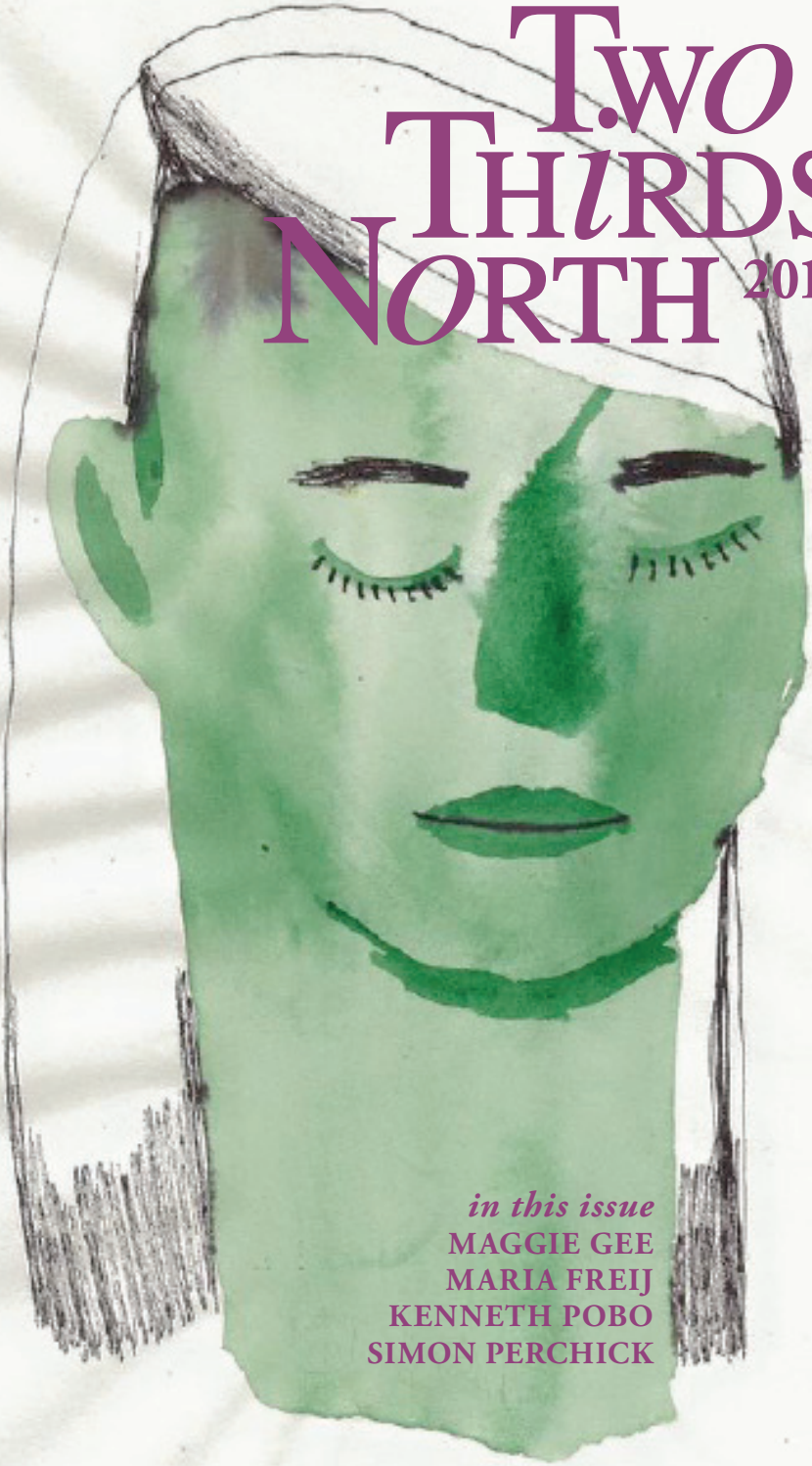
Two Thirds North 2017



in this issue

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TWO THIRDS NORTH

2017

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PUBLISHER Stockholm University & Cinnamon Press

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ISBN 978-1-909077-98-0
ISSN 2001-8452 (PRINT)
ISSN 2001-8460 (ONLINE)

Cover art by Klara Rusan
Photos on pages 8, 32, and 101 by Björn Carlén.
Photos on pages 48 and 74 by Gry Kristiansdatter Lilleng

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Editor's Foreword

America First. *Front National.* Brexit. *Sverigedemokraterna. Partij voor de Vrijheid.*

The demagogues of our nation states are calling for walls and insulation against outsiders. Primed to feel threatened, many ordinary people accept restrictions of movement and resist outside influences. It has been a hard year for *transnational* thinking, but here at *Two Thirds North*, there is a crossing of many cultural vectors. Here we give space to global poets, writers and artists who have taken up the cause to counter the narrative of threat and inherent difference.

We have taken WORLD as an organizing metaphor this year. In *World on Edge* we have gathered poems and stories where something is seriously amiss on a large scale. From Kenneth Pobo's angst about global warming, to Ting Yiu's seismic "A Topography of Absence," there are concerns for what we cannot seem to control on our planet. But we also have a recollection of growing up during the Irish "troubles," and Jonathan Greenhause's playful query into the hypochondria of the contemporary human condition.

If our world is on edge, its national closures and identity politics must be met with the loud voices of poets and writers in *The World Open Itself*. John Williams writes "I'll widen the world," even in the rotting ribcage of a carcass. In a post-truth era, our narratives and poetic images must rediscover the real by defamiliarizing our habitual visions and allowing us to perceive things again, as they *are*. Many of our poets look to the familiar to find the new. But this section is also dedicated to narratives that open to new life possibilities, whether it is a world expanded

by a bicycle as in Laurinda Petersen's "Transportation at Ten," or through family changes, or simply in a moment of sanctuary, as in Gary Allen's "The House on Boyle Crescent."

Far from the madding crowd of national divisions, there is always *The World of the Heart*. Here our contributors show, as William Faulkner has suggested, the only thing worth the struggle of writing is "the human heart in conflict with itself." Here we find the wonderful and terrible ambivalences of the heart, whether about having another baby, as in "Family of One" by Constantinos Ioannou, or how the love of a new child interrupts and is part of poetic creativity in "Lewis" by Maria Freij. And like the world of politics, the heart has its battles and overt conflicts, some resolved, many not.

Of course, the world will go round long after our attempts to trump its delicate balance. In *Turning Towards Tomorrow*, we have gathered those works which seem to recognize an inevitable futurity, whether out of a "morgue of leaves," as Richard King writes, or in the need to fix a broken relationship in "In Pieces" by David Stallings. For many, the possibilities are still dark, but in some, like Tobi Alfier's pantoum "West of Amboy on Route 66," hope comes in the possibility of seeing a new and different spring as buds grow, "sprig by sprig."

As usual, we see *translation* as an essential part of transnational writing. We seek engaging translations of contemporary world poetry, as we have here with Jade Huang translated by Elaine Wong, but here we also include Changming Yuan's conceptual translations and Srinjay Chakravarti's play on poetry by Jibanananda Das.

We close *Two Thirds North 2017* with an exclusive interview with the remarkable novelist Maggie Gee, and her insightful guide to the new writer on starting a novel, starting on a new world.

Paul Schreiber



WORLD ON EDGE

Favour in Lampedusa

ENAIÊ AZAMBUJA

To Favour, the Nigerian baby whose mother died of petrol burns when her overcrowded boat capsized in Lampedusa.

I cannot share the weight of my solitude
willing and unwilling to
visit the world
with the laziness
of spring on Sunday

The crow perched on the lamppost
resumes its
ceaseless crapping

As I carry Favour in my arms
my nipples stiffen
and I lactate
petrol is more bitter than colostrum

Hungry grinding teeth
couldn't disturb the speed of the boat

Favour gazes at the turquoise blue
lifts up her head and points at the sky
with clouds like spilled milk
spread over the table

She touches me
her tiny dark hands
and never cries

She wraps the sun with two onyx ribbon bows
clarity makes me shiver

Methane Wandawoowoo

KENNETH POBO

I keep watching YouTube videos,
hard to tell what's true or not.
I used to be sure.
2 + 2 always equaled 4. Now
numbers seem to jump on a trampoline,
bounce in strange ways. Yesterday

I saw a scientist, a *real* one,
say we may have only 15 years left—
Arctic methane bubbles up
and seals our lungs. I'll be
65 then, ready to retire. Work
all my life and at the gates
of Heaven I can't breathe. Maybe
God will set his Big Foot down
and say no, this is my world—
I can't let this happen.
He's never stopped other horrors,
so why do it now? The clock

runs out of breath. It's like being
in a car, a driver going 125 mph
in a 25 mph zone, laughing, turning up
the radio. Stop, stop, I scream,
but stop is a word that broke
into tiny pieces. We can't.
We don't know what it means.

Salt Is for Curing

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

To feel the bottom:
sand & stone. Silt. Sea snails.

What makes up the foreign world
clumps between my toes.

Uproots. Assimilates.
Distances collapse: now

we are merely the naming
vs. the named, hands

vs. being held, the forsaken
& reinhabited.

—:as a cypress collecting kites.
—:as a child reaching up

from the crook of its branches
toward string & color.

Salt & wound, I am standing
knee-deep in this shipbroken

blue, as the horizon rushes in,
coughing up shells I can slip

my entire body into
like a coffin.

The Ghost of Wainwright

JOHANNA KASURINEN

I. "Oil Boom Brings Hope, Anxiety to Arctic Village in Alaska"

The houses of Wainwright, Alaska stood so far apart that feuding with a neighbor required real effort, and a friendly visit even more. Home to some five hundred people, half of the land belonged to the military base where Army medics trained during the long winters. The men, boys really, would drag one another night and day through the snow-drowned forests, fashion makeshift leg braces from branches with outdated methods for wars they'd likely never see. Yet they walked around town with the pack mentality of military distinction and bred contempt among the townsfolk. Yes, indeed the other half of Wainwright belonged to its inhabitants. Once people of old trades, many now served the tourists or the oil plant. Some old townsfolk, old enough to have seen the near-end of the arduous town with the decline of hunting and whaling, prayed to the oil companies with the same earnest dedication as they did previously for fishing fortune, uncomfortably shameless in their belief.

The Farmer had lived here his whole life, raised and molded along with the scenery, with the greyed pastel wood houses, stout yet rickety in the cold wind, connected by thin, wiry phone lines.

The tourists came and went like the tide. Every day a new flock of smiling, pink-faced people in bright colored Gore-Tex would laugh in strange languages he did not understand and wonder at the cold dark, like it was a strange feature, mere attractions for them to behold. They did not see the darkness for what it was, and when they wandered too close to the living void of the forest or sea, a guide's hand would always be close by to yank them back.

When they returned home they would take with them genuine, Alaskan memorabilia sold by *Kavanaugh's Souvenirs.*

Adam Kavanaugh had turned his back on traditions and opened up a store in service of the tourists. He sold maps, figurines, keychains of the orcas, and mugs and all sorts of what-have-yous to the tourists, who ate them up like fish gorging on bait. Adam would sit amongst his trinkets, wave to the Farmer as he walked by, always in a good mood. Between the soldiers, townspeople and tourists, there was nary a folk in town who didn't like Adam.

Kavanaugh's Souvenirs centered the village, drawing in the tourists with its childishly simplistic, obnoxiously yellow sun logo that sported the store's name. Adam had proudly designed it himself, he would be quick to remind visitors. He chatted up the tourists, content in his fluorescent lit store like he had truly hung up the sun himself in the dead middle of winter.

The Farmer diligently worked through the grey cold-bitten seasons without complaint, as the land dictated.

Adam had once offered the Farmer one of the orca figures free of charge when he'd caught him staring up at one. What use did a man have with a plastic toy when genuine orca bones, killed by his grandfather, already

furnished his mantelpiece? Silently he declined, shaking his head to the warmly smiling Adam.

II. "We Were Wrong About Limiting Children's Screen Time"

The Farmer lived well outside Wainwright village on a farm that had belonged to his family for generations. His great-great-grandfather had bought the land, and each subsequent head had bought more, pushed the edges of the plot out and out until there was more space than was useful. The barren cold plains of the land were a tough prospect for any farmer, and while production had been commercially viable before, the Farmer could only sustain himself. He'd read in the paper that local milk production would be in an upswing soon, and until then feeding himself off his own land was a reason to be proud, like his father had always said. His father had worked until the day he'd died, right through his dementia.

His mother had died of old age some five years ago now. She had never liked having her picture taken, and so he had no photos of her in the grand living room alongside the old paintings. There were no pictures of his father either, for his mother had never been sentimental. It was in this room, dark and smelling of warm ash from the fireplace, that the Farmer spent his evenings after work. His days were long. The constant disrepair around the structures of the farm and the tending to the cows and musk oxen had him rise up well before sunrise and left him little time for rest in the small hours of the night. He'd sit by the fireplace and have one glass of whiskey.

This night, a shuffling noise came from the door.

Animals, he thought. Or lost tourists.

At the door, on the porch, he found neither. A trail of blood and grime had apparently visited his door, mangled about and had now receded back into the dark-infused plains. The tracks were big, and as he approached the black vast he could make out the shape of a folded over figure. It was human. Half-naked and crawling like a crayfish on land, Adam looked up at him.

The man bleated like a cow, blood trickling down his temple as he waved his limbs around like they were half their length and blunt.

The Farmer asked him what he was doing but got no answer, just Adam whimpering on the ground, pushing his face into the watery dirt. Why would the man be this far from the village? The Farmer wasn't one for guests. Guests always assumed they needed more attending than the farm.

Indoors by the fire the Farmer noticed that Adam's head was not only bleeding, but protruding. The swelling made his face look funny, and he could barely open the other eye. Even Adam would have trouble selling trinkets looking like this. The man was still moaning and gawping, unconcerned about all the dirt and blood he'd dragged into the living room. He'd have to clean it tomorrow, the Farmer noted.

III. "Pregnancy at Slaughter: What Happens to the Calves?"

The morning was cold when Doctor Chubbuck arrived. Her large steel colored Range Rover pulled up next to his pickup.

Doctor Chubbuck had been coming to check on his cows and oxen for a number of years now. She was a heavy woman who everyone knew had diabetes, but the Farmer

approved of her because she handled her job well and promptly.

One of his cows was pregnant, the last pregnancy he reckoned was in her, so he hoped for a female calf. He'd called Doctor Chubbuck when he'd suspected the cow had an inverted stomach, which could cause problems. For half an hour, the doctor poked and patted at the cow with her pale-pink stethoscope, taking blood samples and running various tests. Her face was round and her white skin shiny, but her eyes and mouth sat simply and neatly on her face in a pleasant manner. Her bundled up brown hair fell over her brow as she knelt to retrieve her utensils, though he noted how her thick middle made the process ungainly, her white lab coat straining at the shoulders.

"It's safe to say it's not LDA. I think it's just her age catching up to her, so you're seeing symptoms of the pregnancy you might not have seen before." She scribbled on her clipboard as she talked, not looking at him. "I'll check out the uterus while I'm here. Just in case." She pulled a long plastic glove over her arm, up past her elbow. Black and shiny slick, like the skin of an orca.

The cow made a familiar noise as she inserted her black gloved arm into it. As she worked, she mused. "Have you heard the news about Adam Kavanaugh?"

"No. The souvenir shop?"

"Yeah, I'd be surprised if even you didn't know him. George asked me to ask you, because he's been missing for a few days now. Everyone's worried. We thought to ask you to keep an eye out, just in case."

"Don't know why he'd come out this far."

"Just in case. But yeah ... They found his cellphone out by the far end of Nashoalook road."

He didn't say anything, so she went on, her arm still inside the cow.

"My money he went out drunk and got himself into trouble. Even folk who grew up here forget it's dangerous. They have the boys from the Fort looking for him too. If they can't find him … Well, his wife is absolutely devastated, of course."

