hitching it over her shoulders. As she began walking, she felt a tug on her tunic.

“Auntie!”

She turned around and it was the little boy.

“Musa...” Mother didn't know what to do. She looked up to see that Doa was busy with the mangos.

“You remember me?” she asked.

“Come say hi to mama,” he kicked the ground before peering up at her imploringly. His features had changed. The small button nose had taken on a more aquiline form, and his cheeks had gone from round and plump to narrow and frail.

“I can't do that, son,” she hesitated before speaking again, “Your mother was not good to me.” He stared at her blankly. “What do you mean?”

How old was he now? Probably nine or so. Time had passed. What would happen if she followed him?

Don't wait until you're with me, he had said.

“I mean... I mean she took something she was supposed to give back,” Mother began. “She—”

“Musa!”

Mother looked up and saw Doa coming their way. The man selling the mangos saw Mother and called after her.

“Lady! Come back! You didn't pay!”

But Mother was gone. She turned around and made her way through the crowd. The concrete houses looked to her like slabs of paint from her mother's canvasses. Her tearing eyes were turning everything into strokes from the paintbrushes her mother would wave effortlessly. All the same earthy tones and decorative gates kept her confused all these years. Mother still sometimes walked by her home without realizing it was hers. Instinct would never be enough.

This time, she knew she was closer to home because as she approached her house, she saw that the Rottweiler had woken up. It barked at her louder than it ever had before. She dropped her groceries in fear. As she got on her knees to pick them up, she noticed two stout hands. She looked up. It was her neighbor, the owner of the Rottweiler. She had never seen him up close before. He had light blue eyes, unlike any she'd ever seen on an Egyptian. His thick eyebrows veiled the rest of his face, but his soft jaw mitigated the sharpness of his features. And right behind him was the dog. Its long pink tongue dangled far from its mouth, and its tail wagged so fast Mother almost lost her footing in dizziness. She let out a little scream. Her neighbor laughed.

"Don't worry, Madame. Ziko is nice. He gets excited when he sees people. Here's your stuff. Do you need help getting to your door?"

"No," she said. "No I'm fine." She scrambled to grab all her bags properly.

Mother turned around and took the stairs to her apartment as fast as she could. The sun's rays birthed shadows over the ground on which she laid her prayer mat. Doa's ease consumed her as she washed her face, arms, and ears. That calm gait. Those pointed shoes. That bright smile—so unlike anything Mother could ever give. She tightened the veil around her head and began to pray for that face to go away. The sun cast red and blue mirages on her half closed eyes. The edges of her prayer mat told her there would be no healing, only a reckoning. Still, she kept her whole body inside the confines of the soft fabric as she got down on her knees and set her forehead to the ground. Outside, Ziko's barking dissipated as his owner fed him diced pieces of Mother's mango.

In the Pines

an excerpt from *REMNANTS*

Ariella Ruth

black painted bars on the kitchen window.
room's latches are small [moan] get lost
underneath scaffold, broken oak. middle
pains from weeping, a train car beneath
pulsating ocean. solemn in her apartment
corner. second floor, the stepping stool
below the bared window facing the sea,
windy reeds beneath. roots at a cliff's edge
& shards of grass left after the fire. a
goodbye song.

[sing it for me]

Inversion

Rebecca Doverspike

The headless bird in the yard wants the coyote, or the fox.
I want to stop asking myself what to do.

If perception can transform action, it takes effort
to keep one's eyes open. All the windows dripping with rain.

Trees in a puddle where sky and water meet is home.
There I stay, un-stitching every seam to a world within a world, learning how to pray.

Don't stop looking to see all the way down, though endless, the last gradation of blue will hold
that beating sun so small behind the ribcage,
silent and stilled when asked
if a star can feel.

city driving

Rebecca Doverspike

a car horn and I can't remember the word soften. don't want to remember it,
I think ugly thumbs and sneers, floating trash in the night river,

concrete, concrete, concrete. I mistake streetlights for the moon,
wonder about the relationship between error and truth.

no one told me stars were god's transient anger, ceramic plates shattered,
fixed constellations some form of repentance.

no room for soften, unnecessary—all the other cars are litter to the one honking
and then the next one and the next, it takes me a long time to imagine

pearls (it doesn't matter if they're real or fake),
light streaming through dust in his childhood when the equation differed: beauty = breath,

some stray Sunday when he felt life worth living, before he tortured insects
or even after, learning a first lesson, eyes clearer.

in a poem the moon is a great big pearl,
the tender voice of trees' knotted hearts sound louder than the traffic and we listen

until they've bled it out and then hear the tiniest pine needle sing,
and the man who plays violin on the side of the road a translator

like each note inside a book's margin its own bird taking flight,
like every wildflower mixed with dried bones can heal.

the pearls there are the same pearls here, fresh from the water, moons
made from oyster's agitation, like rescuing a made-up image of a stranger eases mine

and soon I don't wonder which moments make his eyes bright if any
I just feel all the aches of a heart's secret work.

From the Notes of Dr. Carlos J. G., Psiquiatra

(After Remedios Varo's *Mujer saliendo del Psicoanalista*)

Edwin Alanís García

Patient Number: zweizweidreizweisiebenocho

Patient Name: Blackbird, Blackbird

Date of Assessment: 13/13/20XX

History

Patient missiled through the window sans appointment. Graceful flutters, like chloroformed butterflies. But herky jerky landing. Patient knocked over my coffee then squawk-cried. Seemed overly apologetic. I maintained flat affect. I gestured the patient to take a perch. Patient continued to apologize until she asked "Are you the devil?" (note: transference; patient is difficult). Folded wings over breast, like a casket sleeper. I then asked my secretary for the intake forms.

Description

Patient is birdshaped with a labyrinthine gait. Indiscernible wingspan, Phoenix-like but introverted and shockbrowed. Aquiline attractive, showbird beauty, though plumage disheveled and dirty and missing in scarshaped patches (note: avian trichotillomania?). Eyes and beak perpetually half-open, though eyes otherwise auburn and beady and thousand-yards-away.

Treatment Progress

I. Interview

What brings you here today?

I don't know. You can't help me.

I'm sorry, that was vulturistic. You seem nice.

