

ISSUE 1

LOTUS-EATER



LOTUS-EATER

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in English and translations from the Italian

Editor: Diana Mastrodomenico

Assistant editors: Marco Costantini, Chiara Patrizi

Italian poems translated by Diana Mastrodomenico

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Prose



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Cricket Boy

Cricket Boy has looked in the face of death. It only makes him horny. He calls me his Blow Job Queen and says, “Those Manchester girls haven’t got a thing on you.”

Four a.m. and the telephone wakes me.

I get up and go to the window, see Cricket Boy cradling his cell phone, the first snowflakes of inevitable winter fluttering around him. When I unlock the door, he stumbles down the narrow hallway of my apartment, knocking the artwork with his shoulders. I brush past him and climb back under the comforter.

He kneels beside my bed and says, “I only called you because I wanted to fuck.”

“I only opened the door because I wanted to tell you to fuck off—but since you’re here—”

Thing is, Cricket Boy can’t get it up. I start thinking the reason for it is grief. His dad died of a heart attack three weeks ago, his sister died of cancer four days later. He was just off the plane from two funerals in England when I met him. But it isn’t grief. It’s Guinness.

He went straight from the airport to his neighborhood pub. I was there with my buddy, a writer who writes about women’s feet.

Cricket Boy was slurring when he asked, “Got any English in you?”

I shook my head.

“Would you like some?”

I scrawled the writer’s number on a coaster and slid it over the bar to him.

“Brilliant,” he said, nodding.

A few days later Cricket Boy made the call, chatted with the foot fetishist and wangled my real number out of him.

“Your boyfriend said you’d be getting off work about now.”

I knew it was him, what with the accent and all. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Perfect. So let’s have a drink.”

Not that he’d asked me on a proper date, but I hadn’t expected him to be with four of his friends when I arrived. They were all artists, which is to say they were carpenters. I’ve always had a thing for construction workers—love, love, love power tools and the smell of sawdust, a beat-up Ford F250—good thing, as I spent the rest of the night being hit on by the carpenter-artists during which time Cricket Boy sat with his back to me and chatted up the waitress.

Dan bought my drinks and Riley lit my cigarettes. Boris tried to lure me into the bathroom with coke. Wesley managed to flirt with me while making excuses for his friend.

“He’s had a rough time,” he said, leaning a bit too close and brushing the

hair back from my ear while he detailed the diptych of deaths with a whisper.

Around last call, I tapped on Cricket Boy's shoulder, "So, what's your deal?"

"I used to play cricket. Now I'm a contractor."

"Great," I said.

"Let's get out of here."

"Right."

Cricket Boy dances a little dance, waving a steak burrito in front of the dog. He's been MIA for over a week, then shows up after hours bearing a greasy white paper bag and talking about his trip to New York. From the looks of it he's only been to El Chino.

Cricket Boy has lots of ideas about New York. "Best cabbies in the world," he tells me, taking a massive bite out of the burrito and dribbling sour cream on the floor. "They all follow cricket—in Chicago nobody even knows what cricket it."

"Well," I ask, "what is it?"

He claims if he could see paintings at Boris' house like the ones in The Met that he wouldn't need to do drugs. Says he spent so many hours in the museum he had to buy his mate a lap dance to make up for it.

"Generous."

"Oh, you," he says, reaching to unbutton my jeans.

Later, in bed, he tells me if it wasn't for the rent, he'd live in Manhattan.

I tell him if it wasn't for life, he'd live.

The first time we fucked, we didn't.

I asked him if he wanted to talk.

"About what?"

"Exactly," I said.

I lay in bed beside him, thinking about death. Cricket Boy never mentioned his father, his sister. I wondered if this was how he and his hooligan friends got women in bed. One tells the sad sad story. The other takes her home. But recent death or not, Cricket Boy and I had yet to close the deal.

Waking in the turgid morning light anything seemed possible, and Cricket Boy got it going on. Then somewhere mid-screw, he lost it, and with the lost erection—the lost condom. Twenty minutes of groping and, finally, Cricket Boy signed on for the search, tugging the condom out of me, flaccid and pathetic, in his big working-class hands.

I've had a little bit of death myself, but I don't tell Cricket Boy.