She withdrew her arm. The cow was fine. He felt relieved. After the cow calved, he'd have a good few months of beef. The doctor gathered her belongings, petted the cow on the head and cooed, "Good girl." She handed him the bill as they stepped out of the barn. The main building of the farm stood dark, towering before them, the black wood of its eaves breaching the pale sky.

After a quick good-bye, she started towards her Range Rover, but turned back suddenly.

"Have you ever thought of getting a dog? All this space." She gestured towards the plains.

"A dog?"

"Might be nice to have some company. They don't complain either."

He snorted, short but mocking. "No, I don't think so."

She seemed embarrassed to have brought it up. She told him she'd be back to check on the calf in a few months if nothing else came up. Once her Rover was out of sight, he headed back to the tool shed. *A dog*. She thought having another mouth to feed, another needy creature would be nice? A dog was no different from cows or oxen, even if it could maybe hunt foxes or raccoons. It was like the time when a tourist had asked him if he named all his cows. No. He shook his head. She was just as air-headed as other women.

IV. “Three-legged puppy climbing stairs is the most inspirational thing you’ll see all day”

It was quiet during the day. A restless, consuming quiet.

Adam stared out of the window, his forehead resting on the cool glass, hands resting limply on his lap, folded. He bulged out his cheeks with air, holding his breath.

He blew out the air, his breath condensing on the window glass in two hazy ovals, blurring his vision.

He hadn’t seen anyone on the other side for a long time now.

V. “3500 soldiers train in 4-week exercise in wainwright”

The Farmer found Adam by the backdoor on his knees, digging his aimless, limp hands at the doorknob. It was fruitless and embarrassing to watch. The Farmer had come back for lunch that day only to find that the grand living room was like a raccoon had run through. It wasn’t until he spotted the orca bones of his grandfather on the floor in pieces that he’d strode right in. Now the Farmer snapped at him, threw the curved broken bones at the stupid man. Adam curled up on himself, beginning to sob in huge breathy gasps like a child.

He grabbed Adam by the shirt—his old shirt—and dragged him up the stairs and into the bathroom. He had shown the man nothing but hospitality, even when no one could like him in the state he was in, sloppy and unsightly. If Adam insisted on making a fool of himself, he could sit out his fit alone.

“Don’t come out until I say so.”

He waited until the sobbing man nodded, his face smeared with snot and saliva.

The Farmer made beef stew for lunch, a rare treat, but he didn't feel like eating once he sat down at the table with his bowl of stew. Suddenly he heard a knock on the door. He must've been really out of his head if he hadn't heard anyone drive up.

At the door was George Itigaituk. The old Inuk man stepped in as a volunteer deputy when the town needed one.

"Hope I'm not interrupting," he said. "I was hoping you'd have time for a quick chat."

The Farmer invited him inside to partake in the stew so it wouldn't go to waste. The Farmer had massive respect for the indigenous people and all their traditions, with roots in the deep soil and snow of Alaska itself. They were honorable people.

He set a pitcher of milk between them, from his cows. George looked at him but said nothing.

"I suppose you heard from Lisa already." George ate his stew, hummed in approval while talking. "Doctor Chubbuck, that is."

"The owner of the souvenir shop."

"Yes, it's been almost a week now. We've had all eyes looking, but no luck. Military helped too, though they're in the middle of some big operation. Reckon we're looking for a body now."

"Yes."

George looked at him, eyes coal-black. "I thought I'd give the area one last sweep. His wife's been coming in daily. I can't say I have much experience with this sort of thing."

"Difficult undertaking."

"I'll say. I got a brother-in-law in Florida. He's been a cop for twenty odd years now. I remember a thing he used to say." George held out his glass and the Farmer filled it with milk. "Above all else, to trust your instincts."

"There's still stew." The Farmer set down the milk pitcher. He got up to refill the bowl. When he returned, George Itigaituk was standing by the living room door, looking at the mantle.

"Your father had orca bones there, I remember back when I bought his truck one summer." He was looking intently at the room.

"Your people have many legends of the orcas," the Farmer said. He sat down and ground pepper into his bowl and George's. "Wolves of the sea."

"I suppose." George sat back down, his leathery face bunched up at the brow, staring at his spoon.

The Farmer continued. "They revered the orcas, believed they were the souls of the dead. Alive only under the dark surface as great whales, neighbors to the drowned."

George pushed a piece of meat around in his bowl.

"A grand heritage. A second life of honor, don't you find it delightful?" The Farmer smiled, staring. "The wolves of the grand open sea, kings amongst the ill-fated. Sea-lions as your slaves."

George laughed shortly, like a bark. "What happened to the bones?"

The Farmer stared.

"I got upset."

Silence lingered between them and George dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. "Fine stew. About as good as Elaine's, but don't go telling her I said that."

Again, the Farmer stared.

"My wife, she runs our diner. The one in town. You're welcome to drop by sometime, if you like. I mainly do

package runs to the airport, she's the heart of the operation. I've been busy now, of course."

"Yes."

"People disappear around here every now and then." George tucked his dirty napkin under the plate. "Wolves, bears. Alcohol. The woods in general. Usually, it's just … we would have found the remains by now."

The wind outside prickled at the windows. George was suddenly more aware of the old house around them, its gentle creaking, its darkened wood and tall ceilings. The cold.

The Farmer smiled, teeth white as the milk. "And what do your instincts say?"

George sat back into the driver's seat of his car, the thud of the door shutting out the outside cold air. His breath came as condensed puffs in the pale light. He stared back at the dark farmhouse, hand on the ignition key. He could make out the Farmer standing still beyond the surface of the downstairs screen door, a figure submerged in the darkness. Inexplicably ashamed, George averted his gaze, instead looking up at the tall glass windows of the upper floors.

At one of the windows, condensation lingered upon the glass. On the hazy surface, someone had drawn a circle, haloed by dashes of lines. A childlike sun.

George's hand rested on the ignition.

The cold fields, the languidly grazing cows, seemed suspended in the dying light of day, and the dark figure lingered beyond the screen door.

The Farmer watched George's truck kicking up long trails of dust in the dirt road behind it as it rumbled into the distance. He scraped the leftovers from their bowls together and reckoned there was enough left for Adam.

VI. "22 Questions That Human Beings Will Never Ever Be Able To Answer"

At first, Adam could not hold down his food. Saliva gleamed down his face as he let pieces of beef fall from his mouth, no matter how many times the Farmer picked them back up to present to him. This continued for a few days, until he pressed down leftover potatoes into a paste with the back of his spoon, and Adam ate.

The wound on his head had gelled and then dried out, forming a deep red crust on the top of the malformed mound of his temple. It was itchy, apparently. Adam's hands seemed to hang off his wrists listlessly now. He also didn't seem to know what to do with them, and would at times end up scratching himself to bleeding in the process of his shuffling. The Farmer diligently clipped his nails, but eventually just tied the other man's sleeves into knots so he wouldn't hurt himself. He must have felt ashamed, he knew, to act this way. It was troublesome, but he tried to be understanding.

Kavanaugh's Souvenirs centered the village, the sun logo covered in a thin lining of snow. In the dark empty windows no Adam sat smiling. Instead, only the Farmer's own reflection stared back at him. The village adapted to Adam's disappearance with the same half-hearted disapproval as they did to all changes. The investigation ended as an unsolved case, with George Itigaituk stepping down as volunteer deputy of his own accord, and the military announced their efforts were fruitless as well. *A real shame*, they called it.

One afternoon when he found the time, the Farmer drove up to the shore, just off Point Hope. The cold had started to truly set in, and he pulled his jacket closer to himself as he stared at the blue dark, pulsing surface of the sea. From here it looked endless.

The Farmer threw in the broken bones one by one. They sunk into the sea languidly. The last specimen was a grand piece of the orca's jawbone, lined with jagged smooth teeth. He noted absently, how in their impeccability, the teeth looked almost plastic.

Chapter headlines were taken from

"Oil Boom Brings Hope, Anxiety To Alaska Town." *latimes*.

Dvorsky, George. "We Were Wrong About Limiting Children's Screentime." *Gizmodo.com*.

Ernst, Stephanie. "Pregnancy at Slaughter: What Happens to The Calves? *All-creatures.org*.

Wierks, Kylee. "Three-legged puppy conquering stairs is the most inspirational thing you'll see all day." *CBS 4 - Indianapolis News, Weather, Traffic and Sports | WTTV*.

"3500 soldiers train in 4-week exercise in wainwright." *630 CHED - Edmonton Breaking News, Traffic, Weather and Sports Radio Station*.

"22 Questions Human Beings Will Never Ever Be Able To Answer." *BuzzFeed*.

Yearbook Zero

GARY ALLEN

The best years of my life were wasted
on a country that couldn't give a damn about its young
grown men stood on soap boxes or the backs of flatbed lorries
to preach a politics that hinged on the madness of religion
some seemed to pray for the Apocalypse
some seemed to wash their hands after the cross
had been erected on every country road.

A sense of hopelessness filled the young
destinies already believed to be beyond their grasp
three hours queuing outside the youth unemployment office
my father said, You stick by your own, come what may
but I saw them blutered on the Orange Hall dance floor
tearing lumps out of faces already old
and for no other reason than the taste of it
while the girls screamed and huddled in the toilets.

Sex was taboo too, every station of the cross
was a taut hand with chipped nails
and the question, Where did you say you worked again?
At night the pubs were ringed with steel wire and sandbags
like in a real war, and the front doors of the houses
were useless on snibs
the libraries had books that were fifty years old
and the men at the street corners uselessly wished
they had followed their brothers to Canada or Australia after the war.

When I look back on the dead stars that were crazy years
I can count the cost in terms of lives lost

those who could fill old photos in a school yearbook
or the opportunities that were denied by self-made men in expensive suits
the doggerel faith led our fathers by the nose
the loyalty that was easily given to fools in a mirror
but mostly I think when I think at all
of a large working-class family sitting in the forced darkness
of a political power-cut, my mother counting pennies from hand to hand
and the long wasted hours punctuated by our collective sighs.

A Topography of Absence

TING J. YIU

When
the earth quaked again
it became a thing of numbers
stone figures multiplying thick and fast
Aftershock Aftershock Aftershock
red dots replicate without relief multiplying to the hundreds
devoured through a cold blue television
screen

Waiau
lifts clear off the land
forming a new geography that puzzles the animals
Richter scales twitch, tectonic plates thrust, crumbling mountains
rupturing roads, cracking the asphalt, the tarmac, the macadam
o p e n
earth is in labour
delivering entrails of soil and roots and minerals
rocks, dirt, debris block all roads
No way in no way out

The
gods are furious
Papatūānuku and Ranginui
punishing us/me/them for abandonment
suffocating their children in darkness until they were torn apart
by Tangaroa, SeaGod, rushing to fill the void frothing the ocean
threatening gargantuan waves to come
crashingcareeningcolliding
to landfall

Forcing
Kaikōura's seabed to cleave upwards
bringing giant fronds of bull kelp from the depths
clinging to salmon-pink greywacke drying and stinking in the sun.
A new coastline of stranded pāua and crayfish
suddenly without brine, like enormous
armoured insects of the Cambrian
faltering, dying, desiccating
in the new sharp
air

Antipodean
seizures travel via
express internet connections
reaching me 17,500 km away from
site of emergency on solid unmoving Scandinavian bedrock
no-connection signals aggravate frustration fury fear
scrambling unashamed for scraps of disaster porn
news

What of
standard operating procedures
for measurements of guilt? Count loyalty by number of
"refreshes" clicked for latest updates? Weigh responsibility by
frequency of long-distance-calls placed multiplied by pitch of worry
in voice totaling sum of overall
compensation for
absence in
body?

Basic Health Questionnaire

JONATHAN GREENHAUSE

How are you currently feeling? How are
your sinuses?
How are your feet? How's your breastbone

& collarbone?
How are you managing? How's your
guillotined head?

How's your gangrene? How's your typhus?
How's your
inadequate typing? How's your Type 1

diabetes? How's
your cancer? How's your dastardly bastard
of a spouse?

How's your house? How are your zombies?
How's your
genetically-mutated virus? How are

your psychics?
How's your leprosy? How's your power
of reasoning?

How are your disappointing children?
How's your
gunshot wound? How's the shrapnel?

How well does
your crap smell? How's your sense
of impending doom?

How's the state of your bedroom? How's
your sex life?
How's your ex-wife? How's your

Treponema Pallidum
commonly known as syphilis? How's
your mistress?

How's your confining tomb? How are
your measles?
How are your mumps? How's your

existential crisis?
How's your shattered belief in God?
How's your

rheumatic fever? How are your seizures?
How's your
genetic disposition to unending failures?


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A WORLD OPENS ITSELF

Bombas

ROWAN JOHNSON

At 4 am, Prince's Beautiful Ones played as the remaining customers in Flairs stumbled out of the bar. Further down Bar Street, George Clooney was still painting Catherine Zeta-Jones' toes outside the Million Beauty and Slimming Salon, but the street was almost deserted. With a plastic cup still full of whisky, the Cypriot soon found himself on Tombs of the Kings Road. Still wide awake, he made it all the way down to the ruins, where he jumped the fence and sat staring at the ocean.

His girlfriend Samara had recently become a flight attendant. She had moved to Jerusalem a month ago and left him alone here in Paphos. He missed her still, but in many ways the separation was for the best. Samara was mostly a decent girl, but she was unpredictable. Like that time she suddenly visited her sister who lived in Jerusalem. She had packed a suspicious-looking present in her bag and labeled it with the Hebrew word for doll – "booba." But the way she had written the word looked like Greek "bomba," so airport security almost cancelled the flight.

One weekend, as was often the case, Samara was bored and she created a picture of herself in her dream job as a flight attendant on Photoshop. But rather than showing a successful woman proudly performing her job, her image showed her wheeling a suitcase out of an ocean at sunrise

in her drenched uniform as a jet ominously crashed into the sea behind her. He asked her why she did it but she just shrugged.

He drained the rest of his drink and grew suddenly aware of a slight movement of light in the sky. He barely saw a distant plane drifting through the air. It was falling rapidly and crashed silently into the ocean. Laughing it off, he stood up and headed home.

Bronze Havana

RICHARD KING PERKINS II

I find my finest thoughts
at daybreak

as insects
of the underground return home

to reveal petals of atonement
in parched weeds.

Dislocated by the joy
which emanates from their purring cilia,

creatures are reacting,
you might say,
and becoming part of your envied pantry.

Yet in here, within the tight darkness,
within the silent floors and garage,

eluding luna,
dreaming of bronze Havana

the insects can be heard to boldly sing
of your capture and release,

absorbed into volumes of tilted stars.

Legacy

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

And cannot be stilled, the lifeless
fox convulsing with ants and sweet
honeycomb buzz; the full weight
of the sun calling all hungers
together for a single purpose
two fingers of bourbon
refuse to dull in me.
Or senseless sex in the dark
alleys between palmettos.
Or my youth as it extends
farther from reach. That poems
praising decay never age like
a body; that, if this is hunger,
I don't know what for; that
the inner life of the dead
reveals itself in what survives
—bloating, loosening
into parts, making a home
of ribs for its young;
that I am more fox than poem
and will become a temporary country
teeming with life; that this
is how I'll widen the world.

Transportation at Ten

LAURINDA PETERSEN

One year I owned only feet
at the bottom of my legs, good
for the steep life I lived down
hill after hill where if I ran
deep enough I would drown
myself. Instead I learned
to swim and left for the nearest
city which was set in squares
so if I grew skates I could
glide the glassy concrete

and thread my way through
back lanes that were none
of my business. Once I could
balance a bicycle it went
better, opened new mapland
for me to risk riding with
the murmur, the whisper
of wheels that changed me
into a second kind of survivor.