But you can't help me. Ever since I hatched the galaxy has imploded. I've been trying to unhatch but the pieces of eggshell are now cold so I had to grow layers of feathers.

(note: attachment issues, possible separation anxiety; mother did not sufficiently regurgitate during formative years?) Tell me more about these layers.

Safety. If someone gets close I peck them away. Even if I want them close. Safety.

Do you get lonely? (note: This is a trick question. Birds don't get lonely. They're birds.)

Yes. Utterly. I sometimes get tempted to go up to the cumulonimbi but every time I've been there everyone's so cumulonimbic. I want them all but don't. Like engorged cocks in lead cotton candy.

Patient squawks apologies for the perceived vulgarity then flies into the corner. Our therapy does not resume for another seven months (note: patient is difficult; Axis II?) Follow up interview reveals patient builds nests out of poetry magazines (note: hoarding/OCD?) and only has sex during somnivation. She says it would be like floating (note: dissociation) if not for her already being airborne. So instead "it's like being dead" (note: nymphomaniacal Cotard's?)

II. Free association

Ice

Womb. Bat.

Splinter

Free will.

Savannah

Porn.

Man

Threat.

Chthonic

Dictionary.

Masturbate

Safe.

Bird

Help.

Perturbed

Dictionary.

Scabies

Beauty.

Beauty

Hell. Help.

Test assessment: Failed. (Note: Patient is difficult.)

III. Self-assessment

Please rate your level of physical discomfort:

Cero/Voidtouched

Uno/A splinter that has become gangrenous and wannabe-tumorous

Dos/First epidermal layers abraded; soul completely abraded

Tres/Shadow aspect complains of stomach pain, begins to fear the ego and thinks it should don a romper

Cuatro/Romper or no, you've reached full tenebrosity [patient handwrites note: "NEVER-MORE"]

Rate your attachment to reality:

Attached and grounded.

My arms/wings remind me to deny myself.

This body is a cataclysm that I witness from a safe distance.

covfefe

Rank the following needs by order of importance (from 1 to 7):

0 – Sex

0 – Food

7 – Love

0 – Shelter

7 – Acceptance

7 – Safety

8 – Education

IV. Arche/atypical Assessment

Pick and choose from the following; how many flavor combinations can you unlock?!

<i>Event</i>	<i>Figure</i>	<i>Motif</i>
la tormenta	el chiflado	el apocalipsis
la migración	la virgen	el diluvio
la vida	el diablo	la mexicanidad
el matrimonio	el héroe	la autoría

V. Dream analysis

Tell me about the last vivid dream you had.

I'm inside the night's core. It's clear but there's an overvoice made of someone's shadowed backbone, like spinal fluid and oil slick.

I'm flying. Gravity is a bad memory. I'm scared that if I stop flying I'll wake up and waking up means you die.

There's another bird here. I used to love this bird. He's a vulturehawk. He's terrible. I love him. He wants to fly with me and I want to fly with him but I don't know how his wings will fit in this cage.

No. We're not in a cage. What rhymes with 'cage'?

Age.

Rage.

Gauge.

Wage.

Mage.

Disengage.

Page.

Stage?

Stage. Yes. Stagestagestage. Ohnonono. We weren't flying. We were dancing.

(patient paces about the office corner, rests her head contra the palatable wallpaper collapse)

I don't have wings, do I? What good are these glass candy legs? I can't fly. Why did you make me think I could? You all make me believe things that aren't real. You're all the same.

Please commence your dreamscape. What happened next?

I woke up and I was a character in a book. And so are you. Let me go. (*note: more transference; projection; patient is difficult; patient walks out of the office and rubbishes a wayward soul into the rubbish and never comes back*)

Final Diagnosis

Ruffled black bird is actually a young woman with erisian hair and heartstrings.

Treatment Plan

Start on SSRI cocktail in bird feeder.

Recommend extended bed rest and high gluten diet.

Take away her keys.

Don't countertransfer.

Pray.

The Temptations of Molech

Shira Telushkin

1.

I'm being fucked gently by a man named Gustave
And this time his mustache doesn't bother me.
It's both silky and harsh and they love it,
The small children whose bones he grinds up
Each morning, extracting a calcium so rich it
Produces a paint so pigmented that his art
Is never not praised.

2.

In this moment he is gripping my elbow as my head
Bangs gently on the headboard
(His thrusting more for show than for pleasure)
And tomorrow I will sit by his side and
whisper praises on demand,
mixing calcium with color for him to consider.
They mix well in the crook of my arm.

3.

Years ago, Gustave took me to Alexandria,
walked me down the 268 steps of the encircled catacomb,
and asked for my elbow.

I told him I needed to think about it.

4.

Do I need this elbow? Winged like a chicken
When I place hand on hip, dangerous around table edges,
Weaponized against pushy people in galleries.

The truth is, outside of Prague there is a church
built from the bones of dead monks and in the catacomb tombs
of Alexandria there are glass cases full of bony
fingers, torn ligaments and martyrs' skulls.

5.

And the truth, inside of me is a small space
barely the size of a mixing bowl (small enough for
a skull), and this space is available for him,
should he need it, but my bones are my own.

The Ghosts of Birds

Kristina Marie Darling

My letters, tied with white string in the hull of
a ship that never reached the other coast.

My letters, which startled the very bird I was
trying to describe as I stood before the impasse.

Now that bird will never come back. We may
die writing each other from adjoining rooms.

1) 1 (1) 1 (1) 1 (1)

The ocean grew larger and larger.

The distance between rooms smaller.

We hear their voices in the corridor, an
aperture a mouth to cover and close.

This heap of ash, this terror.

No barge empty enough to carry it all.



The last snowfall the last thaw.

Your letters widowed into dust.

Now, a little burial.

Your grief even smaller.

Did you place the bones near each other.

Here or here.



When I'm not waiting for the ships
I listen for you.

When I'm not waiting.

In such a light how could you say
No, there is no ship that waits like that.

I Sat Down and Cried at the Pigalle Metro Stop

Angela Stubbs

From a street nearby, I wrote you
letters. For months they were kept
in a box near the door, stacked up
and waiting. I wish I knew where
you were so I could tell you things.