Cricket Boy empties the seal onto Boris' ugly 80's chrome and glass coffee table and busies himself scraping out lines with a battered ATM card. Boris grabs the seal, licking the glossy square of paper for such a long time that I think the newsprint will come off on his tongue, but eventually he crumples it into a little ball and tosses it onto a stack of magazines, the top one of which is called *Juggs*. Gesturing at the assortment of porn, he explains that he only buys it because he paints the female form.

Cricket Boy, rolled twenty to his nose, laughs so hard he chokes, scattering the coke all over the rug. His face goes from its usual hungover British pallor

to crimson as he hacks and coughs and waves his arms about, flinging himself back into a peeling faux-leather recliner and nearly pulling a Len Bias—or the cricket equivalent—in his seat. Still talking about the female form, Boris crawls around on his knees trying to salvage what he can of the disseminated drugs, yanking up bits of shagged carpeting and examining the fibers with his clever artist's eye.

When I'm reasonably sure I don't need to call 911, I take a look at the canvases tacked to Boris' wall and think, perhaps for the first time, that Cricket Boy may have had a point. Still, when I try to imagine him wandering through the galleries of The Met, it's a tough image to conjure considering the tableau he's creating now—sweating and jonesing and speed-dialing everyone he knows on his mobile.

Cricket Boy will take me nowhere, which I guess is where I want to go.

The second time around, same as it ever was.

I asked him if he wanted to talk.

"Are you taking the piss out of me?"

"Taking the what?"

"Fuckin' Americans—can't even speak fuckin' English."

The writer and I are having coffee. He asks me what's up with Soccer Boy.

"Cricket, you mean."

"Yeah, him."

I stare out of the cafe window at a couple bundled in matching parkas. The guy

is wearing a goofy purple fleece hat and holding a snowball, mock-threatening the woman with him. I shake a cigarette out of the pack and light it. When I look again, the woman's got the hat on and they are kissing.

"Let's just say nothing's up," I tell him.

"You mean?"

"I mean there is nothing worse than having a limp dick in your mouth."

"That so?" he asks, scribbling into his notebook.

The truth is I don't know why I've logged so many hours with cricket Boy. Maybe it's the accent. Maybe I'm waiting to hear about all that death. Death with an accent.

Cricket Boy never wants to talk unless I'm asleep.

He calls me late at night while he's eating take-out Chinese and watching television. I smoke a cigarette in the dark and look out the window, try to decipher the jumble of words.

When the ad for 1-900-WET-TALK comes on, he tells me he has to go.

Outside there is snow, drifting over the parked cars and swirling in the blue glow of the street lamps. Right now it's beautiful. Tomorrow the commuters will unbury their dead cars with shovels and brooms, resuscitate them with jumper cables. They will pull out into the street, leaving behind them a wintry yard-sale of blue plastic milk crates and folding deck chairs, maybe even an ironing board, to save the parking spaces they've carved



out for their return. Overly confident about the crunch of salt beneath their tires, they will flip through talk-radio channels as they hurry toward the expressway, a sheet of black ice beneath its snowy surface.

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The Fire and The Fox

Misery hangs in the air of this city like old and stale breath. You can taste the common pain within a few minutes of stepping outside. It's a bitterness that sticks to the back of the tongue. It tastes like death, only without the dying. There's no drawing light to float towards. It's just a slow and dull ache which refuses diagnosis.

When I woke up this morning I thought about turning on the gas, putting my head in the oven and closing my eyes. I don't suppose it's quite as peaceful as all that. I suspect there's a whole unpleasant process to endure before you find out if the other side has preferable qualities. I thought about looking it up. A little pre-suicide research. Then I remembered the oven had stopped working three days ago. I couldn't call Mr Wong because I owed him money. He isn't a terrible Landlord. He's reasonably unobtrusive and gives fair warning before any of his sporadic property inspections. My reluctance to pay isn't a financial issue, I just like to make him wait. He's much shorter than me and refuses to look up when he talks. His eyeline is level with my chest, nipples to be specific. I look down at the droplets of sweat on his bald head. They seem to form symbols, like they're trying to show me something I don't want to see.

"You owe me two months." Mr Wong shouts at my nipples.

"I'll have it for you tomorrow, Mr Wong."

"Tomorrow no good." He says as the tiny beads of sweat on his head change direction. "Today good."