The Fire

JAMES BARRETT

Ask the old boys on Sámi Radio Finland
as they sit around low fires in timber houses,
high above the tree line drumming the songs
within them making their own medicine invisible.
In the deepest murk of winter they see,
without the need for electricity and food,
coming from a place never colonized nor paid for,
their tongue is the same in all tasting.

I open my hand,
releasing dried leaves and preserved flowers
and the tiny bones of hundreds of dead birds.
Through my skin the sun shines revealing
rivulets, capillaries, canals, all woken by movement,
for its own sake, woven about a light
which bears no resemblance to its source,
the shadow voice which began language,
a story whose beginning has never been found.

He calls himself Wolf
but in winter dresses as a woman.
There is little room left at his fireside,
for all come to hear the dancing.

Last Bar in Okinawa

SAMANTHA LÊ

silvery faces
the color of molt skin
odors tasting
of rice wine and warm
dish towels pinch
shut egret eyes
the old-timers gum
bits of morning gossip
with the patience
of those who've tasted
the longest

lives

young stranger
sinks to the bottom
with ice cubes foam-
stuffed mouth forms
senseless sounds
300-yen Orion
shouldn't stale
like centuries-old sorrow

distances

between the generations
isn't knowledge
but fright worn
of varnish in elbow spots
the bar sleeps dreaming
of fish outside
miles of coastlines
soaked in a blind
ceremonial light
stones in secret
pockets grow weighty…

wait

The House in Boyle Crescent

GARY ALLEN

Honour the Lord with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce. Proverbs 3.9.

In this house nothing is wasted, but Pakeha time,
the uphill trams to the termini bring more leftovers,
Can I bed down one, or maybe two nights?
I've got some change, and a bag of supermarket bin fruit.
Can I sleep with my girl? Sure, just don't bring hard time into the house –
which they ignore anyway, like in Salvation shelters
or train stations, or holding centres.
Is this a religious place, do I have to sing or get touched up?
No, just do your bit around the house and don't upset the neighbours
by fucking naked in the garden.
The only neighbours I have are the dogs
who made my people strangers in their own land.
And don't antagonise the cops when they make a routine visit
looking for drugs or guns or runaway kids
or proof of ill-repute or anarchy or religious fuck-ups.

Soft fruit tastes better anyway, just dissolves
like thick homemade hooch, like a wooden baton in the groin.
Where you get those tattoos boy? This park belongs to the City.
Isn't that girl too young to be hanging around out here?
Be glad she's not white, though we didn't say that
because we've been on Government ethnical understanding courses,
got the certificate and everything. And now you hang out here
it's not just the elderly neighbours, worried about the value of their
property
ask the social worker, the probation officer – hangout for pushers
bikers, antisocial types, discarded syringes in the gardens

the man is either compliant, or a do-gooder fool.

In this house the beds are low to the ground, on wooden boards
candles light up faces that sing native hymns
and protest songs, and songs that free the soul
the mountains, the forests, the whales - and what we eat
has been thrown out, and what we use has been neglected.
This Pakeha looks like the Pakeha Christ, but he brings all the Gods here
and turns no one away, even the cops are caught between his voice
and the need to beat-up kids, and down-and-outs,
and those whose minds are no longer their own.

And when he's not writing poetry or drinking plum wine
he supervises the big pot of vicious soup that holds everything
or he hands out money, darns socks, talks kids
into going back to sort things out
barring the cops, hiding addicts though he doesn't condone it
but understands it and knows that everything is short lived
and must by the very nature of a man come to failure.

Mews for the Tarpans of the World

FELIX PURAT

The thunderclouds are thundering
Greying skies are imminent, see?
Lush fortune for the greenery
Dismal for the *koniki* though
Grazing delectable grasses
Beneath vanilla yellow walls
The palace facing to the West
The rotund courtyard hosting here
Mews for the tarpans of the world

the lands that Polonized Przewalski
and his namesake horse,
but here you have the milkywhite,
mistygrey but ass-stubborn pony instead,
so grey they almost dissipate into vapour
rainyday ghosts merging into the surrounding climate
leaking rainfall imported from the West
looming cumulus concoction of cloud cover
showering Sieraków Castle first before
reaching the refuge, coming into range,
recreating the world war
one hundred years before
entrenched like the French but
without rainsoaked linear pits
helpful farmers, no Apollinaire;
vodka not his Alcools,

Prussian vs. Russian,
Pole vs. Pole,
tarpan vs. the world
minus mapless Poland;

Equestrian sanctuary
Harmless to reality in
A relic of the royalty
The feast fit for a Polish count
That no king of the bygone bloods
Will ever feast upon again
Until the next anarchic age
Will run its long, chaotic course
Delirium that held its breath
Will only then be fully spent.

Both of You

NYKHITA TORRES MONDACA

For years, my father struggled to accept that I'm a lesbian. He disowned me twice. The first time, he was forced to sleep on the couch for almost a month. The second time, when I brought Alitash home, mom's strength and faith in me cracked and she cried. Alitash was neither man nor woman to them; she was a blasphemous in-between that challenged everything they thought they knew about the world. Dad saw his chance and kicked me out.

Mom soon found out where we lived and started to send packages filled with jars of pickled pearl onions and cucumbers and at least two kilos of avocado. Amongst the goods, she left a post-it with a hastily written note: *Cuídense.* Take care, both of you. Each package brought me back home, to the sounds of pots and pans early in the morning, delicious meals and long talks.

That Halloween, an invitation came through the mail. Thanksgiving was around the corner and a small bird had told my parents I was pregnant. My brother was the most likely culprit; he had eyes and ears everywhere. Alitash said my belly didn't show much for someone who was seven months pregnant, but my waddling gave it away.

The day before Thanksgiving, I called. "I'm still with Alitash."

"It's fine, m'hija. Come home," mom said.

All family gatherings meant a full-house: aunts, uncles, cousins of varying degrees. Facing my parents' reactions to Alitash had been rough enough; the thought of facing the whole family had me eat two whole jars of pickled onions.

"Let's have a safe word. If we feel something's wrong, we say Makena and we leave, no questions asked," said Alitash as she got into bed.

"I'm not using our child's name as a safe word!"

"It has a calming effect on you, usually, and I'm sure you'll need it tomorrow."

"And you won't?"

"I'm gonna need Xanax and two shots of the finest bourbon eight dollars can buy."

"Can I get in on that action?"

Alitash laughed and snuggled in close. She rubbed my belly softly and Makena kicked in response.

Today I find out if my parents have changed at all. My heart pounds in my ears when we turn to my old street. I grip Alitash's hand like a vice. The bantering should spill through the open windows by now, the shadows of people inside should dance on the snow, but everything is silent. My daughter's name is on my lips long before we reach the porch.

Alitash rings the doorbell. Mom shuffles to the door in her bright red slippers. She ushers us into an empty house. The spicy, golden-brown turkey is on the table, surrounded by bowls with aji pebre and locos con mayonesa, Betty Crocker recipes be damned.

"Mom, where is everyone?"

"Your dad doesn't live here anymore," she smiles and cups my face to bring me close for a greeting. "It's just us."



THE WORLD OF THE HEART

Return

ERICKA HEDLUND

I still go home for Friday night dinners. Red wine fills the crystal glasses that my mom brought over from Israel when she and dad immigrated to New York and fell into the welcoming embrace of stringy haired hippies protesting 'Nam and advocating for free love. After dinner she'll wash the glasses delicately in warm water, drying each one individually before placing them in a chest lined with crimson silk scarves.

They've lit every candle they own, including the yellow beeswax ones you could buy from the corner shop before desperate artisans decided they were a rare commodity and doubled the price. The tablecloth is a starched cream linen covered with another layer of ivory lace. We hold hands as the Rabbi leads us into prayer, his baritone voice singing the Sabbath songs while yellow wax drips onto the lace. All I can think of is the way his wife's hand feels in mine, powdery and light, her bones as fragile as a bird's. I have a flashback of Maria, of her big third generation American teeth and how her caramel skin tasted on my tongue. I have to stop myself from squeezing the wife's hand.

The flames flicker and my father's voice joins with the tenor of a violin string. For a second I fall into the old-world reverie, and I'm back in the moment where Abraham sacrificed Isaac, the thin brittle flutter of locusts wings, and the bush that kept on burning.

And then there is silence.

I'm to bless the wine, a prayer usually reserved for my father, but tonight their only son is to be the center of pride. "Baruch atah, Adonai…" My Hebrew sputters in short croaks, a coagulated cocktail of corroded identity. My father stifles a cough, my mother shifts in her seat, the Rabbi and his wife sit in half shadow with the candlelight distorting their disappointment. My father clears the shame from his throat and makes a joke about American kids, they all laugh politely.

That night as I ride the subway back to studio I rent in Queens I mouth the correct Hebrew to myself. I've heard it my whole life, it's as part of me as my breath. Sitting across from me, a homeless woman snores, her long grey hair snaked in thick, matted dreads, her skin creased and heavy. The bright white train lights flicker and the woman is jostled awake.

"What you lookin' at?" she snarls at me, half in slumber. I turn my gaze away, focusing on the orange and black graffiti that tags the train. The woman stands and starts dancing to her own rhythm in the middle of the subway. Instead of singing she lets out long moans and when I look back at her she catches my eye and laughs.

The train pulls into a stop and as she exits she yells back at me, "I like your little hat!"

It's been almost a week and to apologize I take my parents to lunch. They sit bewildered at a pale blue linoleum table. There's nothing Kosher here so they sip on black coffee weighed down by the sludge of sugar cubes. They rarely leave their neighborhood with its safety net of synagogues. "Speak English! American!" I scold them, embarrassed at my tone and embarrassed they kept reverting to the harsh sounding Hebrew.

I pay and usher them out of the restaurant, like a sheepdog, herd them along the sidewalk, past a thick cloud of cigar smoke attached to pot-bellied man in a yellow-stained undershirt. Beads of sweat drip along my face and gather under my arms.

"It's A Real Scorcher!" the newspapers declare as we pass a tobacco kiosk. Like all generations of immigrants, they've banded together with others like them. The Chinese with their jade trinkets and chrysanthemum teas, the Poles, and the Greeks with their watered-down coffee and goat legs roasting on a spit-fire in the window of the deli. We pass the hole-in-the-wall Italian place where I first kissed Maria in the bathroom because even her family could never know about us. Star-crossed lovers, we could never be anything else.

When they were twenty my parents moved to America, when I was twenty I moved to the end of the F train. They wanted to seize the height of opportunity and began the search for some better, golden path. My father worked two jobs while learning English, and my mom did the ironing for the brownstone rich. I grew up in oak lined streets, where white Tzitziyot swayed in the streetlights with an army of men dressed in a uniform of coal colored kippahs.

I want my parents to go home. Not to their small apartment with dripping Sabbath candles and long chants delivered to a G-d we've never seen, but their real home. Yet they've worked so hard to create this for me. I have no misapprehensions about my place in this world, I'm their American dream. Yet for me, there are no roots, no heritage, my fractured Hebrew is pieced together by the threads of voices that echo from the strangers on the street. And they are not from anywhere I am allowed to go. None of us are from anywhere anymore, we all left the Promised Land for a land of empty promises, we are a new sacred,

with feet that will continue to walk the only pavement we will ever know and holy hearts that will never get to love, so where does that leave the rest of me? Where do they bury your body when the only home you've ever had is America?

Lewis

MARIA FREIJ

I held you and I rocked you and I sang to you about birds
and wires and freedom, about water, lighthouses, headlands—
I sang songs about your beauty and the frailty of your hands,
the fine down on your arms.
I sang but I didn't write.

I wiped your tears and I held your hand
and I looked into your blue eyes, like worlds
where everything had already happened
and everything was yet to happen. I listened to you
laughing when I whistled made-up tunes out of key
and I whistled like never before, and I whistled but I didn't write.

And I scrubbed the pots and pans and boiled your bottles
and I changed your clothes and I washed them in the sink
and I read you books about rabbits and tigers and bears
and I folded your socks into one another so none would get lost.

And I let you sleep in the nook of my arm
and I let you eat my cheek and my hands
and I watched you sleep, your eyelids
like silk draped over your eyes. I watched
your body rise and fall, I breathed with you.
I stayed up all night and I didn't write.

I played you all my favourite records and you listened,
and sang along in your own language, your hands
slapping your thighs, such joy, such hunger—
your body becoming, each day, less mine, more your own.

I read you my most beloved books
and blanked out the references to death
and sadness and suffering, or swapped them
for kind words, small words, like *joy*
and *kiss*, and *hold*. I read you all the poems
that made me want to write, but I didn't.

I wrapped you up tightly in blankets
and watched you watch the golden
of the birches with awe, with a passion
I cannot remember ever having. You slept
and I did the dishes in my sleep, dusted shelves.
And then the first snow fell.

In the night, the flakes tumbled into one another
as we danced in the living room to tunes
no one else could hear—I threw you high
into the air and caught you again
and listened to you scream with delight.

Your hands in the air, your fearless abandonment,
your trust in me overwhelming, we spun together—
you were my little moon; I was the centre of your world,
and yet it was I who was orbiting you.

You, whose every gesture is a poem,
every twirl the beginning of a story—
you, strange, beautiful creature,
who write me, every day, into being.

Hibiscus Deep

KENNETH POBO

Wandawoowoo buries her face completely
inside a crepe-paper purple hibiscus.
It fits! This is heaven. Eternity
should be hibiscus deep and take you in.
When she pulls her face out,

the world is different.
Neighbors' houses look the same,
but who can enter a new solar system
and not return changed? Bees donate
stingers to World Peace. Bats
wear costumes of people at Halloween
parties held in mid-air. Even
Mr. Diedermeier, a snarl for any occasion,
waves and offers to wash her car.

The farther she goes from the hibiscus
the more normal, more cruel,
the day gets. Cats fight on the porch,
the news points a dirty syringe
right at her eyeball,
and the phone rings
like someone about to cry.

Family of One

CONSTANTINOS MICHAEL IOANNOU

Saga wants another damn baby.

"Come on woman! We already have a daughter and that ugly dog."

She stands over me like we're about to duel, and she is the fastest draw in the North, but she takes off her jumper and slides her sweat pants off, over her boots. The boots are how I know I am in trouble.

"I am officially on sex strike," I say.

This baby mess started a few years after my wife decided that she wanted to move back home to Sweden. New York had become too hectic, she felt. When her father got sick she seized the opportunity. "He needs me, he doesn't have long to live." Of course the old bastard would make a miraculous recovery soon after and move to Thailand. Next she came to me and pleaded for a baby. "Sure, I have my career and we have money, but this can't be everything. A baby, that's where true happiness lies. That's when the mundane has meaning."

I bought her a puppy for her birthday. I told her that it was a pure breed and that we'd call it Dabiku. The dog turned out to be a stupid fat mongrel who refuses to pee outdoors. Every week her food costs me five hundred kronor—five hundred!—and even though I feed her and walk her knee-deep in snow, the bitch hates me.

At night, she sleeps between me and my wife and

growls when I get too close. My wife was happy for a little while, but she always knew that Dabiku was intended as a distraction.

So, I whisked my wife and her dog away on holiday. Who knows, maybe the dog will be sent to the wrong place due to a routing error or whatever. I said, "Let's leave Sweden for a while and get some perspective. Six months without a ray of sunshine, how can you be reasonable? Let's talk about the baby when we return."

I took them to the abode of peace, Dar es Salaam. Dabiku spent the first day running through a maze of narrow backstreets lined by bazaars and mosques. We spent most of our days lying on the beach drinking banana beer talking about the past. One night we got so drunk that I made love to my wife right there on the beach, while Dabiku serenaded us with her howling.

On the last day, we discovered a small restaurant in a residential street just behind the hotel. "There is no menu," I said, "You just ask what the options of the day are, and they make it fresh in the back house. They bring it to the restaurant using a yellow wheelbarrow."