We wound up in the underground. I
found us huddled near
a vending machine, drinking
from the same cup of coffee,
laughing at a photograph of a fat man
wearing a tu-tu on the wall,
advertising cellphones.

The train approaches, shrieking
into the hour, wind rushing. In
the middle of Pigalle I sat down
and cried. Down here, there are
directions. Going and Not Going.
I can't look at where you are
only where you want to be.

My eyes won't split us
in two, but my body knows
how distance feels.
One minute you're standing
in the rain, the edges seem to shiver
and suddenly you're never seen again.

Attempt at an Elegy

Edwin Alanís García

In order to answer the question *How am I doing this evening?*, we must first agree that your utterance isn't an interrogative, but a performative, one intended to lessen the intrusiveness of your calling on a weekend night in order to ask me for a donation to your alumni fund. But I've had a bad week, so I'll treat it as an interrogative. Considering that we're conversing on a weekend night and I'm home alone with a bottle of Manischewitz, I won't dignify your "question" with an equally performative response that'd indicate "I'm good" or "I'm okay."

Again, I know why you're calling. Your institution has been calling for the past four years. I never bothered to answer until now. Yes, I'm a graduate of [Northern Cockwomble University]. But there's no 'anus' in my surname. The 'i' should be read with an accent over it. I used to just write the accent, but my friend, who is now in the ground, said it was unnecessary. Perhaps my friend learned that at your institution. She's also an alum, though I wouldn't bother soliciting her for donations. Funny thing: my friend was a white girl who spoke better Spanish than I did. And she was put into the ground the other day. Or maybe turned into ashes, I'm still not certain. She and I bonded over a shared aesthetic proclivity for incineration. So maybe she's not in the ground. Again, I don't know, because I wasn't there, because I couldn't afford to go home for her memorial on such short notice, which obviously makes your endeavor rather Sisyphean. But for simplicity's sake let's just say she's in the ground, and no, I don't know with absolute certainty what happened. I'm not yet ready to know, because certainty would imply the concrete truth of a body, whereas speculation, no matter how horrid, still exists in the realm of make-believe.

In any case, had I surplus money, I wouldn't give it to your institution. My friend, who is now in the ground, claimed that she could connect me with lawyers who'd build a case against your institution and that my old mentor and my department chair would one day be forced to don frigid smiles as they awarded me an honorary doctorate after I had given the commencement speech at the school that wouldn't let me finish my studies. She said this to encourage me, and then she probably kissed me, but I was too numb to notice. I'd ask her to remind me if she weren't in the ground. Then I'd ask her how her book is coming along and if she'd like another set of eyes to take a look at it and that maybe she should consider applying to MFA programs.

I don't know what she was up to during the time of our estrangement, though I still knew her as the server at the Thai place who had Sailor Moon hair, who'd blow kisses from behind the cash register and try to invite me to her sexcapades, until she learned that I couldn't stand any of this that I was still stuck on an eccentric classmate from South Bend. I called her Lady South Bend. The night my friend invited me to her place, she broke down and we didn't (never did) fuck, which resulted in us seeing each other as humans rather than toys. So I kept hanging out with her since I wanted the company. I needed sanctuary. I grew addicted to her room, the bookshelves, the surreal artwork, the feminist posters. And her bears. She had a crowd of plush bears in her loft bed, lined up at the edge like a gladiatorial audience, gazing down into the pit of her room and giving the thumbs up and/or down at whatever debauchery or bloodshed (or both) played out for them. When she saw me looking at them, she introduced them as her suicide bears, because they were gifts from past hospitalizations. Then she passed me another beer and we watched a cheesy fantasy show because she thought the lead actress was hot. Thus, we became friends when all attempts to hookup had been thwarted by Powers-that-Be, as though a narrative wove two characters together simply for the purpose of showing the world, *These people are fucked up, though fucked up in fairly complementary ways*. For example, she once came up to my apartment after work and asked if she could rest because she ate a bunch of pills that kept her up all night. She said, "I'm scared. My heart won't slow down," then she asked me to crawl into my bed (which I never used because beds depress me) and hold her. She took my hand and pressed my fingers up to her carotid artery and I couldn't feel anything, so I listened to her heart and it sang like a nightmare. She took baby speed, at a dosage she wasn't used to, though it was still less than what I took daily. And I told her it would pass but it'd hurt like fuck until it did, that the little ache you get in your throat and chest would feel unbearable but to just drink a lot of water and make sure you're not alone, because that's when the thoughts creep up on you. Though maybe she was like me and that ache wouldn't really ever go away, just lessen enough so that the vagus nerve isn't stimulated to the point where she'd howl at the cold marble floor of my apartment and vomit from the actual, physical pain caused by an omnipresent mind in a static body. That is, from terminal, self-aware loneliness. I held her wrist to remind ourselves that our nerve endings weren't actually decaying from disuse, or at least hers weren't.

She was a good friend. She'd bring me lemon water when I was sick, offered to take me to the hospital when I was *really* sick, threatened to call the cops if I didn't check in with her to assure her I was still alive. We engaged in mutual kvetching over my microaggressively racist/sexist ethics professor who was notoriously rude to waitstaff, e.g., her and her Thai coworkers. She called me af-

ter one awful night at work because she said my voice was like a lullaby. In contrast to Lady South Bend, my friend nearly convinced me that I'm a man and not a monster, an object of desire and not revulsion. Nearly, though not quite, because in truth I'm all about the monstrosity and revulsion. You, dutiful donation collector at [Rural Dumbfuck University], can judge me all you like about how shitty a friend I was, because it's true. I'll keep making excuses for why I wasn't there, why I didn't try to contact her parents and say something comforting. As she was an advocate of parrhesia (sometimes to cringeworthy, "I-swear-I-don't-know-this-crazy-girl" levels), I couldn't fall back again on polite small talk about the ethical implications of Friedman's economics, or how splendid the weather is in rural Illinois. She'd want words of vile honesty, of cum cracked rib cages, shattered cop windows, bloodied cop noses, which she herself shattered and bloodied and got away with because, as she liked to remind me, "pretty white girls can get away with anything." I'd have to divulge to her parents that I was a boy that probably broke her heart a bit. I was a shitty friend when she wanted me to live with her in Chicago and I thought she was just wanting to use me to help with rent (which is possible, even plausible), but she said, "Doll, don't worry about the rent, I just want to see you," and she admitted she was lonely and scared, which I didn't understand because she was objectively pretty and living in one of the country's most populated cities. And I turned her down because I was still hung up on Lady South Bend, and when my friend realized this she just replied, "Ouch." And we never spoke again of living together.