I'm going to have to pay up. I want him to fix my oven. I want to leave the gas running, go out for the day and come back to cinders and ash. I'd smell the smoke before turning onto my street. I'd taste it and it would overpower the bitterness. I imagine Mr Wong's furniture, my clothes and personal affects as ashes. I picture them as black and grey flecks spiralling away in the cool-night breeze. This fantasy is incredibly freeing. Several other buildings would also be taken out by the fire. I'm okay with that.

"What's happened here?" I'd say to a soot-stained bystander. He'd be overweight, more so than I. A well-formed and evenly-trimmed goatee would rest on his second chin.

"Some clown left the gas on." The bystander would say. His superman t shirt wouldn't quite reach his baggy jeans, an ugly white strip of flesh and hair would be exposed.

“For real? No shit.” I’d say, silently reading the words ‘Man Of Steel’ across his chest. The bystanders big belly would’ve stretched out the t-shirt, changing the expression on Superman’s once chiselled face, he’d be all Clark and no Kal-El, he’d no longer represent truth, justice and the American way.

“No shit. For real.” The bystander would confirm.

Standing there for a while staring at the firemen as they roll up their hoses and ready themselves for the next hot emergency, we’d swap a few more words about the stupidity of it all. Our exchange would be brief, concluding in phrases that don’t really mean anything.

“You don’t know what you have until it’s gone.”

“One in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Like that.

He’d go home. I’d go somewhere else. Perhaps I’d find myself in an all night café. Flirt with the waitress over there. She’d be a bigger girl with a regional accent. Green eyes and pale skin. Big tits a man could lose his cock in. I’d burn my tongue on hot coffee. Eat a half-cooked cookie-dough, topped with ice cream, leave an inappropriately generous tip on the table, walk outside, button up my coat and start all over again.

I’d stop at a store and buy a pack of

smokes. I’d sit on a wall in front of a pedestrian crossing and light up. It would be quiet and deserted. I’d blow out smoke and look into the road. A city fox would stop exactly half way across the crossing.

I lived in the country for half my life and only ever saw a fox twice. I see them regularly here. I read somewhere that city foxes can’t function when reintroduced to the wild. They stand in the middle of fields like miss-placed ornaments.

He’d tilt his head slightly and stare at me knowingly. He’d look at me as if to say, ‘none of this is real and I’m okay with that.’

He understands the city better than I do. In the distance a car horn would break the silence. The fox would look off toward the sound before returning his attention to me. Then he’d bow his head and carry on his way.

TONY MASTROIANNI



*Nothing in particular
or Paradise Blue
or Computer blue by Prince
or The Whale*

His mom's face fell off. I'm not catholic anymore, he told her. She'd been joking in the first place. Had he abstained from meat? all the temptations of such an ungodly, the ungodly world we live in? His mother jested, as if 40 days sans animal meat is but a formality in regards to being a good boy, a good future resident of the sky and really, it is, but her face fell off anyway. Just like that, it fell off when he said he wasn't catholic anymore. I don't know what I am, he told her. He was just a poor lost soul in an ocean of... No spoilers!

With her face lying on the floor like that he had the time to explain. She could no longer try and refute him, interrupt him, say Are you an atheist? I knew it, I shouldn't have let you move to the city, you were at such an impressionable age, but now that the speaker box for the Catholic United Mothers Society [C.U.M.S.] lay on its kitchen floor, he could speak his peace. Sense-wise, she was all ears. He had the floor. hahahahahahaha

Well, about three years ago I took the car to North Carolina to visit Louie,

he started. Remember Louie? Louie Rawley, the Rawley's hot dog place's kid. Louie chose University of North Carolina for the namesake. He thought it'd be funny to work summers at a taxidermist's shop. After graduation, the kid started working there fulltime, just while he got his feet off the ground. He ended up never leaving the place, though they must have taught him something at school down there. He had the place booming with animal corpses. The old man ended up making him partner and when the old man died, Louie became Rawley: Carcass King of Raleigh.

He could hear his mom even without her vocal chords attached to her mouth. *Did you turn into a vegetarian? Are you a vegetarian now? How are you gonna get protein?*

Anyway, I hadn't seen Louie since..., I hadn't seen him in years and he'd been breaking my b-sack to come down since he made it to the taxidermy big time. You remember this, no? So I was driving, he said, continuing his soliloquy, trying to decide whether to look at the



head or the floor. And driving and driving and driving, driving on E. Past E. Below the red line. He chose to talk to the head. Looking and speaking at the floor as if to avoid his mother's eyes was exactly where he found them, so he went back to the head, I was playing the Kramer game with the gas tank since before I hit Virginia. I stopped off by the bay somewhere and drove through town a little on the little fumes I had to drive through town a little on, until I found the correct gas station, the blue and white sign calling me, whispering in my ear that it was them that had the cheapest cigarettes in Virginia. I pulled in, went inside, 15 on 2 and a carton of Marlboros and two packs of Marlboros please. I paid the good man, hit the pump, hit the gas, all that and I broke.