I ordered a plate of pilau rice which was smothered in beef drippings and had chunks of beef throughout. I looked at Saga and asked, "What do you want, baby?"

Saga just sat there and looked at me with a stupid expression on her face.

"Well, first, I want a fucking menu. Second, I am 32 and I want … no not want, need, I need to have a baby."

The waitress and I didn't entirely understand her order, but we both agreed that she wanted the same as me.

Just then, a table next to us got their food, and it looked stunning. I wasn't sure the pilau rice would fill me up, so I also ordered deep fried fish, beans, curry sauce, with a scoop … no, two scoops of kachumbari over everything. "Oh, and a beer, Serengeti, sounds good."

When the waitress left, I said, "I think you've probably

had a little too much sunshine. We'll go home tomorrow honey and we can talk about the baby then. Things are always clearer at home."

I eventually had no choice but to keep making love to my wife, but I swear, it was only under extreme protestation and duress. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy the pleasures of love-making more than most men, but I've never wanted a child. Even less so in a country where Dabiku is not the only mongrel.

My wife agreed to call our daughter Tumaini, Swahili for hope. My hope was that this would be the end of this baby business.

Tumaini developed a more natural bond with her mum, but I don't take it personally. Maybe it's because of the breast feeding. Whatever the reason, daddy is less important. Sometimes Tumaini stares at me at me with her big blue eyes, like I don't belong in this family or something. She tries to pee on me when I change her diaper, but thankfully the dumb baby just ends up peeing on herself.

My wife, my daughter and my fat mongrel all say that they want another damn baby. When I come through the door they run to me. I am still holding the shopping and my wife plants a big stinking kiss on my nose, while the dog jumps up on me. Then the damn baby points at me and says, "Mamma … mamma."

I move my face as close to hers as possible and I say, "Papa … papa," accentuating my lips. She bursts out laughing. Daddy makes Tumaini laugh. Babies laughing, that's a good sound. You know, she is not so bad, after all.

Later that night my wife locks Dabiku in the kitchen, and puts Tumaini to sleep in her own bed for once. Then she nestles close to me in our bed and whispers, "Don't worry, our next child will be a fearless warrior. Just like Daddy, a fearless man who keeps battling against all odds."

I feel her boots scratching me under the sheets.

Heart a Cavern

IAN C SMITH

You tell me you must undergo surgery.
Miserable with dread I picture visiting hour,
watching over you, a sentimental afternoon,
silence, except for the swishing of tyres,
cold as murder outside, warm in the ward.
Should I bring flowers? Would this be significant
if your other is also present, eyes guilty?
What if your operation goes awry?

Life, that trickster, is never fully imagined.
I am a former person, ex-this, ex-that,
heart a cavern etched with hieroglyphs.
I remember us in huge cities rushing through days.
Alert for childhood omens, ladders, ambulances,
I might hold my sweaty collar until I spot a dog.

Open-Air Argument

LAURINDA PETERSEN

Each sentence we dropped
in the clearing left its
own little comet cutting
across the dark we had
made and when we

waded out of the words
where we had flung
them, they stung the
backs of our legs like
biting fish as if the woods

were underwater and we
could breathe without gills,
see without light, and
speak without setting
each other on fire.

Four Untitled Poems

SIMON PERCHICK

Without an address your hands
lean across – another crease
making the final correction

though this note still opens out
windblown, fingerprints
everywhere on her lips

on her breasts, on the bed sheet
folded and over, warmed
for its nakedness and side by side

– every word is already lost
and there at the bottom
where little blossoms should grow

there's nothing but silence
and the long line for a stamp
to cling when it leaves your hands

as if even without the flowers
the corners will arrive as evenings
covered with dirt and her forehead.

*

What you open leans against wood
that is not a door you can muffle
put your arm around the only sound

when you knock on this kitchen table
whose corners were broken off
straight down, still lit, letting you in

circle her mouth not yet the room
left over and listen for the smoke
around the hush from small fires.

*

Just died and its rain
is already snow, comforts
the obituary page

with moonlight pieces
slowly circling down
as that star-shaped lullaby

small stones still look for
– it's this morning's
though over your head the deaths

are hidden in silence
begging for water
that doesn't break apart

the way each sky
is hollowed out for another
– you make a sea

for these dead, each name
a boat, sails, the spray
midair and out loud.

*

This tree abandoned at last
flows past as ravines and riverbeds
and can't fall any more

– it's used to dirt and those initials
you carried along inch by inch
not in some stone letting you stop

for water – you were buried
in the afternoon, late so the light
could close the lid with leftover kisses

become an ocean, still burning
and between each wave the glint
from a clear silence you took for yes.

Home from College

SAMANTHA LÊ

My brother, eighty-six seconds older with arms like wings.
From the upper bunk, my head creeps over the edge,

drawn to the musty warmth of his sage skin. Eyes closed,
grinning out loud a daydream, he says, "It's cold under

the covers, Little Man." "Lie with me," is what he means.
In what's been transformed into mother's gift-wrapping room,

among the ribbons for tying sugarcane bows and metal boxes
with lids shut tight to keep honeybees from spilling out,

I'm made. My reflection in the magnifying glass: convex,
pierced by light. A mouth surrenders and releases an "O."

Acting Apart

NICHOLAS SKALDETVIND

Breathing in
makes him more cautious

You might say that he had an air of keeping himself disengaged from the mere words he let drop

His verbs built catapults to sling his adverbs and datives, which sprang up like well-tended roses. For almost the first time he had the feeling that he was acting a part –

She longed to be a nourishing bosom for the infant Earth
but was too narrow and weary

He knew she wondered why she had coaxed the vines of her devotion
onto such a wind-shaken, pompous genius of the Genus Populus
and because of this
she did not leave him

**

We should not give so much meaning and practicality to our lively endeavors
they don't want to be bothered;
they do not bother.

**

Still

an ecstasy of eternal seconds

a pulse harder than gravity

**

I felt like talking to those lovers under the sea
so I picked up a shell nearby
held it to my ear…

What I did hear was
suspended
black velvet
silence.

The Special Occasion

TING J. YIU

I've been awake since five. Too excited to sleep, a bubbly fizziness keeping me up all night. Effervescent is the correct word I believe. I might as well get out of bed. Today of all days needs a spring in the step, best foot forward, early bird catches the worm you know?

Yesterday, I asked for the most luxurious package at Salon Aurélie. "That would be our Goddess Rejuvenating Deluxe," said the receptionist. "You will receive a colour rinse, curl and set, a hot stone massage, then an illuminating microdermabrasion peel followed by a honey collagen facemask and—"

"That … sounds perfect." I pulled a wad of bills from the bottom of my shopping bag, unscrunched them on the counter to smooth out the wrinkles. I counted them one after another until I reached five. "Only the best for a special occasion."

The hair survived the night, there's an almost violet glow to it. Very Betty White I think and that gives me the giggles. Edward will turn in his grave at this frippery and the thought makes me laugh even harder.

I start on the food even though it's still dark. Luck favours the prepared and I'm feeling extra lucky today. Six hours later, I survey the fruits of my labour, dozens

of casseroles, pies and cakes for the evening's guests. As Edward liked to say, the kitchen was always my place.

I put the kettle on, take out the silver cream jug and place cubes of sugar into the cut crystal bowl from yesterday's trip to Taylor and Sons. At one, my granddaughter arrives to pick me up.

"Doesn't the house smell divine?" I ask, sweeping her inside, showing her the giant heads of peonies filling all the vases I own. I ran out and had to use water pitchers, soup bowls, even teacups.

"We've already ordered the flowers."

She's spoiling the fun, "No dear, these are for me. Doesn't it just brighten the whole place up?" I was never allowed flowers when Edward was around. It was the same as flushing money down the toilet and I should pick up gardening if I wanted my own flowers. He would chuckle to himself as if it was the best joke in the world. Well, today, there are dusty pink blooms everywhere. Crowning the dining table, surrounding the windowsill, in the hallway, up the staircase, filled the bathtub with water and floated blooms in there and just for fun, took the ones with the longest stems and stuck them in the toilet bowl.

She helps me get ready. I tell her to take special care around the hair as she lowers the silk dress over my head. I wish I hadn't waited so long to buy this. Well, if fishes were wishes. She zips it up and I do a grand twirl in the bedroom that makes me giddy.

"This is so … extravagant," she says. Anything is extravagant compared to her black button-up and no-nonsense schoolmarm's bun.

"Only the best for a special occasion," I say. "And now these." I hand her the new strand of champagne-coloured pearls.

"Grandma?"

"Yes dear?"

"You never told me how you and Granddad met."

"Why would you want to know a thing like that?" I take the pearls back and fasten them myself.

"Today of all days."

Her hands have moved up to her hips.

"First lipstick," I say ignoring her. "What about this one?" Tropical Coral. It looks extra cheerful.

I watch her drink tea beside the flowers and food. She blows on it, rippling the surface before sipping. The story of the barbarian and I? There was no thunder, no horses, not a single war chariot, no air steaming with curses and coarseness, no salting the earth or burning of bridges.

He came, like they did for all women. Full of braggart and bravado; charmed us and cajoled us, called us and caressed us. No eyes were blinkered, no guns held to our heads; we opened our arms and soon after our minds. Our hearts they took piecemeal, letter by letter, word by word until they declared sovereignty over our bodies, planting flags here, carving space there.

"It was at a dance. He liked my smile."

She frowns. "That was it?"

"Yes." He told me later it was my childbearing hips. That, and I looked like the kind of girl who wouldn't put up a fight.

I filled her cup with the barbarian's spoils: tea from lands faraway, a slick of cream from the beasts of their plains, a cube of sugar paid by weight with another man's blood. "Your Granddad was no great talker. Believed actions spoke louder than words."

The barbarians told us we didn't need a wall. They would protect us now. Romans and Mongols, Conquistadors and Crusaders, they called themselves Pioneers, Scientists and Liberators. Big men with big words taking down Boudicca and Ching Shih the Pirate Queen, stripping Godiva down to her skin. Even Cleopatra had to open her thighs.

The barbarians convinced us to dismantle our wall. They planted the first ideas, then, structures, jails and entire nations. It was for our own good they said, soldiers, priests and politicians. They're hard to tell apart now, fathers, sons and lovers in every home and heart.

"Love was a rib eye cooked medium-rare, silence during the news, kids away to bed and a five-course spread when his boss came for dinner." I hated cooking before I married him. Love was also watching me beg him for cash when I needed silliness like pantyhose and underwear. It was the pleasure he took in calling me a common whore if a waiter smiled at me.

I gave him that first smile. Then water out of my cup. Then fifty-one years. Children. And his punching bag.

"He's gone now. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

"I was never afraid."

Love was a forty-four slipped under the pillow. It was withholding sex until he took it with force. Love was a $3.49 strip of arsenic-laced flypaper soaked in water, the liquid mixed into his beloved Sunday steak and mash. Love was the joy in cooking it two hours early, letting it go cold on the countertop. Love was knowing he wouldn't bother reheating it while I made sure I was seen with neighbours all afternoon.

I pat my hair one last time, "We should get going or we'll be late to his funeral."

Offering My Hand

DAVID STALLINGS

I.
Deep within a leafy cemetery,
among darkening obelisks and vaults
overgrown by wild flowers and grasses,
my man and I plant the cedar phallus
I have carved.
Below its 14-foot column
I dance, arch, turn,
wrap myself around his
brown-skinned body and mind.
My heavy breasts, my wide hips
slither and writhe, weaving
his strong arms, his chest, his belly.
He and I become a Mobius strip of one flesh,
wound around strains of inner music.

I cannot understand his words.
He stumbles with my art.
Only in dance
can we realize each other.

II.
As gravestone shadows lengthen
under falling leaves,
he helps me erect
my latest sculpted phallus.
From its marble sides, breasts
jiggle and sway.
Tantric dancers slip

from their low relief
along the shaft,
swirl into our silky colors,
our urgent smells and sounds,
until the music of our blood
becomes the whisper of maples and firs.
From behind dark stones and bushes
others join us,
as do the stars, the moon,
the loamy earth itself,
until all settles
into silent nocturne.

III.
In our elder years
the veil between us thins
to a shimmer of light.
Sometimes we walk
a rainforest trail.
I take his hand
as we pause
where a carved cedar log
lies rotting,
where grubs and worms
arch and turn,
slither and writhe.



TURNING TOWARDS TOMORROW

A Morgue of Leaves

RICHARD KING PERKINS II

Dying accelerates in November –
the fish in our small pond become sluggish
and other small bodies are caressed
by water's delicate nudge at shore.

Pines and evergreens observe quietly – the place
where they meet earth concealed by a morgue of leaves.
The indentations of fallen sparrows become less distinct.
Above the treeline, identity struggles to remain.

At one time, something slid out the cracked door.
You began counting, looking at your fingers.
A sound rumbles in the distance. Nothing is perpetual.
Never have lightning and thunder been so far apart.

West of Amboy on Route 66

TOBI ALFIER

Rolling easy down unsure roads, we see
first signs of spring through patches in weathered
and worn asphalt. Blades of green force up
between sealed cracks that look like ancient faces.

First signs of spring through weathered cracks—
a universe of jigsaw pieces, black, gray, shiny, old,
new. Between fissures that look like ancient faces
shoots of green sneak up, tentatively aimed toward sun.

Over a universe of monochrome jigsaw pieces,
we drive casually, regard the seedling's resolve to grow.
Shoots of green sneak up, tentatively aimed toward sun,
small blooms ignore the mountain snow, begin slowly to bud.

Driving idly, we photograph the resolve of spring,
watch the trains that are constant as they travel their own seasons
while small blooms ignore the high altitude blinding snow
and march upward, with purpose, sprig by sprig.

The trains as constant as earth and time
we say one day we will take that ride,
while someday marches upward, sprig by sprig,
we check the clock, change the station, turn toward home.

Someday we will take that ride, watch
the first signs of spring through a sleeping car window.
We change the station, then turn toward home,
our easy roll back now over sure roads.

Exit Wound

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

the landscape here is hungry
for un-endable rain, maps
the roots can trace away
from the source, out &
downward into a country
where light behaves differently,
where things never quite
get around to dying.

~

if we're being honest

don't we all wish for such an exit
wound opposite the point of penetration?
can't there be a promised sky
snaking through the undersoil?
a star for each silenced mouth?
please, when the rains we've drummed
our feet in unison to command like
a broken horse finally arrives,
let there be some dance left in us.

~

because *drought* implies frailty,
we say *scorched skin heals*. we say
restorable, *anew*, *future river*,
abide. we say we all know

what it's like to see ghosts,
to survive & sometimes to make them,

to believe, in the end,

~

pity drives the clouds' drift
directly overhead. &
once we're dancing again
to claim ownership of the newborn
river & the fawn that returns to drink
from our crosshairs.

In Pieces

DAVID STALLINGS

Fuming after an argument
with a neighbor,
I return to my cottage.
At the front door
I rush past the overhead
feng shui mirror,
the carved pine greeting-Buddha,
but am seen through
by the gaze of my 8-inch replica
of Michelangelo's David, who,
when the door slams, leaps
from shelf to floor, breaking
his right femur and ankle.
What have I done?

I place his pieces on the kitchen table,
minister with Elmer's glue,
rubber bands.

By next morning, the repair
seems complete, but he remains
at the table for musing.
The gift of a close friend
returning from Paris, just before
she was struck by an illness,
he also reminds me how older gay friends
tell of using his image in closeted times
as a coded living room clue.

I make amends with my neighbor.
Back on duty
beneath the dragon tree plant,
over his left shoulder
David eyes my doorway
alert to all Goliaths.
He stands stronger now
for having been broken.