She just wanted a normal life, longed for a happy family of her own. The desire for normality was one of her deepest secrets. It's something we had in common. And not that I could provide that for her, but it was still wrong of me not to try. I left her alone so I could pine for someone else. Unlike Lady South Bend, my friend didn't judge anyone for emotional fragility. One night we were watching an episode of *Futurama*, the one about Fry's dog who waits and waits into old age for his companion to return. I warned my friend, "Nah, can't do it. This one makes me cry." And, as predicted, as the episode reached its end and Connie Francis's version of "I Will Wait for You" played while the little cartoon dog closed his eyes (presumably for the last time), I laughed while fighting off waterworks. My friend curled up on the floor next to me and we fell asleep together. I left the next morning and succeeded in not waking her up. She texted later, sad that I left without saying anything. She was hoping to wake up next to me. I wondered what I'd gotten myself into.

So again, I have no money to give you. Had I the funds, I'd have invested them in one last visit to my pretty but insane friend who is now in the ground. I'd make sure not to miss the next time she sings Fiona Apple at karaoke night. I'd ask her if I could have even just one of her drawings, and ask her how the hell she came up with such a twisted landscape. Or I'd sip cheap wine in her room while she packs a bowl over her cluttered glass coffee table, and I'd watch the reflection of her auburn hair brush along its surface. Or I'd raid her bookshelves and ask her to recite Anne Sexton poems from memory, and I know she could, which itself should've been a red flag.

What haunts me most about her was that she said she loved me, though I didn't quite believe her. I still don't really believe her, but I cherish the words like a meaningless mantra, because she's the only woman who has ever said that to me, and is the only woman who ever will say it to me, and whatever truth or lie was wading through her mind as she said it is now lost in the ground. So for all I care, representative of [Not-as-Good-as-UIUC University], your institution can similarly

place itself into the ground, along with that wretched city, and all of the Midwest, and this entire planet.

Perhaps we'd be better off in the ground. Recall that under the repayment conditions of federal student loans, being in the ground (or in an urn, or at the bottom of the sea, etc.) automatically expunges any outstanding debt accrued by the interred, essentially a synthesis of passing "GO" and heading directly to "JAIL." And yes, I've considered the ethical consequences that arise from fiscally-induced mortality. If you recall Kant's First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative (and, assuming you're also a product of [Glue-huffer Institute of Technology], you probably don't): "ich soll niemals anders verfahren, als so, *daß ich auch wollen könne, meine Maxime solle ein allgemeines Gesetz werden*" which is usually translated as something like "I should act only by that maxim that I could also will as universal law *and holy shit this stuff is even worse in the original German.*" But I digress—I'll humor Kant on this point. A contrary opinion, and the one I'll adopt for our current discourse, arises from a bit of sidewalk phronesis I encountered as a child, a note scribbled over a flea market table that read, "YOU BRAKE [sic] IT YOU BUY IT." There was a collective groan as a crowd of onlookers heard a crash and beheld the shattered remains of a porcelain panda, and my neophytic mind processed the little black eyes and black snout and faint smile jutting up from the tile walkway on white, razorlike shards. And that developing mind, fresh from grammar school lessons about why no sane girl would ever want to be with someone of my kind, thought it wasn't right for that little panda to be broken alone, and what if I were to go up to the table and knock over another panda next to it? Therein rests one of the greatest cognitive disadvantages of atheism: no comfort in believing that there's a purpose behind which toys god chooses to break.

So to answer your original "question," I submit to you that empirically verified, peer-reviewed sources confirm that I am broken. My friend, who is now in the ground, once cried at this possibility and kissed me and said "I don't want you to be broken," but as she grew to know me, she came to accept and affirm that I was right, and though she denied that I was becoming "less human," and agreed with the doctors that there's nothing actually wrong with my brain, she finally admitted that, "Maybe you're just broken." Perhaps that's why she allegedly "loved" me. Because she was broken, too, as can be corroborated by a legion of bears that are now wondering where their pretty and sad and insane caretaker has gone. And I'd give them the straight talk that she's never coming back, that they must now search for a plush panda to act as her proxy. Is that a sufficient answer, loyal soul collector of [Hill]jack Heaven College]? Because right now I'm only questions, the most pressing being something that will never be answered, though I'm going to ask you anyway: *If we're broken, who's going to buy us?*

No, I cannot donate to your alumni fund. Please remove my name from your list.

Also, we think your football team sucks.

Arc

Chase Feree

In the rising humidity the robins shake
their heads and kill the worms
one by one
the grackles hop and skate from
ground to fence glistening rainbow
in sunlight
clouds take on a depth when
at a low-enough angle
underneath
each tiny observation revelation
of emptiness or clutter
disorganized
you're useless full of hasty
research incorrect wording
inaccurate
decades of research into dinosaur
bones ignores tell-tale signs
of feathers
on a body disintegrated and found
each morning in the lawn nervous
to touch
a missed opportunity
and see this feather in the light.

The Boy on the Moon

Courtney Sender

I found a boy who was born on the moon.

He was uncomfortable on earth. His hands were still cold. I blew on them, loaned him gloves, shoved them under my armpits. Then his knees started buckling on the spongy ground. I bought him sneakers, offered my elbow, sat him on park benches and porch stoops. He suffered oxygen headaches. I pressed his nose to my chest, breathed directly into his mouth.

“What shall I call you?” I asked him.

“The man on the moon.”

“Not anymore,” I said. “There’s no one up there now,” and the thought of the lonely moon almost made me want to give him leave to visit.

*

He was never thirsty, but he knew instinctively how to float in swimming pools. He was never angry, except at water, because he couldn’t hold it. I bathed him, showed him the droplets that clung to his skin, told him he couldn’t cling to them.

“Why have you come here?” I asked, the faucet streaming through his fingers.

“I wasn’t happy.”