I hit the brakes and I broke when I saw her. She already had me in pieces. She was getting out of the driver's side of an old, super old Chevy pick-up. She had on this red dress, *she was a prostitute wasn't she? That's a sin! You confessed right? Oh, yeah, but you're not a catholic anymore, huh? You'd be lucky if they even let an atheist vegetarian sex maniac into the church and to think I'll never hear the end of this from the girls*, eh-em, a red dress that hung from her a little bit tanned shoulders and went down to her two unevenly tanned knees. And her hair! Her blond locks moving in the wind like they do in the movies. She was crossing the parking lot, her eyes scanning it making sure not to get run over or something and they crossed mine for this

nanosecond and Jesus Christ. *DON'T*. And Jeez Louise. They were spring sky eyes. A little less blue than blue. They were Napoli jersey eyes. They were the kind of sea blue that we don't have in the Long Island Sound. They were the kind of water and the kind of eyes that I'd always wanted to engulf myself in. Paradise blue eyes. She was like nothing I'd ever seen before and everything I'd ever seen before. She was photoshop beautiful. My chest was pounding and my crotch was burning. I was still trying to pick up the pieces of myself and put me back in order when the car behind of me started beeping. I picked the cigarette up off my crotch and pulled out of there.

It took me until the third stoplight to convince myself I had to go back. She probably wouldn't even be there anymore, but I figured I'd never forgive myself if I didn't at least try and rob her heart or at least make her blush or at least least make her agree to see me on purpose. After all, she was the most beautiful three-dimensional girl I'd ever seen.

So I pop a u-turn at the third light. *I don't want to know these things. You do know that 90% of all accidents are caused by bad left hand turns right? you practically did that twice! You could have had a 180% chance of being in an accident! And in Virginia of all places. You know how they are down there*. Who knows, we could get married. I could stay here, become the taxidermy king of Chesapeake, I was thinking. I raced back, racing the cars,

the stoplights and the gas pump. She was getting in the truck as I was pulling in. I was sweating. I was excited. I was nervous all over. I was all nervous over all the films I had just filmed in my head and she was pulling out. She was pulling out before I could tell her my name and that I don't usually do this, in fact I never do this, but I just pulled a u-turn three lights away, risking my life because I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I never at least tried to make you blush or have you out to dinner or something and she was pulling out before I could potentially even get to the climactic, the cinematic, the magic, magical movie moment that I had just played out in my head. She was pulling out and I was figuratively pulling out and second in line to literally pull out. I was behind her car in the pulling out group of cars, beeping, waving my hands like the mad man she was turning me into.

There were cars were zooming on both sides of the street. If she had indeed chosen the correct blinker, she intended on going left. I sat there beeping, wishing I could tell her that 90% of accidents result from left hand turns, but trying to convey this via horn isn't the easiest thing in the world. She threw her finger out her window. I looked down to see if her license plate was personalized or could give me some kind of sign. It said nothing in particular. It literally read <nothinginparticular>. I was flashing my high beams, everything, my low beams, middle beams, when she squinted her paradise blue eye beams into the rear

view mirror and reflected them right into my car. Without even processing my thoughts, I motioned her over to the side of the road. And VAVAVOOM! she did it. She changed blinkers to the right side, not even realizing I saved nine tenths of her life and she pulled far enough up on the grassy knoll thing for another car to pull up behind hers.

So I get out of my car and walk over real nervous like, real rigid movements, like I'm about to show her a picture of John Connor and she rolls up her window leaving open only a crack big enough to talk through. I go through the whole thing. I say, I don't usually do this, in fact, I never do this. I was a stoplight, three stoplights away...a u-turn! My mother would have killed me...I would have never forgave myself...I wanted...blush...future in taxidermy...dinner...