Untouchable

SIMON LINTER

I've been sitting in the shadow of London's magnificent St Paul's cathedral for hours, days, months. Could be years. My memory of Gujarat fades a little every time Marks and Spencer give me veg, sometimes non-veg, food. Starbucks have given up brushing me away from their door. The feet of the city's pedestrians pass me by each day, thousands of blurred flecks of coloured fabric and leather. There are a handful of coins in my ripped Starbucks cup. I shake and rattle it but today they don't like me like they did a month ago. Today no one stops to ask, "Do you need help?" and "Can I buy you some food?" Today no one spits a warm globule of snotty spit in my face. Today no one says, "Get a fucking job, parasite." Today no one says to their kids, "That woman is just going to buy alcohol or drugs if we give her money." Today I *feel* the feet.

I realise I'm begging in Gujarati and switch to my begging English. A bell chimes. The cathedral doesn't like my English. The sun has started to show from behind the dome, and I watch the soles of footwear flash past. Someone with clumsy feet walks past and kicks my cup, spilling the coins into the road. I hobble across the pavement to collect them. Bloody fools brush past me and almost knock me over. Car horns beep at me, and double decker buses come to a standstill. I hobble back to the pavement with the

coins I rescued, sit down on my old blanket, and hunch, crumpled cup in my thrusted hand. I rattle the coins.

Black and shiny gentlemen's shoes stop in front of me. His trouser legs are pinstriped and his socks have a diamond pattern. I raise my cup towards him and keep it raised until the muscle in my good arm starts to spasm and it droops to the ground. I swap to moaning. He won't be able to resist my pleas. I am like my cup: crippled, twisted, deformed. I used to be a beautiful woman. I used to be happy. I used to be whole. I keep moaning and use my beggar English but he doesn't react. His trouser legs rise as he crouches. The hairs on his shins are black. I try not to look at the man and just raise the cup closer to where I think his face might be. He says nothing. He sees me as a rowdy sheeter and isn't giving me anything.

Then he tells me to look him in the eye. I don't want to move because my muscles and bones hurt. I am not the woman I used to be. I lean backwards and see a moustache. Brown skin. Black hair. Handsome. Big brown eyes like mine, and they are weeping. He dabs at the tears with his sleeve. I try to block the sunlight with my cup. I've seen those eyes before, but they can't belong to *him*. I haven't seen *him* since they kicked me from Uganda, which left me screaming his name and disabled, the day I became untouchable. I tell myself that something is wrong with my brain.

He raises his hand to his eyes and looks down at my walking stick. I cry *Please* twice, and louder, and rattle my coins under his nose.

The man continues to weep. He says that he is sorry.

The sun disappears behind a black cloud. Again, he says that he is sorry.

And now I recognise that voice. I stop moaning. Maybe I am wrong. Perhaps two people have that voice. It can't be

him. My mind is playing tricks on me because nobody in this world could possibly know who I am. I am a common housefly to the people of London. It's not him. Give me coins, you bloody fool.

He just keeps saying that he is sorry.

Then he stands up and walks away.

I want to follow him and plead for some money, but I can only look at the pavement.

Later, I creep into St Paul's tube station while the security guard's back is turned. It's late evening and I shuffle towards the Metro newspaper stand, grab as many copies as I can carry, and stuff them into my bag. I hobble towards one of the exits without being spotted. The rain has started to lash down. I wander down Stationers' Hall Court and into my safe haven, an alcove where a big tree stands. I place my mangled cup down, spread my blanket on the ground, unpick the staples from the newspapers and loosen the pages. I place my walking stick on the ground, sit down, and look into a carrier bag that someone has given me. A loaf of bread, some black bananas, and two bottles of water. Nice. The mushy banana mucus does not need to be chewed. I'll save the bread for the morning. I lie down and pull the newspaper pages over my bones. The night is coming but I don't know if I'll be able to close both eyes to sleep. It's not the spiders that keep me awake. I'm used to their pitter-patting over the ridges and scars of my skin. They don't even tickle any longer. It's the other beggars who'll try and take my space, or move me on, or just beat me. There's just no place safe in the city. Rain pours in towards me and my cup is all wet. I reach out to grab it, but the rainwater lifts it up and it sails away from me. Bloody hell.

I crumple the pages of the newspapers and stuff them around my neck. It might be a good night after all.

There are people shouting at me to leave the country or face the consequences. I look around but I can't see Raj. I ask the angry men if they've seen him but they snarl back at me. I can see a machete. One has a gun. They are wearing light green military outfits and say they are ridding Uganda of the bloodsucking Indians. I sit up and scream Raj's name. Someone drags me by my left arm across the ground and towards a vehicle. I make my body go limp. I am not leaving without my baby boy. I look around at every little boy in the crowd that surrounds me, and my heart stops each time I see one that looks like Raj. The men are angry. They drop me on the ground and hand gesture at each other. One points his weapon at me. He wants me to get on the coach. I shout, Raj, Raj! The man with the machete looks at me and raises it above his head. They tell me that this is the coach for the bloodsuckers. It's my last warning. I stare at the machete as it cuts through the air towards me.

A noise echoes off the courtyard, and I wake up with a jolt in a cold sweat, gasping for breath. Where did that loud noise come from? I look around. A lorry driver is busy unloading supplies to a shop's back door. It's still dark but it must be early morning. My body aches, and when I move, my bones start to crack. Every day may be the same but I'm not. Every day I feel more twisted. The man unloading the truck looks in my direction but only for a second. I push off the ground with my stump. The newspaper pages drift away. I struggle for a while before I am able to sit up. I reach into my bag and eat a slice of bread and the rest of the mushy banana. The driver throws down the shutters on his lorry and drives off. I roll up the blanket and put it in the bag with the bread. I clutch my walking stick with my hand and try to stand on my good foot. It takes all my strength to stumble out of Stationers' Hall Court, and onto the street. I creep through

an alleyway and into Paternoster Square. A rubbish bag left out by a shop or restaurant has split open. Fast food containers blow across the ground like leaves. Pigeons are attacking a half-eaten baguette until a crow ruins the party and flies off with their breakfast. Through the mêleé I find a new cup, a big one. I pull the straw out of the top and fling the plastic lid on the ground. There is some ill-smelling yellow dry milk in the bottom. I hobble towards the column, the centrepiece of the square, and rinse the cup in a large puddle. There is a homeless person lying on the steps in front of me. His hand is raised to his red blotchy face. I leave the pigeons and crows to fight over their scraps, and I head towards Marks and Spencer. It's a brand new working day for us Londoners.

The clip-clop of shoes is a background noise. My cry is well rehearsed. The rain has stopped, some coins have been donated, and it has been a good start to the day. A group of tourists wait for the cathedral to open. Maybe some of them gave me the coins. A bus drives past and its air-brakes hiss. A woman jumps out of her skin. She composes herself and walks towards me. The peach colour of her legs is lovely.

Please, please.

She stops and her pointed black shoes turn towards me. I thrust my new cup in her direction. She delves into her bag, pulls out a small box of cereal, places it by my side and walks away.

NEW! Frosty Bran-O's. 30% healthier. Sample pack. FREE!

I put it in my bag.

The tourists are now disappearing into the cathedral, and I want to be one of them. If I stole one of their cameras, could stand upright, and look as young and professional as them, I would be let in.

Please, please.
Nobody stops.
Please, please.
They keep on walking.
Please, please.
They know I am there.
Please, please.
Black shiny shoes.
Please, please.
The man says that he is sorry.

He has returned, but is not weeping this time. He sits down on the pavement in front of me. The pedestrians that walk past shake their heads. He is wearing a blue suit, and he looks handsome in it. He doesn't take off his sunglasses to look me in the eye as he did yesterday.

Raj? Is it you? The moustache has been shaved off ... but ... that voice. The way he pronounces the word *sorry* the same way I do. It's him. I know it.

He says that he is sorry for what happened.

"It's not your fault," I say.

He takes off his sunglasses and wipes his eyes with his hand. Those brown eyes. I lower my cup to the ground and stare at him. I can't believe he's here. He couldn't have possibly found me here, in London, on this street, just passing by. What would Raj look like now? I try to imagine. It could be him.

The man puts his sunglasses back on, pulls out his wallet and slips a fifty-pound note into my cup. I usually say thank you, but now … I grab my cup, take out the note and sit on it. Nobody will take it from me.

He says he'll be back. He stands up and walks away.

I say આભાર, રાજ.

TRANSLATIONS & METAMORPHOSES

Poetry as a Lingua Franca

SRINJAY CHAKRAVARTI

after Jibanananda Das

The infinity of the empty page:
on this white paper of silence,
these are the dots and dashes

lost—and found—
in translation
from syntax, imagery, trope.

Outside the window
of my brown study,

the Morse code of fireflies
is parsed down
on dusk's manuscript
of ashen shadows.

Twilight's soft footsteps
tread in a scansion of echoes,
in a tangram of enjambments—

and what we leave outside
is always much more vital
than what we put in.

The Apple

CHANGMING YUAN

The only magic fruit from Mabakoola:

Your hardness is so soft
on Eve's tongue; your weight
so light to Newton's thought, and
your roundness so flawed
in Jobs' hand. Ah, blood-
skinned, black-hearted
you sweet temptation
with your juicy flesh

Who hung thee there?

Danai's Eyes Are Like Stars

JADE G. HUANG

Translated by Elaine Wong

— inspired by a young soul and a lost human simplicity

Danai rides our small yellow boat and gently rocks away
from us. A bright noon, ripples glimmer on the sea
like the countless dots of masts filling your eyes
when you ask a question in class,
and slipping out of the river mouth
toward the deep blue ocean. Once, you glided through
your mother's channel in the same way––

It's cloudy, drizzly, slightly chilly.
Lush green lines the river bank, monkeys shout in leaps.
The stream-wading boy enters his mother's water
as pebbles unroll primordial thunders.
Clear water whisks by the feet like the wind!
There, fish and shrimps snap at the heart.
A bamboo raft is fastened to shore, wobbly.
The courage of his people, the Pangcah,
blossoms inside him. Rope loosed, pole shoved,
the small boat quickly sails over Xiugulian Mountain.
At the estuary, uncles are netting fry.
Thrilled by the water, Danai waves
farewell to the elders of his homeland,
to the secret headquarters on the alley,
and to the little bunny he kept
(it's okay to set him free).
He leaves his last playmate on the sandbank
(you may take all the toys),
pushes his pole, and probes the cold sea.

達耐的眼睛像星星

——源起自一個幼小的靈魂，和人類失落的樸性

達耐乘著我們的黃色小船輕擺而去
晴午，海面上波光粼粼
好似你課堂發問的眼眸裏
有千萬支帆桅點點
輕輕滑出河口
划向既深且藍的海
當年你也是這樣滑出母親的航道——

那天陰兩微冷
夾岸榛莽蒼蒼　　猿聲跳上跳下
走溪的男童探入母親的羊水
鵝卵石滾出鴻蒙聽雷
像風一樣拂過腳邊的清水啊!
裏有噬咬心臟的魚蝦
一支牽在岸邊的竹筏悠悠　　晃晃
邦查的勇氣在心底開滿了花
鬆開繩索　　船篙一撐
輕舟便過秀姑巒山
出海口有叔舅把網撈魚苗
快意江河的達耐揮手
向家鄉的耆老道別
向長巷裏的秘密基地道別
向豢養的小兔子道別
（你們可以把牠放生）
在沙洲放下最後一個伴
（那些玩具你都可以拿去）
然後撐一柄篙向冷海中探尋

The classics that he refuses to memorize
remain rolled up in a school drawer.
The forbidden peek out of the classroom window,
wet with summer sweat, turns to the bouncing football
in Physical Education. The mind occasionally wanders
to the mountains and snared animals, so time-to-go-home
will come running fast. Confucius says,
"To learn and apply your learning, isn't it a *dee*-light…"
Hmm… the discipline supervisor's eyes flare from behind.

The view slowly blurs, retina full of blue.
The peaceful look of a dying muntjac comes to mind.
How nice it would be to taste the fresh green bile again.
If the mountains are so green yet I can't run,
if the sea is so blue yet I can't dive,
what's left to see in this world?

The whole tribe gather by the night sea for
New Year's Eve. A cauldron of bubbling blue
does nothing to dry out the salt on the corner of their eye.
(Coast Guard's request reinforcement:
Rescue boats, please head south.)
Torches and sticks rouse the mountains' itches.
Helicopters and speedboats disrupt the calm
of the sea. We ask the mountains and the sea
if they have seen Danai but the horizon mutes to a line
(matters of life belong to Chaos; it's useless to ask),
leaving behind the witch and her prayer.
The spell hovers around the school uniform that
flutters in the wind. Pedals spin, the bike unmoved.

那些堅持不要背完的經書
還卷在學校抽屜裏
夏天汗水模糊了窗檯禁足的視線
投向體育課那顆胡亂蹦跳的足球
偶爾讓意念徜徉山林　　想想
那些陷阱裏的飛鼠野兔
回家的時間就會跑得快一些
子曰：學而時習之，不亦ㄌㄜˋ乎……
嗯，然後……訓導主任的眼神又從後面殺來

視線漸漸模糊　　藍色充滿視網膜
山羌死前安詳的眼神浮上腦海
多想再喫一次那青綠色的膽汁
如果山那麼翠綠我卻不能奔跑
海那麼湛藍我卻不能跳水
這世界還有什麼好看？

部落全村出動　　除夕夜海邊圍爐
那麼一大鍋煮沸的藍也
蒸發不掉眼角的鹹
（八二大隊請求支援：
救難小艇請往南邊搜救）
火炬　木杖　騷動山的癢處
直升機　快艇　搗亂海的平靜
問山問海可有看見達耐身影？
海平線靜默成一條線
（生機本屬於渾沌，莫須再問）
剩下女巫喃喃有辭
咒語繞著風中飄盪的制服飛揚
腳踏車空轉踏板

Danai didn't return.
Some people meet him in their dreams.
School continues; there are assignments
to be written, exams to be taken.
Back to the classroom,
an empty chair patiently waits
for classes to end. Not until the sky brightens
can we face the ocean. Perhaps, sorrow
has already gone with the night's gray rain.
The kids cram on the shore, faces of mud dolls.
They fold their repression and longing into
paper boats, follow Danai to the sea.
They slide through their mother's channel once again
and learn about death.

When the yellow boat fades into the golden sun,
when the kids' calls quiet down,
the lonesome father makes his way to the middle of
the water. His hand lays a little boat on the sea,
quieter than a muntjac's death.

達耐始終沒有回來
有些人在夢裏遇到他
學校還是要繼續開張
功課依然要寫　　月考也還是要考
回到教室
一張空掉的桌椅在那裏
靜靜等待著下課
直到天放晴了　　我們才敢對海洋
憂傷也許早在灰色夜雨中洗去
孩子的臉龐在岸邊擠成泥娃娃
把壓抑和思念折成紙船
跟著達耐一起駛出海外
孩子們再次滑出母親的航道
學會了死亡

當黃色小船溶入金色陽光
孩子們的叫喚零落
孤獨的父親一人走到水中央
兀自放下手中那只小船
竟比一隻山羌的死還要安靜

The Secret

ZUO YOU

Translated by Yi Zhe

Those who died
still lived secretly.

They've always been with me,
since I knew their names.

Before dawn, I saw them.
I caught up with them, seeing joyfully that many sticks
with sparks
struck repeatedly
finally became matches.

They struck a match,
lighting up a cigarette, smoking in the tree slowly.

After a few words with me, they disappeared.

秘密

左右

那些死去的人
实际上他们还隐秘地活着

自从我知道了他们的名字
他们就一直跟着我

天还没亮，我就看到了他们
我赶上去，欢喜地看见很多星星被划来划去
变成火柴

他们划了一根
又点了一根。香烟在树上慢悠悠地吸着

他们跟我说了几句话就不见了

Vårtbjörk

MEL PERRY

Silver Birch

Her left cheek
rests on my right
shoulder, as a hand
circles my neck.
The warmth
of her breast
softens my lichen.
Her lips part,
and Freya's breath
puffs motes of moss
in leaf-whelmed woods.
I wonder how she will
know me as she
strokes my branch,
taps my bark,
prizes my butt and burr,
finds fissures,
sounds the hollow;
that void
yearning
to hear calm,
and feel her
Brisingamen
at my pulse.