“But you had the whole universe as a view, and all your privacy, and everyone who saw you loved you.”

He said, “I saw the woman on the world.”

*

He stood outside at midnight, searching for the moon. I pointed to it, drew him pictures, took him to the planetarium. He didn't believe me. He didn't think that shining thing looked like the plains of his memory.

"I can't let you stay here," I said at last. "You should go home. You miss it."

"Home is a piece of rock," he said.

"You love it."

His knees crumpled, and he fell to the grass. "Something that can't love you back is water cupped in your palm," he said, struggling to stand. "No matter how you try to hold on, you will lose it."

*

Even so he swept his fingers over my picture frames, looking for dust. He knelt to the soil, seeking stone. I couldn't delude him anymore.

"You are the man on the moon," I said, "but I am only a woman on earth."

"I used to be the man on the moon."

It wasn't tense I was correcting; it was article.

"There are other women on the world," I confessed.

"No, there aren't," he said. "Let me show you."

*

HE TOOK me to the moon.

"Look," he said. He pointed over the edge of the moon, down through space to that mottled green-blue rock he'd found me on.

He held my waist so I wouldn't fall off or float away, and I leaned forward to look: I had moved to the moon, and there were no more women on the world that I could find.

"You see?" he said—cooling my still-hot hands, bracing my knees, feeding my lungs, un-mooning dust that held fast to my palm—and I told him that I did.

The Sleep of Reason

Robert Huddleston

1.

On a lane called rue des Ecoles
leading to Blackbird's Towers,
les Tours de Merle, birds alight
in a field of severed stalks.

They are *merles*, *Turdus merula*,
their sleek feathers edged softly
with evening light. In their call
a hiccup of darkness, warning
some say, merely of nightfall.

The thrush wards off bedfellows
and sleeps alone. But I've heard
they fatten best in hard weather.

The narrow lane winds to a hut.
Chill clings to its stones, even
as humid heat fills the valley.
A scythe hangs under the ivy.

But summer is Lethe. Fears new
and old are gathered and left
standing like hay-wains (*hay cows*
you called them) until harvest.

2.

On a Paris street, near another
also called rue des Ecoles, I took
a picture of a sign that read rue
des Anglais. Thinking it funny

that season of Brexit, till in Nice
a truck like a scythe through grass
cut down children on Promenade
des Anglais—and then it wasn't.

In the Orangerie hangs a silhouette
of Apollinaire painted by Giorgio
de Chirico before the war. The spot
where, four years later, shrapnel

would cleave the skull like an oar
dipped in water is circled in ink.
A premonition? Felled by fever
and trepanning, the dying poet

heard beneath his window a cry
suddenly go up: "*A bas Guillaume!*
Down with William! —Down with
the Kaiser!" The great war was over.

Jesus was a Comet and a Perp

Michele Somerville

There is a strange and awful vitality in the suffering of the innocent.

—Howard Thurman

1.
By sheer love and will
I brought them here.

They are free, will
die.

I insist a quotient of valor attends—

2.
On the night of the celestial event
I awakened her, child of the troubles,
just before 4:00 am.

We were at the beach.
The tiny girl and I
put bathrobes on, walked out in

flip-flops to the corner of the beach
road, where we could see
God,
I suppose.

3.
Television and cigarettes
are permitted.

Books too, *Mein Kampf*
but not *Freakonomics*.

1 in 3. 1 out of 3.

They squirmed
in times-tables seats,
disturbed
the universe, the Social
Contract, failed
to fall in

line, line up, lineup,
failed to play well with others.

When they were mine,
I tried
to remember to hold
their futures daily in my memory.

Sometimes a sandwich or a coat got the job done.

Who ordained merit and demerit?

4.
Definition of "grace":
DNA advances 30 plus years post-
sentencing made it possible
for one man to tell reporters

he was just
glad to be free.

"Good" > "naïve."

5.
One executioner I met bore
Witness thus:
He watched a head explode
in the course of a botched
"procedure."

For the one who signed off
on the order, it was the back-
breaking straw.

The traditional post-execution hot-cakes breakfast
was a glum one in that case.

“I walked away after that one,”
he told me. “And devoted my life—”

6.
No wedding rings, no under-wires.
Leave your license in the locker.

There is nothing like that ride over the Rikers bridge—

7.
They are always there,
for the object lesson
those who pay
with breath.

The Stain

Anam Javed

The women were like a swarm of bees descending on flowers. They scoped out every young girl in the vicinity for their perfect sons. They were skilled at measuring height, skin color, and morality in a single glance. Natasha seethed every time one of these women looked at her. She knew that they were pity-gossiping over her broken engagement, and deciding if her fair-skin made up for the stigma of the failed engagement. Zulekha did not understand her best friend's melancholy. She had gotten engaged to Ahmed a month ago and had promptly forgotten the vulture-like gazes.

After they welcomed the wedding procession, Zulekha grabbed Natasha's wrist and pulled her into the wedding hall so they could find a seat. Natasha noticed that Zulekha's fingers were too small to fully close around her wrist. She had never noticed how child-like Zulekha's hand was. Zulekha wanted to be closer to the male section of the hall so that she could keep an eye out for Ahmed. He was wearing a black shalwar kameez with a bright yellow scarf thrown around his neck, like every other young man at the festivities. It was hard to spot him without making it seem like she was checking out every man around her. She had to make sure that the tongues didn't start wagging. Natasha's experience told her that even an engagement couldn't shield her from catastrophe. If anything, she had to be on her best behavior for these two weeks. Their formal paper-signing Nikah ceremony was exactly a fortnight away.

Around her, the scent of biryani and chicken karahi unfurled as dozens of waiters uncovered the dishes placed on thin tables around the corners of the hall. It was a madhouse then. People pounced on the food, creating expertly balanced mounds of rice, bread and chicken to carry back

to their tables, praying that no one had stolen their seats. Young kids could be shoed away, but older ladies had to be humored. The waiters ran in between tables, serving soft drinks.

In between bites, Natasha caught a whiff of cigarette smoke and looked around. Ahmed was standing behind Zulekha's chair, respectfully greeting every adult in the vicinity. She rolled her eyes at his excessive politeness. Zulekha should have gotten engaged to someone more interesting, not that Zulekha had chosen him. Still, Zulekha had happily agreed when her parents suggested Ahmed. Once he had greeted all the adults, Ahmed turned to Zulekha, but she looked away, turning to Natasha instead.