She was nervous at first, but I think my nervousness transcended her nervousness and turned her nervousness into tranquility, because by the time I got to blush, she was blushing and by the time I got to taxidermy king, she was laughing. By the time I got to dinner, she was hungry. She says, Listen. I haven't eaten lunch yet if you wanna grab a burger or something. I dry heave a couple times being in an overwhelming nervous state (Virginia), and the most beautiful girl I've ever seen asks me to get a hamburger. *This is who you want to be your wife? and her idea of a date is a cheeseburger? I know we weren't the Rockefellers, but I thought we raised you a little more...* I dry heave and

say yes. She rolls her window down the rest of the way, poses her picture perfect arm-elbow combination on the door. Hey, she says, since you probably don't know where you're going, probably noticing my license plate or my accent or lack of it, Just follow me. She gives me the time it takes to swing my legs back and forth to my car before she starts hers. I start mine and we're off. Just like that.

I follow her. We drive a couple miles down the main strip there. It's canyoned by gas stations and car dealerships, motels and fast food joints, in all of which you can purchase magnets and t-shirts that read I Love Virginia. We drive a couple miles down the main strip and boy oh boy oh boy, do I love Virginia. She pulls into a Wendy's parking lot and boy oh boy oh boy, do I love Wendy's. As she's going to get out of the driver's side of the super old Chevy pick-up again, as her door creaks open, old pick-up style, I race around my car to feign opening her door the rest of the way. I offer her my hand and she grabs it while she steps down from the floor of her truck, holding her dress down with the other hand, like the lady she is. Outside of the missing finger, it is a very beautiful hand. By the way, she says. She tells me her name and I tell her mine. We walk across the parking lot and I feel like the first person in history to ever walk across a parking lot. I hold one door open and she holds the other and I tell her to order the entire menu if she wants, but she just asks the bitter looking man behind the counter, who has probably seen all this before, two little

love birds, giddy springtime love birds, for a double cheese burger. She specifies double cheeseburger with square patties, which I thought was cute. I order two double square pattied cheeseburgers myself, but it's not cute for some reason. We split a large fry too, but it wasn't enough so we ordered a bunch of normal sized ones after.

We ate and talked, *tell me you didn't chew with your mouth open*, and laughed. Barring nervous laughs, I never laughed during a date in my life. I never had a date like that in my life, let alone a first date. There was no, What do you do? Did you go to college? Where do your parents live? What did you do between birth and now? We just talked about daytime and nighttime and all the in between times. We made fast food jokes and all sorts of bad jokes. I wanted to stay hungry forever. The Lord works in mysterious ways, she says. I, too giddy, too high on Wendy's "food" and this muse sitting in front of me, tell her that I had a half a pack of sunglasses and a full tank of sunglass and it's nighttime and she just looked at me with a face like the bottom of a cookie jar. Do you want to go to the beach? she says, regrouping and recuperating that angel face she'd been wearing the last hour and a half, two hours. Of course I did. Thank God the protagonist never told King Rawley when he'd be getting in. The kid Rawley had known since tee ball, since first communion was never getting in. We split one more large fry in half and I followed my burger queen back to the parking lot.

Yeah, my car was still there, don't worry. Hers was too. Do you mind if we take separate cars, she asks, I have a charity thing at five. Whatta girl! What you gonna say about that Mom.

I told her I didn't mind at all.

So I followed my sun kissed angel further down the main strip and a couple other roads and a couple more other roads and into a parking lot where one parks to enjoy the ocean with the most beautiful real girl they've ever seen. What a duo, I was thinking. A burger queen and the future Taxidermy King of Virginia.

In that split second while I was parked, while I was pondering our royal ceremony, the horns, the trumpet horns and crumpet cakes, she was out of her truck and onto the sand before I could even take her hand and help her out of her old machine. Her feet were already in the water by the time I got out of the car. C'mon, she says, wading further and further out, hiking the bottom of her dress further and further up her legs, scrunching the excess into a little ball. She did this until the water reached her private parts. A little wave went and splashed her before the dress could go any higher than her thighs. Hiking it up any higher would have been of no use. She let the little ball of dress go and continued pushing further and further out, dress and all. She waded in until the ocean reached her chest and waited there for me with that "the water is warm enough face." Her eyes were the same as the background, the surface

meeting the sky and eyes eyes eyes eyes eyes. They gave you the impression that they were the center of her body, that she started with just those eyes and the rest of her grew from there. They were the best eyes I'd ever seen. She still caught me staring at her breasts, I think. But they were so buoyant looking! *this is your mother you're talking to*, I kicked my shoes off and ran in as fast as you can run in water. It was too shallow to swim and I don't think I remember how anyway. Plus the doggy paddle doesn't seem appropriate at the climax of a story.