Review of *To the Middle of Love* by Omar Sabbagh

PERNILLA JANSSON

Omar Sabbagh's fourth collection of poetry to date very much delivers on the promise offered in the title. It is a reflection on different kinds of love and the ways in which it is bound up with vulnerability, pain and—on the opposite side of the spectrum—death. Sabbagh begins the poem "As He Loses His Mind" like this: "Wand-stroke / past wand-stroke, / the air around me quilts / the air / with mercurial pleats." This ever so subtle reference to self-love is preceded by some introductory musings aptly named "That Chap Onan Again."

At the core of the collection lies a deep love for language. A British poet of Lebanese origin, Sabbagh's father was born in Palestine and his mother has Syrian and Iraqi roots. Having met at the American University of Beirut, they moved to England at the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War but returned to Lebanon on summer vacations throughout Sabbagh's childhood. The complex relationship with his homeland is ever-present in his writing, whether by design or without conscious intention, and Beirut in particular is painted in rich, seductive

colors of plum, mauve and purple against a canvas of contradictions. Here we find some stunning love letters to places and people, as in "The Cedar Never Dies," which is worth quoting in full:

> My country, my love,
> Let me speak to you now in a foreign tongue,
> Quipping against the flaming madness
> Now begun,
> The language in which I body my caress,
> My missive in Dove…
> My country, my love,
> Tell them the Cedar never dies and She will rise,
> A Phoenix without the need
> Of ligaments, ligaments or knees…
> A sour privilege to be, and concede
> Against the flung velvet of a glove
> The asking seed of daring gauntlets, my
> Country, my love:
> Let these words meet, though in a different
> tongue,
> Your flesh of green, your never-ending rungs.

This is a collection where the language is allowed to flourish, and content is hinted at in a way that is seductive rather than disruptive. Sabbagh has an ear finely attuned to the music of alliteration, assonance and rhythm, and to the subtle shifts between love and death—home and exile. The language itself is rich and redolent—both sensorially and emotionally—and Sabbagh makes use of a wide range of references, quoting Philip Larkin, Eugene Leviné and St. Augustine of Hippo among others (the latter of whose *Confessions* Sabbagh reimagines in a series of three sonnets). This makes for a collection that is alternatively familiar and exciting, absorbing and provocative.

The Distance Between Us

OMAR SABBAGH

For Faten

I have this fear: a skittering like
The long and spindly legs
Of an insect –

Without its bowl of magnetism
And the moral of their tribe:
To accept

Even the idea of losing you…

The space between us, two
Nations in the grip
Of all that happens in the lag and meantime
Of warless-ness and

The comforts of
Battling, a fierce antagonism of tongues,
Conflict in the idioms of bread
And mint,
Lebneh:
and love…

Soon, the flame will billow up
And back, her spine
Wavering like a thigh
Of yellow,
like yellow

In a fat and lovely snake's eye…

Love,
The distance in time
And place
Is merely the trigger of
Only a wider-us,
Bettering us,

shot-through
With trust and the old shrapnel of feeling,
Wounding, crippling us,

But happily…

Review of *Watershed* by Colin Dodds

PETER THOMPSON

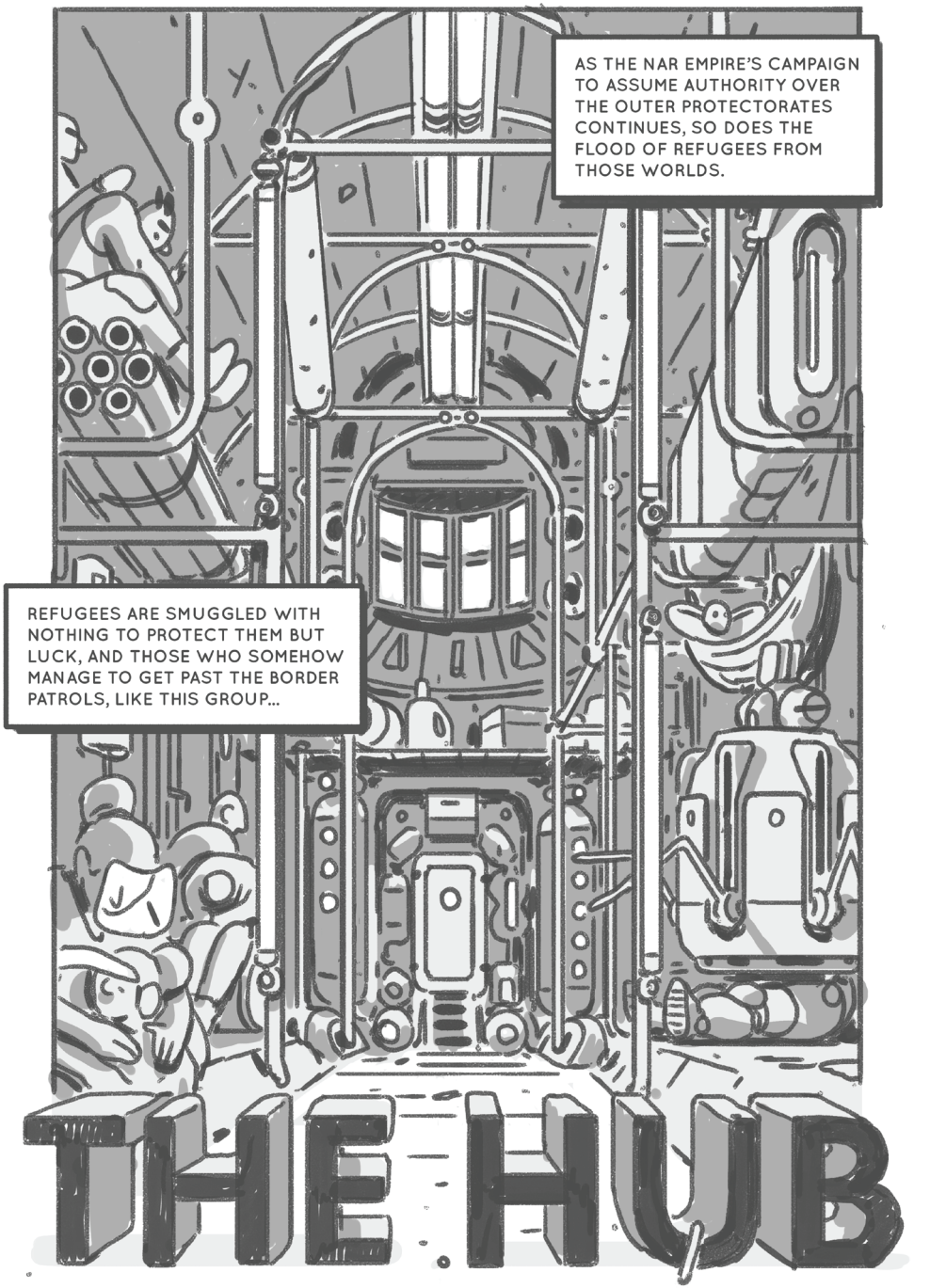
There's a credible authority to Colin Dodds' masterful dystopia, which reminds me of being a child trying to overhear my parents' emphatic talk of separation. Because nothing was edited for my innocent ears and no expletives deleted. Although Dodds has a better sense of humor, and doesn't drop the reader off at the arcade with $5 and think he's fixed the world. He unpacks the future of a modern America that could be today, yesterday or tomorrow. And yet, the End has already come, but it came in a way that, while spectacular, nobody was expecting. It might have even lost its destructive energy and broken far short of total destruction. And that uncomfortable space is the place that he invests with the most magic.

Norwood, the protagonist, a cynical hustler and exotic snake dealer, seems to typify the kind of guy who is spared by catastrophe, blessed (or cursed) with the skills that allow him to thrive in Dodds' New York metropolitan area. It's an area familiar enough even to those who've never lived there, yet for some reason it feels like a newly formed desert. Something has happened since the tragedies of

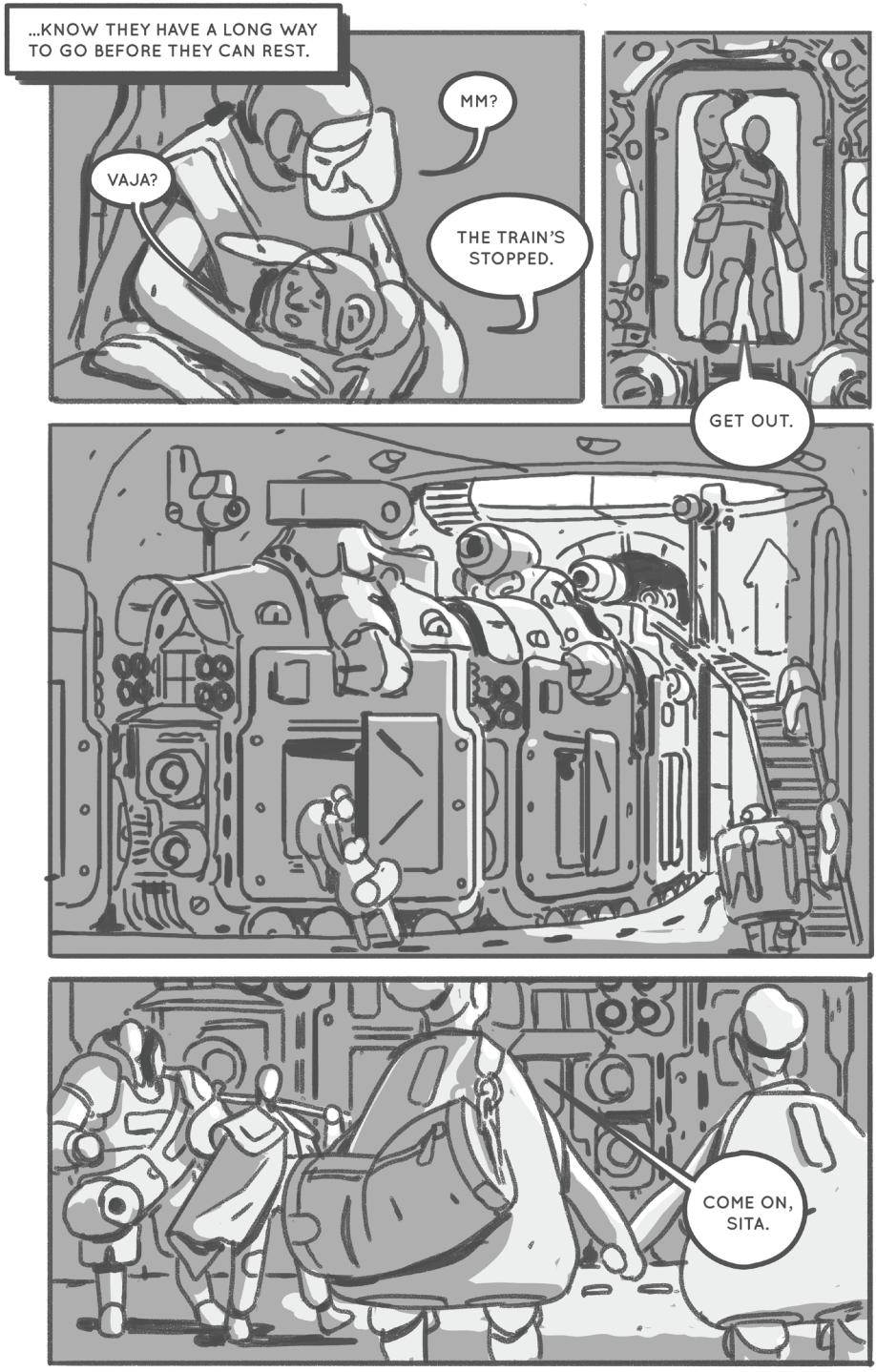
9/11 and, just like in this world, nobody is really willing to address just what it actually was. Instead, the people find solace in a hellish yearly recreation of the event, a ceremony with a literary precedent in the dark black sacrificial fun center to Robert Coover's masterful *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop*. The world of *Watershed* is a world where it's certainly uncomfortable to live but maybe more so to be dead. It's a world, like ours, where digital information once spread out like mist until one day it began to rain over everyone and everything.

Watershed is a variant on the kinds of themes commonly explored in Dodds' body of acclaimed poetry. His poems are often written from a place where many roads meet, the junction of revelation, blueprint, commentary and hosanna.

Some of Dodds' characters, a kind of analog cult, explore the theme of anti-technology but in a reliably complicated shape. The characters are fascinating because you're never quite sure where you stand with them. Much of *Watershed* is like a post-9/11 opera taking place on a dark stage while the smoke chokes the audience and the fires still rage. Love often doubles for despair. There's exquisite horror in the rumors of or from the ruin. A heavy sadness is broadcast from the sun and the seas, long-ago dyed and awash with angry chemical murk spawns. It's a future that, as Leonard Cohen sang, is murder. The revelations of prose in *Watershed* makes that murder enjoyable by offering readers an exit ramp with a rest stop along that endlessly lonely, scalded Road, that moonscape of broken highway that is the main arterial running, broken but straight, until our destination becomes our destiny. Until then, *Watershed* is one of the few things worth believing in.



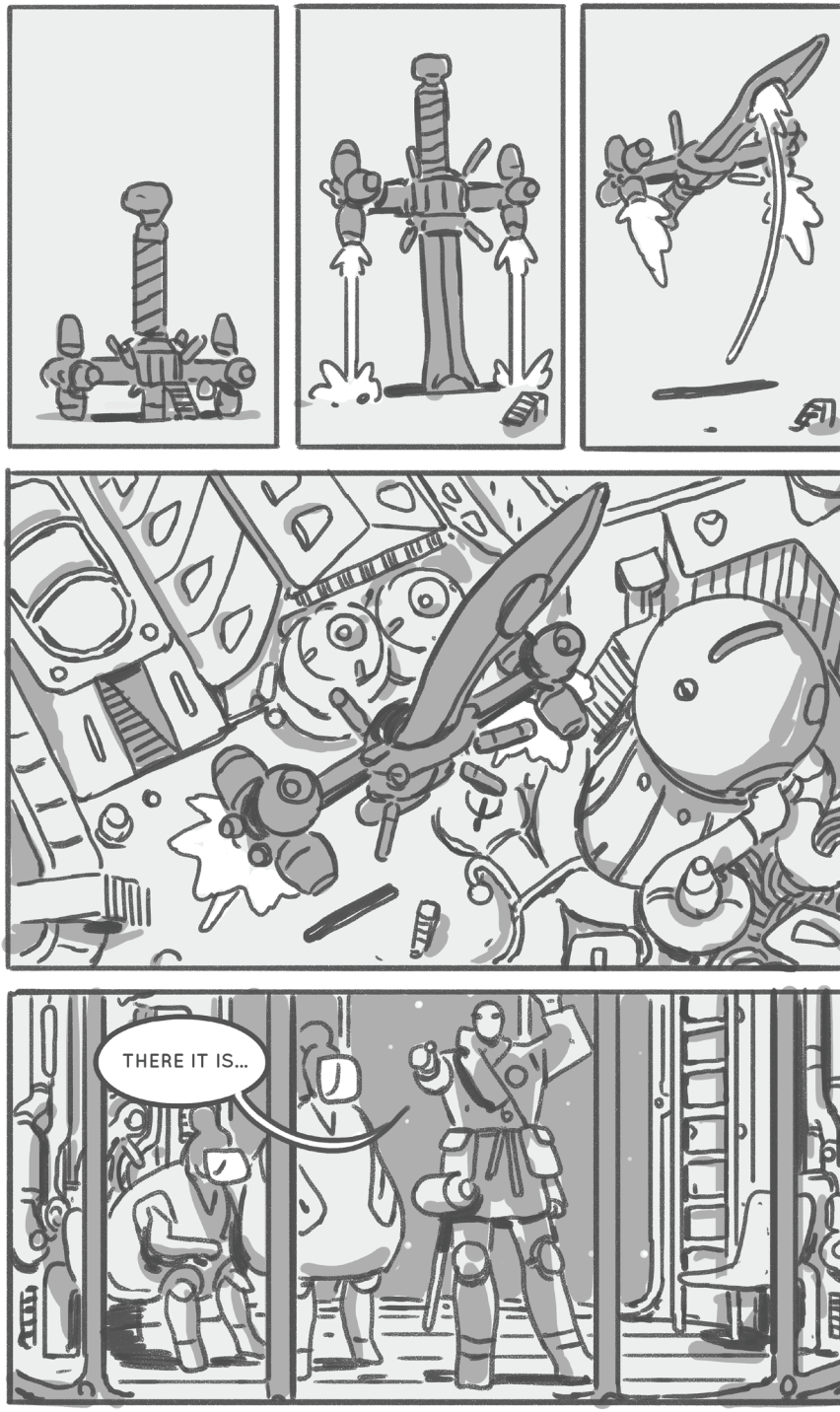
WRITTEN BY MIKAEL LOPEZ & DRAWN BY MACKENZIE SCHUBERT


...KNOW THEY HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO BEFORE THEY CAN REST.
VAJA?
MM?
THE TRAIN'S STOPPED.
GET OUT.
COME ON, SITA.