"Are you ok? You're wincing."

"Oh, it's just cramps." Cramps was a euphemism for 'period', a word she had never said above a whisper. "Do you have a—?" She mouthed the word 'pad.'

"No." Zulekha looked worried. The back of Natasha's tunic was white.

"It's ok, the bathroom will be disgusting anyways. I'd rather sit in a stained shirt than go there! I shouldn't have worn a white shirt but I didn't have any other fancy clothes. Maybe I can use your shawl to hide it."

"Do you want to go home? It will literally take two minutes to get to my house. No one will miss us. Let me call my driver and tell him to bring the car around."

Five minutes later, after saying a hasty good-bye to Ahmed, Zulekha was lounging on her bed. She shone her phone's torchlight in the direction of the bathroom. The electricity was gone and Natasha needed the light to wash the stain from her pants. Water shortage in dams throughout the country had become acute a few years ago. Ever since then, scheduled power cuts would plunge their city into darkness for specific hours every day. The backup electricity generators in her house had failed to kick into action today.

"Zulekha? Can you bring the light closer? I can't see if the stain is gone."

Zulekha went into the bathroom and stood next to her. The flashlight gleamed on the sides of the porcelain sink as light pink water gurgled into the drain.

"Shit, is that an oil stain?" Natasha tilted the phone towards her tunic, the panic evident in her voice. She had carried an oil lamp for the festival earlier in the day. Now the light was making a brown stain on the bottom of her shirt shimmer.

"Yeah, it looks like oil—I'm so glad you didn't get burnt by it! Let me wash it. I'll do it quickly." Zulekha placed the phone on the sink, precariously balancing it against the wall without blocking the light. Then she lifted the bottom of Natasha's tunic and started rinsing the stain out.

"I'm so glad we decided to come home! I'm sorry you had to leave Ahmed."

"Oh no, I'm glad we left. I was getting so awkward."

"Really? You're always trying to get close to him."

Zulekha blushed, "I thought no one noticed that. Anyways, uh, I didn't tell you this but

yesterday we sneaked away and I liked what happened but I—I don't know—I expected something—something more?" She started to mumble, the words rushing together, "It's not that I wasn't into it, I mean, I was excited but I just didn't feel that, umm, attracted to him in the moment and—I just didn't like it—"

Natasha and Zulekha had never talked so explicitly about sex before.

"Maybe you were just uncomfortable because it was your first time?"

"Hmm, I don't think so. I was so turned on—but it wasn't—what I wanted."

"So what exactly did you want?"

"I don't know. I like when I look at him, and I do want him, but. . . I—I don't know. Maybe it'll change after the wedding and I just feel guilty right now, you know, the sneaking away."

Zulekha was pulling more and more of the shirt towards the sink as she attacked the stain, exposing more and more of Natasha's stomach to the cold December air. Natasha was uncomfortably aware of her bare stomach and legs. Except for the bathroom, the entire house was pitch dark and completely silent. It would have been scary if she had been alone, but she could feel the warmth of the body next to hers. As Zulekha twisted the material in her hands to wring out the water, she lost her balance and pressed into Natasha. The phone lost its already precarious balance and clattered into the sink facedown. There was just darkness and the warmth of Natasha's leg now.

Zulekha and Natasha snuck back into the wedding. The food had been cleared. People were sipping tea and eating bowls of rice pudding. Upbeat music was blasting. Little girls in heels too high for them were running around.

Their seats were still empty. As Zulekha sank into the chair, she caught a whiff of cigarette smoke. She hoped that she was imagining it, but when she turned her head, it was Ahmed. Suddenly, she wished that she could swap destinies with Natasha and have a broken engagement behind her and the freedom to be with anyone. . . . She couldn't bring herself to complete the thought. She cast a wide-eyed glance at Natasha, but Natasha was looking away. The frown she had carried like a fashion accessory the entire evening was gone. Natasha was not worrying anymore about the women who flittered around finding the least-flawed girl for their perfect sons. She had joined them, looking around at the girls, noticing for the first time the curves underneath their embroidered clothes. The vultures wouldn't hurt her anymore.

Infidelity: Tucked

Julie Ascarrunz

El padre dando bendiciones
-Oremos- he says.

love, I know

He makes the sign
of the cross with pursed fingers
and kisses them.

we are lost

Las otras tias, la familia y las flores
around your aunt's long box
in the sala and the hallways full as the garden
for flowers no space no climbing wall to stand.

*as we nurse
your tia*

Green of crust-
copper-brown translucent lizards
stuck sideways on the limed walls
salt on rims of hot lips
hard into the afternoon.

dying, you run

Wisps of flower smell stuck to each damp
mourner's forehead.

*to your lover
mi amor*

Sweat dripping, the scent of tomatoes
drowned in vinegar sifts through.

you pine

Claveles crowded over black shades.

*suspiras por
la otra*

Tia Sonia's picture on the mantel,
bald and smiling.

A few flies call into the rain.

*promises
perdida*

Vases of coloredrip and opening
sing festive bold confessions sing novenas.

A trowel full of cement slaps
shut her tomb

buried, love

above ground.

Bricks laid and smoothed as if a fireplace,
fiery place filled with flowers.

fuck

He gestures to us
-Aprendemos- he says.
-Let us learn from these two how to love-.

The snails upon the walk can't run

It was almost a normal Friday evening

Tasos Giannakopoulos

It was almost a normal Friday evening. The sun was hot as it typically is in August and the light was bright. We had agreed with my Sophia to have dinner with her friends from Medicine school. I really loved that group with all their uniformity and formality. Hair all tied up, tight white shirts, as if they were preparing to execute surgery. Their variations in textures and coats made all the difference in the world though. Their precision continued in the kitchen too. They had prepared every ingredient with accuracy and all instruments and tools were at place.

Sophia had decided to make my favourite dish, which was none other than pasta with red sauce. We had opened a red wine and the water was boiling and we had started a comfortable conversation about their work at the hospital. 'So, Maria, what will be your field', I asked. 'Actinology', she responded with a smile on her face that was almost grim, just before she was interrupted from dishes breaking on the floor. The sound came from the kitchen five feet away.