I finally reach her. She was smiling and I was smiling. She grabs my upper arms and says, Close your eyes. I flexed a little my little biceps and closed my eyes. I was breathing deeply, I remember. It was the first time I consciously recall my lungs so full. Eyes closed, deep breathing. Her hands move, a little drip of water on my crown, on my temple, dripping down my forehead the way water drips, then her hand on the back of my head. The other hand moves to the small of my back. Eyes closed, but I can feel her closer to me, deep breath, I pucker my lips. She grabs hold of my hair like she never wanted to let go of this. And I'm submerged under water.

I'm breathing air again, gasping for it, I'm all eyeballs, all blue and I'm under water again, and again again.

You are saved my brother is all she says to me.

I'm not a catholic anymore. I don't know what I am, he tells her. Which one is the outside baptism kind?

He picks his mother's face off the floor and gently reattaches it to her head.



Chotto Matte

The day Sylvie decided to vacation in Tokyo, she worked on convincing herself again that she's naturally interesting, because she's from Japan now.

"You are a goddess..." "You are a brilliant genius..."

"When I look at you in the mirror, Andrea Bocelli plays in my heart..."

Over and again.

But the scoop is that she struggles to entertain herself usually, so she says things to herself in public to catch her own attention.

"Oh my god, you just spit on Oprah."

"Oh my god, are you Ke\$ha?"

"Oh my god, you're so attractive that you make my heart cry sparkles."

And nobody ever knows what she's saying, because she lives in Japan now.

The decision to move to Sendai came about as naturally as anything else, and that's the only way she can think about it. Like a run to the convenience when you're out of milk or something. She guessed she'd move to Asia now, and that was it. Sold her Volkswagen and got a POD. It really is that easy.

Last week, she had this conversation with a tweaked out English crackhead in the Ichibancho in front of that leather shoe

shop with the guy who screams. Sylvie can't buy shoes in Japan because she wears a size eight.

But the crackhead was pleading for a matcha Kit-Kat, and it went on for probably forty minutes. Sylvie said she didn't have one right now and that she was pretty sorry, but he was so desperate and tweaked that he moved to grab her boob.

Again, about as natural as a run to the convenience.

Sylvie wasn't mad, because the man spoke English and because he had such nice cheekbones, but she told him not to assume like he knew who she was just because he watched a movie about Illinois one time.

Sylvie can say convenience for convenience store now, because she lives in Japan. Her landlord put out this laminated memo last month, before Tokyo, instructing his residents in how to properly dispose of their adult diapers, and Sylvie had to look down, under the sleeves of her coat for a short second, because she forgot what she was wearing right then at that moment when she read that.

The assistant Sylvie works with, Kaho, could be the star of a modern comedy.



Daily, Sylvie vows to write an ongoing series featuring her, but she is, in the end, a desperate derelict and it likely won't happen.

But she tells her imaginary friends about Kaho on her walks home.

"Have you ever noticed that she'll put on a cute dress, really nice shoes, and—like—fancy lipstick, ...but she'll leave her nose shiny?"

"...It's like, you've come this far. Wash your fucking nose."

Sylvie's shelf bottle collection is becoming enormous, as she sits up at night drinking, testing her flexibility in competitions with herself, and trying to hang her photos on her faux-drywall walls with sticky rice.

"Did you know that rice is the main carbohydrate in Asia?"

Sylvie wonders what financial firms do. And what exactly is a venture capitalist?

And she is utterly, utterly solitary.

Religiously, every single time that Sylvie thinks she's coming close to an acclimation in Japan, she finds that she's been using conditioner as shampoo for three months because she can't read, and that's why her hair is fucked.

So she decided on Tokyo, because Japanese men are, in the main, slightly off-looking, and she had to spend some time with males and other people who were not Gay Writer Seiji and Deaf Uni Student Youhei.

Sylvie has been obsessed with getting AIDS since she was ten.

"...I am not obsessed with getting AIDS. I'm obsessed with getting HIV, which turns into AIDS. You think I'm so dumb."

But Sylvie is paralyzed and crippled by fear of getting AIDS.