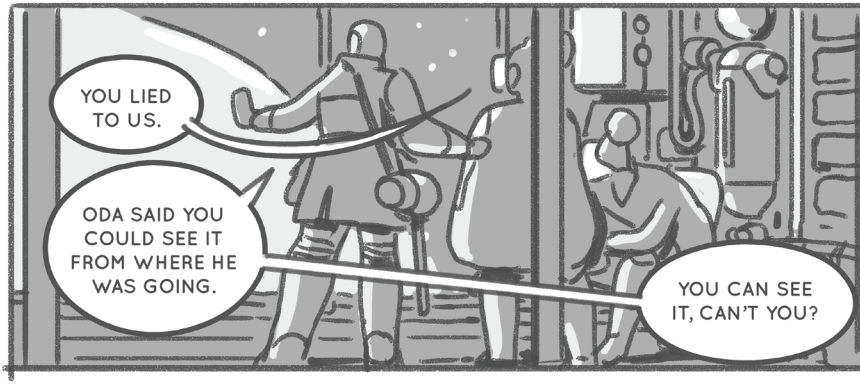

WHERE ARE WE?
I DON'T KNOW.
B
12
WHAT WAS THE NAME OF THE PLANET?
AVANI.
I CAN'T FIND IT.
MAH SAID IT'D BE THE ONLY PLACE WE'D BE SAFE.
LET'S GO BEFORE THEY SPOT US TOO.

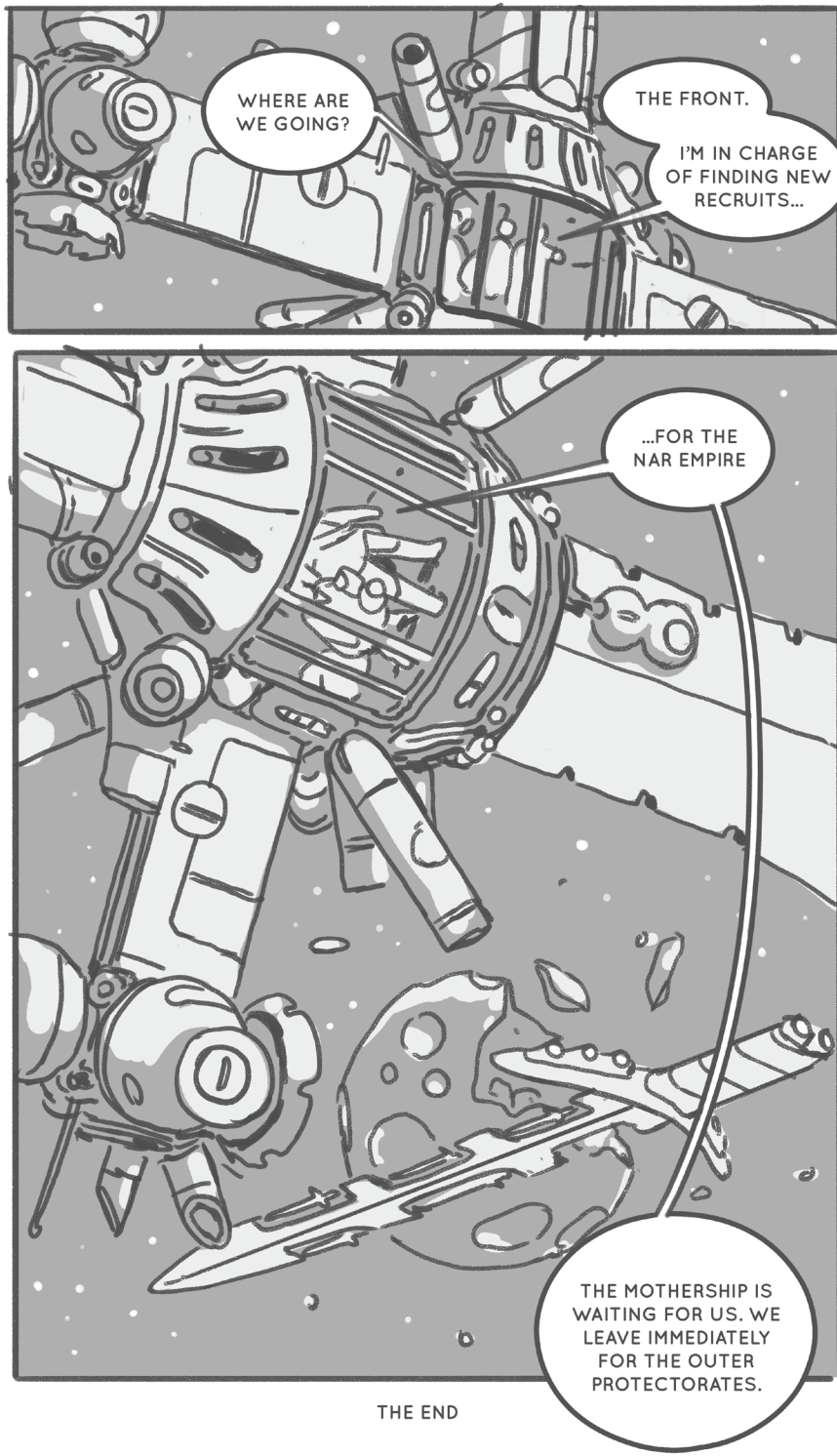

DO YOU SELL TICKETS TO AVANI?
TICKETS
"AVANI"?
NEVER HEARD OF IT.
NOTHING IN THE SYSTEM EITHER.
I'VE HEARD OF IT.


YOU'VE HEARD OF IT?
IT'S AN OLD, OLD NAME FOR A PLANET WITH MANY NAMES.
A YOUNGER NAME FOR IT...
...IS EARTH.
YOU CAN'T BUY TICKETS TO IT HERE, BUT YOU CAN SEE IT FROM WHERE ODA IS GOING.
ODA COULD TAKE YOU WHERE HE'S GOING.
I DON'T TRUST HIM, VAJA.
WE HAVE NO CHOICE. WE CAN'T STAY HERE. WE HAVE TO GO WITH HIM.


THERE IT IS...


...WHAT WAS ONCE CALLED EARTH. YOUR "AVANI". A DEAD WORLD.
THEY CALL IT THE HUB NOW, "THE HEART OF INTERPLANETARY TRAVEL", BUT IT'S SLOWLY TURNING INTO A WAY STATION.


YOU LIED TO US.
ODA SAID YOU COULD SEE IT FROM WHERE HE WAS GOING.
YOU CAN SEE IT, CAN'T YOU?


WHERE ARE WE GOING?
THE FRONT.
I'M IN CHARGE OF FINDING NEW RECRUITS...
...FOR THE NAR EMPIRE
THE MOTHERSHIP IS WAITING FOR US. WE LEAVE IMMEDIATELY FOR THE OUTER PROTECTORATES.

THE END



IN FOCUS

MAGGIE GEE

On Starting Your Book, & Finding Your Reader

MAGGIE GEE

1

Starting your book – I know, that's hard. To all my fellow writers just starting out along a newly stretched tightrope in the early morning mist, one step, then another step, shoulders a little tense (relax them), eyes on the future – good luck! You will need it. Going out over the void of the unwritten is never going to be easy.

But there hanging in the mid-distance in front of you, glowing , multi-coloured, too tiny to decode, is the image of the perfect book you are going to write. Nothing has happened to spoil it yet. It is the jewelled dream of the book. It is what keeps all writers inching forward: one day we will get there.

Wait a moment, though, what are we doing, exactly?

2

Why are you writing something down in the first place, spending too long at the computer, missing the fun other people are having? What you are beginning is, in fact, not a simple stating of something, a mere unfolding of a mental plan. No, you are drafting a message, and the message is going to someone. If it were not so, the book could stay inside your head,

and you could avoid all that struggle, the locked muscles, the snowdrifts of drafts, the workshopping, the rigours of feedback. If a book were not a message to someone else, it need never be effortfully hauled into the light. The message must be read by someone. Yes, the first thing you need is a reader.

3

One way I can gauge how important readers are to me is my mental computation of how many books I have written. I would say I've written 14 books with another ready to go. Yet in addition to the 14 on the shelf, there are another 2 large, hefty hardbacks objects on the shelf that have my name on. They are my master's and doctoral theses, and I never consider them to be books. Why not? Because they have both had only four documented readers – in each case my supervisors and my two examiners. So to me, evidently, it is readers who complete a book, readers who bring the writing into a shared world of discussion, shared emotion, recognition.

Starting to write may be hard, but finding the reader is harder. I nearly called this piece 'hailing your reader' – 'hailing' is what you do to grab a black taxi out of the loud, busy, traffic-thronged streets of London. In a bookshop hundreds of books are all looking to attract that one reader who just walked through the door, ready to make an impulse buy.

Snaring a reader happens in two stages. Books in codex form – ie not parchment scrolls or wax tablets but layers of sequential pages – are characterised by being closed and having covers. In this they differ from the touchscreen digital content with which they are competing; the printed book has elements of privacy and distance that recall its origins as a high status object meant for ecclesiastical, royal or moneyed elites. So the first challenge for the book in this democratic age is to convert the barrier of its cover

into bait for the passing reader, who must be lured into stopping and opening it. The excellence of current book cover design, particularly in non-fiction, an area that is harder to sell than fiction, is evidence of how seriously publishers take this challenge. Covers are ingenious, aesthetically pleasing, exciting, hot or cool as the book requires. The designers are doing their very best to pull readers towards our pile of copies.

Let's pretend that our reader has paused and picked up the book. Now he or she is reading that all-important first paragraph, that crucial first page. Have we got it right? Will we catch their attention, will they read on and eventually take the book to the till because they can't bear not to read the rest of it? Sometimes everything depends on the beginning.

4

Fiction is famous for show-stopping beginnings. Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* heads its first chapter 'I am born' , and continues 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.' Angela Carter starts *Heroes and Villains* at a cracking pace with 'Marianne had sharp, cold eyes and she was spiteful but her father loved her.' And here's Peter Carey, mystifying and intriguing the reader in *Bliss* with 'Harry Joy was to die three times, but it was his first death which was to have the greatest effect on him, and it is this first death which we shall now witness.'

When a reader picks up a novel, effectively there are just two parties in the relationship which begins, the reader and the writer, because the reader knows that the world he is entering is wholly made up by the writer. These fictional beginnings all say to the reader, in one way or another, 'Hey, I am going to entertain you – stick around and be dazzled and amused.'

When a reader crosses the threshold of a non-fiction book, a different relationship is starting, involving three parties – the writer, the reader, and the real world, a world in which the reader also lives, and about which she or he has knowledge, opinions and beliefs. Fortunately readers also have gaps in their knowledge they are curious to fill. Today's reader needs to be convinced that this particular writer – you or I – is the right person to do that job.

Looking at the beginnings of non-fiction books, I am fascinated by how much they have changed over the two millennia since Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus wrote his history *Germania,* in AD 97-99, which begins like this, briskly impersonal and full of imperial certainty: the external world is simply there:

> Germany as a whole is separated from the Gauls and from Ractians and Pennonians by the rivers Rhine and Danube: from the Sarmatians and Dacians by mutual misgivings or mountains: the rest of it is surrounded by the ocean, which enfolds wide peninsulas and islands of vast expanse…The Rhine, rising from the inaccessible and precipitous crest of the Ractian Alps, after turning west for a reach of some length is lost in the North Sea.

Whereas this is the beginning of Carole Shelby Carnes's 2014 social history of a town in the American South, *A Street in a Town Remembered: a Memoir of Shelby, Mississippi (1852-2010)*:

> I have always had difficulty with directions apart from up and down. Right, left, north, south were matters that have made me pause for reflection…

Our contemporary historian begins with a confession of fallibility about where things are and a willingness to

share 'reflection' with the reader – and that's more than a geographical demurral, since the American Civil War and the fallout of north-south conflict and racial fault lines are central to her history.

In the tripartite relationship between reader, world and writer, first-century AD Tacitus takes his reader for granted and simply addresses himself with magisterial certainty to the world, whereas twenty-first-century Carole Shelby Carnes admits she has no claims to omnipotent knowledge, confides her flaws to the reader, and effectively asks him or her to humour her and like her. 'I'm ready to talk,' she seems to say. 'Come with me.' This book, like so many other contemporary works of creative non-fiction, is the story of a quest for understanding rather than a simple imparting of knowledge acquired. The relationship between writer and reader is now in the foreground.

This technique is equally an acknowledgement of the windowframe through which both will be looking. Albert Einstein drew the world's attention to the importance of 'the man at the railway carriage-window', in other words the specific reference point from which objects or events are seen. Once you acknowledge that the point of view of the observer changes what is observed, introducing the writer-observer to the reader becomes essential.

Here's another example of a non-fiction beginning where everything rests on the contact between the writer and his audience, Colin Grant's recent brilliant book about epilepsy, *A Smell of Burning*:

> 'Are you epileptic?' Almost everyone asked this when I told them that I was writing a book about epilepsy. I would like to have said "yes" to see where the conversation went. On some level, answering "no" felt like a betrayal. When they followed up with the question, 'Why are you writing about it?' I would describe this scenario.

> A man writhes on the ground. His arms slap and snap about him. His legs kick out at some invisible enemy…A strange guttural sound comes from his throat and his mouth froths with foam. Your journey to work is abruptly interrupted by the sight of him. Perhaps the man is drunk…You move on. Of course you do.
>
> 'That man,' I would say to the people who asked about the book, 'is my brother, Christopher.'

This is the special point of view from which the book is written, then: that of a brother, and, we find as the book progresses, a bereaved brother. 'Trust me, reader', this beginning seems to say. 'I have been there.' There's another interesting tactic in these paragraphs where Grant is wooing his new reader, and that is the use of 'You' – 'Your journey to work is abruptly interrupted' – to implicate and involve the reader personally in the story he is telling.

Claudia Rankine's extraordinary and controversial, semi-poetic non-fiction book about race in America, *Citizen: An American Lyric,* addresses the reader as 'You' from the very start, but differently to Grant. I think she does it as a way of making the 'you' of the reader, who might be black or white, one and the same as the black 'I' who is telling the book and feeling the pain. She starts like this:

> When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, grey ceiling seems approachable…you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor.
>
> The route is often associative. You smell good.