-Tell me where it is, Sophia shouted with all her anger towards me.

-Where is the salt, with all her strength she yelled at me with tears on her eyes.

-The salt is over, she mentioned as if Poseidon had dried the sea off of it and none could be found no more.

-Why do you have to leave? Why do you have to go so far to be? What is it that you can't stand your own people? Stay here with me. I have loved you and you know it. Look at this simple company. Why don't you appreciate all that is given to us and you seek to leave me alone? I had made plans to stay here so I can be with you and you are flying tomorrow to find new places and new riches. What is it inside you that cannot stand simple life? You, who I have loved like no one, the only one, will not be with me anymore.

That she said and then wept like the sun would not rise tomorrow. Her gorgeous lavish blonde hair was all entangled now like blueberry trees in the wild. Her delicate make-up was all loose making a mask made of ink and her knot was transformed into an awful bundle.

-Why don't you stay, were her last words before hitting her crumpled fists vigorously and robustly on my chest, that was trying not to break.

Her friends were staring. And then they cried as well, because there was nothing left to do.

the house of
In Memory of Virginia Woolf
Jonathan Betts Fields

baptized by mist on my first visit
I could barely walk, barely sit in it
the opposite of air, it makes me light
sometimes shields wind, muddles sight
stone lined hem, overcoat of grief
less dense than this, I float disbelief
melodic tragedy, peace in hurricanes
engulfed by & saved in man made waves

A Flor de Piel

Kythe Heller

Inside me a woman is kneeling but I do not know her. Touching and not touching the shroud of roses she sews petal by petal on the floor. As if what our fingers touch could tell us what we have lost—How everything will be lost. You can hear her sharp keening as roses disremember into a new shape. As if what is absent in touch could speak through you. As if you remember everything that has yet to happen. And the awkwardness of the shroud, ceaselessly trying to arrange itself without the body. As if only being dead were fragile enough for what the earth had to say. Inside me her eyes grow darker. Blackened needles sewing a spectral garment you remember and forget. Your body gets smoky, she says silently. Gets holes in it. A country you can no longer tolerate, precarious as space and time, two forms of motion that cross in a desire of which the body is an unappeasable metaphor. The mark a needle makes as it appears and disappears between the folds. Inside me a woman is kneeling. Returning home after a long journey to find home no longer there. Her body sutures the dark border between Colombia and the moon, between things that enclose you and things you cannot touch. They are so near. (Something sobbing in her all the time, all the time.) The small flame in you shivers and shivers like an eye. Climb in, part your shattered chest like a shroud, and lick at the rose petals welling over your bones. They have nothing to do with your happiness, or grief.

Housesitting for God

Walter Smelt III

It's more trouble than it's worth, I swear.
He said when He's coming back but now
I can't remember, and He gets so mad
when you call about stuff, His voice
thunderous and tinny through the phone:

"What do I pay you for?" Whatever He pays me
isn't enough. His fish are dying, I can't figure out
why. Whenever I break something, it's really old.
He won't even let me use the car, so I'm
stuck here, a thousand miles from
everyone. I tried to get my friends
to come out for a party once, but suddenly
we all spoke different languages. So that
was a bust. Once a week the Popemobile
comes by, but he only makes it this far

because he forgets God's away. Sometimes I picture
the two of them playing dice together,
drinking wine, both cheating, making up
stories about when they were young. I swear,
this is the last time, and then He's on His own.

“Almost Everyone was Mistaken”

On Secrets, Light & the Lyric Imagination

Kristina Marie Darling

In his recent essay collection, Peter Balakian defines *shadow* as a “force that follows something with fidelity” only to “cast a dark light” on that person, object, view, or perspective. For Balakian, this fraught proximity—a closeness that blocks the line of vision—is one of the most essential characteristics of a work of art. After all, it is what we sense, but do not yet see, that beckons us farther into a half-lit room. The careful architecture of a poem—a space that is gradually illuminated for the reader—depends upon all that is hidden as a necessary condition, much more so than the visible beauty or significance of a particular image.

Three recent hybrid works fully do justice to this intricate relationship between secrets, shadow, and the aesthetic imagination. In Henry Hoke’s *Genevieves*, Kirsten Kaschock’s *Confessional Sci-Fi: A Primer*, and Matthew Rohrer’s *The Others*, the unknown emerges as a source of both light and its surrounding darkness. Though vastly different in style and approach, these three writers share a gift for a skillful and calculated withholding, the suggestion of a buried narrative “quietly ghosting” all that is immediately perceptible. Here, what is hidden offers an invitation, an occasion for collaboration between the poem and its reader, creating a third space that belongs to both of them (and at the same time, neither of them). Each of these texts becomes “a glass bridge between buildings,” the beginning of an incandescent structure that is built across temporal, psychic, and geographic boundaries.

Early in the twentieth century, modernists described this kind of innovative text as a “machine for generating meaning.” The poet’s task, then, was to guide the reader’s imaginative work, slowly revealing a vast and luminous fictive terrain without limiting what is possible within it. In the work of Hoke, Kaschock, and Rohrer, this graceful movement between revelation and concealment is most visible in their treatment of familiar narrative structures. We are uncertain whether

the “pursuit” is ending or beginning, as the reader almost always finds herself “where it all began.” “You will wonder if it was the threshold,” Kaschock explains. In each of these beautifully rendered collections, uncertainty becomes a “window,” an “entrance,” and an “invention.”

Hoke’s *Genevieves*, for instance, reads as a ledger of what cannot, will not, be said aloud. Presented as a series of intricately linked hybrid texts, which are each themselves comprised of discrete episodes, Hoke’s writing allows uncertainty to accumulate in the space between things. These absences, the “silent” and “unsmiling” gaps between prose narratives, articulate—through their expertly-timed jump cuts and ruptures—a question that is refined over the course of the larger collection. In this subtle and beguiling book, Hoke asks what happens when we refuse to speak, whether this refusal constitutes an end—to discovery, knowledge, and self-actualization—or possibility, a beautiful “doorway” opening “with a flourish.”