The Japanese have annihilated rabies, but not polio. The Japanese have warm toilet seats that sing, but they heat their homes with kerosene heaters. The Japanese can buy international plane tickets at convenies, but you have to pay cash.

Sylvie just figures that maybe lots of Japanese people have venereal diseases, because their priorities in certain modernisms are so problematic. And Sylvie scares herself because she finds Japanese women hugely more attractive than Japanese men.

Like her one wall-sharing neighbor, who helped her figure the washing machine wall lever. She wears a turban, so she's really pretty.

A night bus later, Sylvie booked in at Nui hostel, close to Asakusa, drenched in rain and having walked from Ueno and Ameyoko like a sucker.

Nui's pretty edgy for a hostel, and she claimed a bed by the window in a room with a wooden chandelier and a green concrete floor.

She got a morning Jameson and she started adjusting herself, but in general, Sylvie struggles in shared foreign spaces, and she's in that terrible age where she's in her late twenties and is suddenly too old for H&M.

Sylvie kicked off her boots, curled into a ball in her creaky bottom bunk, and she thought about her noble friend, Elspeth.

Elspeth, who says that she knows a guy in Vientiane.

Elspeth, who knows that Vientiane is in Laos.

Elspeth, who knows that Laos is still a place.

Elspeth, who knows that the bars close at midnight in Vientiane because people keep dying there and because the monks get up at six and you can't really cut that one too close really.

Elspeth, who says no, she'll never visit, no way, and should she put her psychotic cat back on Valium?

It would ruin everything to ask exactly who Elspeth knows in Vientiane.

So Sylvie Facetimed Brian instead, her lover from Cincinnati who owns a brewery and has a prince albert. Brian's naming a beer after Sylvie, but calling it Norah, because that's the name of Sylvie's fictional, late-teens baby sister.

Brian and Sylvie created Norah's narrative on their own whimsy, and they were both fantastically surprised by how seamless Norah's tale became,

just because they'd both contributed equally to her character.

"You better be wearing underpants this time."

In any case, Elspeth even played Norah a few times, when Norah's appearance seemed so necessary and unavoidable.

But Norah's a drop-out barista with no non-coffee house career prospects. She lives on Cincinnati's Mt. Adams, and Sylvie's very concerned for her because she sells all of her electronic devices for hallucinogens.

All else aside, Norah's Chihuahua, Lady, is a real bitch.

Norah buzzed all her hair off and dyed it blue.

Sylvie thought about dropping the H on Norah, but then she figured it all to be too much to remember.

She figured that Norah already had gauged ears, so a hipster spelling was superfluous.

Brian said that there wasn't so much new news, that Eli's was opening another locale. That he hoped Norah would be on tap there soon.

So Sylvie hung up and walked into the rain with a Nui umbrella.

She did Sensoji.

She shopped Rippongi and Harajuku and Shibuya and Shinjuku.

She hated Akihabara.

She wafted incense to ward off evil, and she ate sashimi at Tsukiji.

She found out what it was like to be the only white person at Shibuya Crossing, she sought out that Murakami jazz club, and she bought a pineapple on a stick because she adored and re-visited Ameyoko.

She went to see Masakado's head with the financials, and she met beautiful, kind Mannon from San Francisco.

Sylvie fell in love with Mannon in Ueno in two minutes under a Sakura tree.

Half-Chinese Mannon with the long, black hair who touched Sylvie's cheek when Sylvie told her that she was pretty sure that her boyfriend peed on her in the shower one time. And Sylvie's breath caught and maybe Mannon knew, but maybe not.

But Sylvie spent her first night in Tokyo in a nightclub called Womb in Shinjuku-ku with an Italian photographer, turned New Yorker, called Mattia.

Milanese, he claimed to hate New York, but even Sylvie found that depressing.

Because, admittedly, it's intense to tell an American in Japan that you hate New York when you're in a nightclub and you're from Italy.

But Sylvie still had sex with him in the weird bathroom with the low-hanging draperies and the weird-pink lighting because she could pull out Italian, and

Mattia liked that, and he called Sylvie a very un-American American.

She was, at once, very flattered and very hurt.

Because everyone says that to her.

And she asked him why he thought he could say that to her, and he smiled.

Unfailingly, people guess Germany, or Finland, or the Netherlands. But none of those countries will ever probably claim her, so Sylvie privately fears that she'll be a gypsy forever. In fact, the longer she stays outside of the U.S., the more Sylvie begins to believe that she doesn't actually exist.