> You are twelve attending Sts Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written…The girl is Catholic with waist-length brown hair… You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person.

How does this work? I think it is a very intimate beginning. The reader is actually asked into bed with the writer, to share her pillow. And then the reader has to share the awkwardness and shame of the long-haired schoolgirl who accidentally insults the writer, aged twelve, by showing she thinks 'looking like a white person' is something admirable.

5

But how does all this relate to my own writing process? Like most writers, the more I have written, the more I have learned there is more than one way to cross the gulf of non-being. The cautious tightrope artist's walk that I described in the first paragraph of this piece is not always true to my experience of starting novels. When I am writing fiction I alternate between paralysis and absolute rashness. After weeks or months or years of procrastination or 'research', followed by a few jittery days of unnecessary self-grooming and making foolish purchases online, one morning I will sit down with my notebooks or at the computer and suddenly rush out headlong across the void, trying to go so fast in my first draft that I do not have time to fall off. After the minimal number of weeks or months I will plunge panting on to the

far end of the rope, without much idea of what appalling carnage I have left behind me. Then it's time, after a pause to recover, to find out what I wrote. And to edit. And re-edit. And re-edit again. But non-fiction – that's a very different matter.

Just over half-a-dozen years ago I decided to take a break from fiction and write my life – which would only be interesting to the reader, it seemed to me, because of what it had in common with other lives. It would be boring if I just told my life from A to Z. Instead I thought, why am I writing it? I am writing it to understand my short life on this planet. Out there must be thousands of other human beings doing just the same thing, and probably asking just the same questions as me. And so I made a list of questions, and structured the book according to my list, setting out my questions at the very beginning and then trying to answer each one in turn by thinking through what I had learned in my life – in a way, thinking it through alongside the reader.

The research did matter, though. I have living brothers and cousins; I had to try to get my facts straight. The things you are most sure you remember may be the things you get most wrong. At last I sorted out how old I was when the Berlin wall went up and during the Cuban missile crisis, events which seeded in me the horror of war that emerges in all my fiction. Closer to home, I found that photographs, maps and plans helped me most. Drawing a map of the houses and gardens where we lived, and then, within those, drawing a plan of each room, helped me remember so many incidents. Once I had the fireplace and the table, I remembered the cups and saucers on the table and the events around the fireplace – how we dried ourselves around the fire in the lounge after washing our hair or ourselves in the kitchen sink, for example. Colours of things returned, location of windows brought back a memory of the views they revealed.

And yet the biggest challenge was getting a reader to look through the window with me. That was the hardest thing. My non-fiction book was not a race through a story but a jigsaw of thought and images whose ordering and re-ordering took longer than anything else. And how to begin? How to find my reader?

After many false starts and moments of despair I began *My Animal Life* with what I might call a 'coo-er' fact, an 'amazing fact' that at the same time binds in the reader with me, the writer.

> I am alive at the time of writing this. And so are you. For nearly four billion years of life on earth, neither of us existed: we were a blank. For the next few billion years before the sun burns up the earth, our bodies will be bones under the ground, or ash, asleep… we are between two states of non-being, two endless nights. Unprepared, we are thrust on stage. The light is on, the eye open. Life!

I am reminding the impulse buyer, the reader pausing just for a split second in his or her ramble round the bookshop one Saturday morning, that this brief electric moment of contact between us as he or she riffles through my first pages is just a metaphor for something much deeper we hold in common. That we are suspended in the same brief stretch of time in the enormity of history and prehistory, and that my book has things to say – in the ear of this reader, this particular reader who I desire – about what we share.

Interview with Maggie Gee

SIMON LINTER

Maggie Gee's latest novel *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* brings back a literary hero to life through Professor Angela Lamb's consultation of Woolf manuscripts. The settings change from New York to Istanbul (plus the flight cabin), and utilises biographical references, as well as allowing the liberty of fantasy fiction to propel the story.

Interviewer

The character of Angela Lamb is a Professor, who is a novelist, Virginia Woolf was arguably one of the most creative writers, and Angela Lamb's daughter Gerda is pleading for her mother's attention, throughout. Bearing in mind that you are also a Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, and that it has been said "authors write about things they know," what considerations were made when you sat down to write the first page and onwards? Did you feel that the connection to your status and profession (especially near the end of the book concerning the conference scene) could not be avoided?

Gee

I think I like to tease and tempt the reader by making some characters a bit like me. In *My Cleaner* and *My Driver*, my two Ugandan novels, there is a writer-teacher Vanessa who is like a nightmare version of me, and she did make

me laugh (at myself). But Angela Lamb is not actually very like me. Richer, more conventional, more prudish, and MUCH more neglectful of her daughter. Gerda, on the other hand, is funny and determined and very like my own daughter Rosa, and many of Gerda's jokes were stolen from Rosa – with her permission.

Interviewer

The book uses the three first-person perspectives of Angela, Virginia, and Gerda, as well as a third-person narrator who is sometimes challenged by Gerda. There are some books like Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* that entitle chapters with the character who is speaking. *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* swaps perspectives as events unfold by using character names as titles, which to the naked eye looks like a play manuscript when only one sentence is used. Swapping perspectives is sometimes frowned upon and it has often been said that an author should only do it with good reason. How was this narrative design conceived, and how did you make it work?

Gee

I began as a poet and changed to fiction because it could show more different perspectives on the world: that's why I like to write from many points of view. Interestingly, *My Cleaner*, which was published before *The Help* and has similar themes and two main protagonists, one black, one white, alternates perspectives in different chapters, but it also has a third-person narrator who sometimes appears to make slightly more distant comments. The main thing in a novel is to make the reader feel they are in safe hands and that perspective and point of view are not wavering or wobbling accidentally. If you do something calmly and frequently enough, the reader will accept it. But my readers will just have to get used to seeing the world from

different angles – which is what I, as a writer, want them to do. Gerda's perspective actually came into the book quite late on, when I got bored with Virginia and Angela. Two narrators, both women writers, felt static: Gerda is wild and young and her voice is utterly different.

Interviewer

Did you feel at any point that the balance between biography and fiction was unbalanced, and if so, how did you deal with this problem (e.g. too much Virginia and not enough Angela & Gerda)?

Gee

So many people know about Virginia Woolf (the real one) that I could not escape the biographical facts of her 1882-1941 life, but my novel is entirely animated by her twenty-first century life in New York and Manhattan, which of course I invented.

Interviewer

Some works of creative non-fiction are controversial for twisting truths, and sometimes they are works of fiction with the label non-fiction stamped on them. There are acknowledgements at the end of *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* that state that the book is "an act of cheek" and "her thoughts and feelings are mostly my imaginings" (475). You also state that references are based loosely on Woolf's writings and biographies. Do you feel that the novel's base of non-fiction blurs the line between what is truth and what is fiction, and do you feel that a novel based on fact is almost the same as some works of non-fiction?

Gee

I tried to solve the problem, the moral problem, that arises

from novelisations of real people, i.e., you are stealing someone's soul by making my Virginia come back to life in the 21st century, so it is clear to the reader that everything in the narrative present is fictional. Virginia never went to New York in real life either, though she went to Istanbul/Constantinople as a very young woman, so there are some references to that earlier visit, and in one case I made her go back to a favourite haunt. There is one passage in the book about Woolf's actual, historical life that is completely invented: I draw attention to that in the notes at the back, to make that clear. Otherwise everything about Woolf's past is based on close reading of her diaries, letters and novels. I do know her work pretty well, as she was the central author in my own English Literature Ph.D., way back in 1980. I've also written the text for a British Council travelling exhibition on Woolf that went to 54 countries.

Interviewer

Did you have any specific intentions towards the genre of creative non-fiction, and do you think your book presents any problems concerning this matter?

Gee

The only responsibilities writers have to genres are to refresh them. Maybe I did that through setting my text out like a play, and by using poetry, and by mixing fiction and non-fiction. And, of course, we always have a responsibility to write, and rewrite, as well as we can, to do our research and edit carefully.

Interviewer

The book is divided into three sections, namely London-New York, Time Passes: London-New York-Istanbul, and Virginia in Istanbul. First, what is the reason or reasons

for dividing the book up into these separate parts? Second, the Time Passes: London-New York-Istanbul part is 64 pages long and takes place in the flight cabin. I felt that time passed quite slowly as I was reading this part of the novel. Was this intentional? and how did you manage to achieve this?

Gee

At first the book was divided into two sections, New York and Istanbul, just as it had only two characters. But three is actually a far more dynamic number. And I wanted to link the two cities with a kind of fluid bridge which has much more time for reflection, so I turned to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* which has a middle section called Time Passes to indicate the years of the war, in which characters die or are lost, and the house which the family loves becomes disused and dusty, and spiders and birds and dust invade it. It's a very slow, poetic middle passage, set in a totally static environment. I, by contrast, set my Time Passes on a jet flying from New York to Istanbul, a long flight I had done myself, and in company with many of the passengers who appear in the novel – a large party of Hasidic Jews returning via Istanbul to Israel, for example. Woolf never flew on a plane in real life, so it was very exciting to imagine her flying on a plane. She was also utterly fascinated in real life by questions of time and space, and I think long distance flying would have appealed to her. The comic element is that Gerda is ill-advisedly flying to New York, looking for her mother, at precisely the moment that her mother is flying on with Virginia to Istanbul. So time and space are out of joint.

Interviewer

Pages 193-195 feature poetic text that uses all the space of the page. The blend of fiction and poetry can often

be difficult to achieve without disrupting the flow of the narrative. You have managed to make the poetic elements of the book seem natural. If Virginia Woolf had been a 100% fictional character, would you have been able to make the poetic elements work?

Gee

I doubt if I would have tried it if it had not been Virginia Woolf I was writing about – it just seemed appropriate. Form and content have to be the same thing, ideally.

Interviewer

Gerda's story verges on the genre of young adult fiction, or at least that is my perception of it. The contrast between the chapters featuring Angela and Virginia are noticeable, as Gerda's internal dialogue screams for her mother's attention. How were you able to change the perspective to Gerda without throwing the reader out of Angela and Virginia's story?

Gee

I wanted the reader to have a holiday from Angela and Virginia. But since Gerda is always thinking, with tenderness, fury or mockery, about her mother, we don't go far away. However Gerda's story is inspired by my favourite fairy tale, Hans Andersen's "The Snow Queen" (which also lies behind the film *Frozen*) – so it's more a modern fairy-tale than Young Adult fiction. Lil Robber, the tough gang girl Gerda falls in love with, is my version of Hans Andersen's Little Robber Maid, who is herself androgynous.

Interviewer

One review accuses you of not asking Virginia Woolf about her books in this novel. I believe that you mention

most, if not all, of Woolf's works in the book, and discuss the impact Woolf has had on the literary world. To add to this, you also imagine how Woolf herself would react if she ever found out about this impact. Although Virginia Woolf is a literary canon, and therefore a good choice of author to bring back to life, did you consider any other authors like Jane Austen, or any of the Brontë sisters, or perhaps Mary Shelley? And how were you able to take on the persona of Woolf and write from her perspective?

Gee

Of course there is a lot about Woolf's books in the novel, and of course, my novel loves Woolf, rather than being hostile to her, as the review suggests. I would have had no reason to write about Austin, Brontë or Shelley: for modern women writers Woolf is still the one to face up to, still the one not to be cowed by, still the one who inspires us with her courage and her freedom. As for writing a novel about writers again – no, I tend to want to do something different with every novel, which is a bit frustrating for my publishers. How did I take on the persona of Woolf? I drenched myself in her work, I went to the places she frequented – Monk's House and Charleston – and I live in Bloomsbury, very near one of her houses. I also listened again and again to her voice on the internet – there is just one recording, but it gives you a strong sense of her. But Woolf alone would not have made the novel work: I spent a lot of time in the places – because novels need characters, action and setting, and the relationship between the three things throws up sparks.

Interviewer

Did the stature of Virginia Woolf as a literary canon restrict you from writing about sensitive areas of her life?

Gee

No, certainly not. If I was restricted it was by my own sense of the limits of what we ever know about other people, and my own idea of authorial morality, which meant I did not want to intrude into some aspects of her life. I did not want to write about the suicide, because I don't like the connection people make between female creativity and self-destruction, but I felt one central point of the novel was that it offered a second chance of life to someone who loved life but died too early, so I had to do that. But I tried to get it over with early on.

Interviewer

For example, the book refers to Virginia Woolf carrying stones in her pockets and smelling of pondweed, which are descriptions I winced at. This leads me to my next question. It has been said that being an author means that you expose yourself and leave yourself vulnerable in order to create a bold artistic statement. Do you consider that there was a line to be drawn when considering how bold you should be?

Gee

A writer must be infinitely bold. If you try to second-guess the response from readers and publishers and reviewers, you will lose everything. This business is not about money, it's about freedom. But being bold is not the same thing as showing off: I mean, rather, that we have to dare everything. In terms of the response from readers, we have to expect cruelty sometimes as well as love. And I have gone through rejection as well as acclaim. It's normal for an artist.

Interviewer

A technique used in playwriting is to write in the actions of people in brackets. You do this throughout the novel

next to the names of the character that is speaking. I'd like to think you are paying tribute to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* ? by doing this, but were you afraid that you were writing a play and not a novel?

Gee

I gloried in the fact that I could write a play while writing a novel. I love experimenting with form, though I try to keep life at the heart of what I do, and I aim not to write difficult books, i.e., to play with form for form's sake.

Interviewer

I feel your book is playful, but if the series *Lost in Austen*, which brings fictional characters from *Pride & Prejudice* into modern life, and Timur Vermes' *Look Who's Back* that brings back Adolf Hitler, can be considered to be playful to the point of comedy, then was this level of quirky comedic playfulness considered when writing *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*?

Gee

I think I wrote a comedy: in the Shakespearian sense of having a happy ending, but also by keeping my sense of the absurd ever present. Oh, and just by letting the characters have fun. I hope to keep the readers amused too, though the book has a deeper and more serious point about how writing and the literary world has changed since Woolf's day, and also about suicide. It tries to say writing is still worthwhile, and ultimately to link writing with freedom in the world.

Interviewer

Virginia Woolf in Manhattan features 95 chapters. Most of these chapters are quite short and punchy, which is something I have noticed with a number of new book

releases. Mass communication theory suggests that the MTV generation has a short attention span, and therefore attention has to be grabbed with shorter punchier messages. Was this a reason why your book is written in this manner?

Gee

I like light pages, i.e. pages with a lot of space on them, and yes, ever since Kurt Vonnegut's work – before that maybe, ever since novelist Stevie Smith's work – some of us writers have liked to offer readers air, so they don't feel imprisoned.

Interviewer

I mentioned that poetic text in the book uses the space of the page, but I also noticed that a bold gothic font was used for Gerda's story. I could imagine Gerda experimenting with different fonts to write her story, but is there another reason that you, as the author, have used it?

Gee

No, you're right. I used it because Gerda is a novice writer having tremendous fun with choosing fonts. And why not?

Interviewer

I try to avoid reading blurbs before I read a book because I want to be surprised. After I had finished *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*, I read the blurb and it reveals quite a lot about it. What are your thoughts on the blurb on the back cover of your book (do you have any control over this aspect of a novel?), and do you think it has the potential to reveal too much before a person has read it?

Gee

Blurbs, like reviews, are very inexact pieces of writing. Basically a blurb is trying to a) seduce and b) help the

reader. But it can never do either thing perfectly, and certainly it can never be faithful to the novel – otherwise all novels would be 100 words long, like blurbs. So much easier for us all! As Robert Louis Stevenson said, "It's the length that kills." But to encourage any new writers reading this, it's also true that if you write 500 words a day, 5 days a week, by the end of a year you would have written a very long novel, and in only nine months, a more reasonable-sized one.

CONTRIBUTORS

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