Reminiscent of early twentieth century experimental films, particularly their creators’ predilection for montage, Hoke reminds us that silence, and the subsequent lack of a clear narrative, make space for the other, inviting “the Crowd” in all of its problematic splendor into the room. He writes, for example, in the first section of this haunted and haunting collection:

Weaponize your juvenilia.

There are only so many times you can come home before you have to decide why you’re there. Before you have to decide when you’re getting away. Carolina sat.

There was a soft cough outside her door. Carolina opened it with a crack and met her half-brother for the first time.

I’ve also been hiding, he said.

Hoke offers a seamless matching of style and content, as the preponderance of secrets in this Southern family is enacted within the behavior of the language itself. Here the connections between things, the transitional language we are so accustomed to, is purposefully admitted. For example, each sentence, and the widening expanses between them, asks of the reader a leap in logic, point of view, and syntax. This movement between perspectives is perhaps most visible when the speaker’s half-brother walks through the door (“I’ve also been hiding...”). Like a room opening inside what we thought was a single room, the narrative generates possibility through these abrupt shifts in rhetorical modes, and the line of reasoning that each one represents. As Hoke’s prose ambulates between ways of seeing, and the elisions they give rise to, we are prompted—inevitably, irrefusably—to locate ourselves in this gorgeous imagined topography. Hoke himself explains, “As I slip below the waves I’ll see light.”

Kaschock's *Confessional Sci-Fi: A Primer* continues this engagement with concealment and its seemingly infinite possibilities for readerly participation. Here, too, the transitional language we have come to expect is skillfully hidden from view. We are offered a montage "brimming with chocolates," "cigarettes," and "dipped carnations," all stripped of their narrative artifice, that unnecessary ornamentation. Similar in structure to *Genevieves*, Kaschock's discrete prose texts represent a dialogue between facets of the same voice, or parts of the same consciousness, rather than a conventionally unified narrative. Her elliptical and gorgeously fractured texts—and the echoing space between them—also become metaphor, instructing us as to how the work should be read, engaged with, imagined with.

For Kaschock, all of thought is a conversation, evoking what Mikhail Bakhtin described as "the dialogic imagination." Just as she responds to and interrogates her own observations, deconstructing the various ways of seeing that she inhabits, Kaschock prompts her reader to do the same. Consider the transition between sections in "After Museum,"

To the museum's visitors (a collective to which you know belong)
the two-way guide is a winged primate, atrophying.

The first room is one woman. A strung-out. She is laid on a
loom, and her eyes have accepted this.

Kaschock's presentation of the "woman" reads as a response to the images of community that are presented in the first stanza—that "collective to which you now belong." As the poem unfolds, she refines these recurring questions of choice and agency, considering our roles as readers and consumers of mass culture. More specifically, the text posits the human mind as a museum, exhibiting the various ephemera, cultural symbols, and pieces of language that have accumulated within it—mementoes that we have not necessarily chosen ourselves. As "the museum's visitors" wander Kaschock's display of elusive, elliptical hybrid creations, they become themselves curators, and Kaschock is implicated in her own incisive, thought-provoking cultural critique. Yet the moment we think we have discerned intent, "it all flies outside and into the porchlight like moths, of course and forever.."

Wonderfully ambitious and fully realized, Rohrer's *The Others* engages similar questions of readerly participation and, more specifically, the cultivation of a shared consciousness through art. In the book's sprawling fictive terrain, the constant presence of the other within the self—that eternal alterity—is a shadow story that haunts the narrative proper. As the work unfolds,

it is this secret, hidden most of all from the speaker of the poem, that is gradually revealed, understood, and dramatized beautifully in the style of the writing itself.

Early in the poem, Rohrer's speaker makes frequent reference to "the others," speculating about their inner lives. "At least I always assumed the others hated their jobs too," he writes. Here, and elsewhere in the opening pages, we encounter a clear divide between subject and object that is skillfully interrogated, and incisively deconstructed, as the book unfolds. Indeed, the polyphonic, collectively voiced style of the poem complicates this line of thinking, positing all of thought, and our life in language, as a shared endeavor. The project often takes the form of a linguistic collage, a carefully orchestrated assemblage of attributed language. For example, he writes,

"It wasn't real, I think,
but I saw it for sure.
The image was broadcast
To my brain to see it.
So I saw it, I guess.
"Well, that's not really much
of a ghost story, Ron.
I've actually got one.
Can I tell it to you?"

In much the same way that the story takes up haunting as one of its primary considerations, we are made to see voice as persistently inhabited by language and rhetoric that is not one's own. This idea manifests perhaps most visibly in Rohrer's use of dialogue. This passage, like many others in the collection, transitions swiftly between quoted sections, the narrative arising from what is really a chorus of voices, a vocal and dissonant collective. With that in mind, his technique not only becomes commentary on the narrative, but rather, it becomes the narrative. It is this provocative tension—between what is explicitly stated and all that is implied by the behavior of the language itself—that drives the collection. What's more, this disconnect, this gorgeous complexity becomes an aperture, a doorway through which the reader may enter the work's vast and radiant fictive topography.

Much like Hoke and Kaschock, Rohrer purposefully refuses exposition, bringing to mind Objectivist poets like Oppen, Niedecker, and Zukofsky. Yet *The Others* situates this rich artistic tradition in a dialogue with more recent conceptual writing and the lyric, ultimately refining their initial question, that lingering doubt as to whether the aesthetic imagination can exist in isolation. Rohrer shows us that voice arises within the context of a community, and that we are indebted to it, whether or not we fully realize it. As Rohrer himself reminds us, "the gate is already down / and the trap has been sprung."

Contributors

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still

William Teresa

I see you, my son, on this white
edged square, I see you in ink,
in black and white. I am always
looking at you, kneeling
to your level. Two, maybe three,
you know who I am by now,
though you won't know me for long.
But in this sliver, you are
beaming, and I am a mirror. I have
nine more years to live—somewhere I know
this. Still, I shine the wheel, still
I mow the lawn, I get upset. I watch
you walk, I make your sister, I leave
your mother, or she leaves me. But
none of this is going on right now, none
of this will happen today, in the held-back
spill of life. Nothing can change
the look on your face.
You are always here,
always about to.