The sex with Mattia was not spectacular, and his belt buckle hurt her leg so badly that she had to stifle tears, but Sylvie still felt warm because she really did feel like she was on the inside of a womb.

So she went back drunk. And the only guy at the hostel who was American was clearly autistic.

Easy, Tiger.

On day two, Sylvie found Sushi Jiro from the documentary series and she went to Kamakura to put her feet in the ocean.

At the ocean she cried, because the ocean makes her cry, and she likes the ocean much more than the mountains, even though sand gives her hives.

She drank and she smoked, and she wondered how to get weed in Japan.

She wondered what they do to you in

Japan if they find you with weed.

Maybe they kill you if they find you with weed in Japan.

Sylvie thought about Mannon.

Seiji was at the coast for the tsunami. He was teaching a uni group there, and the earthquake left him buried by books in a shitty library.

He told Sylvie that they never recovered his car, that two thousand people were just never found, and that he stood on top of a three-storied school while dead pets and babies and grandmothers and children's toys floated past his feet.

So that's why not a lot of Japanese people like the ocean more than the mountains.

Sylvie had sex with the Mexican pilot who knew where to get the Latin cooking herbs while she was next to Seiji, who was enjoying a blowjob from a bassist. They were in this one-roomed jazz bar hidden somewhere on the Hirose-Dori, and watching the Japanese play jazz is funny, maybe something like seeing a Hmong gondolier.

"If you see a couple of Canadians who claim to sing in a J-Pop band at the Irish bar, do not, through any proviso, hang out with them."

On night two, Sylvie stayed at the hostel bar, drinking Jamesons and li-tchi tonics. She met a handsome Aussie named Jorel, and she was enamored.

He had heavy, sad blue eyes and a black

bandana, his skin tanned and his shoulders wide. Tall and strong, with thick, pulled-back, wavy blonde hair, Jorel was kind enough to listen to her drunken ramblings about learning languages.

Sylvie is very creative when it comes to languages, in all truth.

While she was learning Italian, figuring the difference between the *essere* and the *avere*, she formulated great sagas about the "ho".

The ho is *fatto*.

The ho won't letto you go.

The ho *mangiato* your panino.

There were more.

Jorel thought Sylvie was funny, and Sylvie really laughed when he told her the story about trying to lift the gong with his penis at the other bar.

He said he loved her laughing, and he held his drink next to his crotch, like a man.

Naturally, Sylvie decided to bed it with Jorel, because he was sharing a room with only one other guy, and the guy was his brother and definitely not around for the evening.

The Brothers Delicate, was Sylvie's only thought.

But Jorel had the top bunk and Sylvie told him that he was a fucking asshole, and why did this have to be their best option?

Even still, they were both pretty busy. Jorel slammed her into a wall like

she asked him to, and they both willed themselves up the ladder.

Jorel ran his fingers through his hair while Sylvie slid his shirt off, and he kissed her tattoos first, tracing the one on her back with his tongue.

Sylvie squirmed, and she fought back tears, and drunk sex is really not fun for anyone. Truly. And Sylvie was getting tired. And she was thinking that she was doing all the work. And she started sweating. And she looked down, balancing herself on his chest, only to find Jorel with his hands behind his head like a huge fucking douche, absolutely asleep with his dick still inside her and his hair sprawled just so.

“Norah, this is not that time when you had that seizure in that supermarket in Indiana.”

At once, tears welled and Sylvie wanted to cut the tattoo out of her back with a knife and she thought about that one time in Chicago when she burned her own wrists with a frying pan and she tried to put her jeans down the garbage disposal.

Sylvie got down from the bunk, remembering her necklace and her jacket and her scarf, and she walked back to her room, naked, with all of her things.

And she keyed herself in, naked.

And she got into her Japanese bed, naked.

And she pulled her curtain back, naked.

And she listened to the autistic guy from Ohio chew Chips Ahoy cookies, naked.

And she woke up at four, naked.

And she walked to the bathroom, naked.

And she drank from the faucet like a whore, naked.

And she figured that she was disgusting, naked.

Sylvie decided that a shower would be good, so she took one, but she didn't have a towel, so Sylvie walked back to her bed, dripping and naked.

Right then, Sylvie felt like she would walk on any sticky surface anywhere, barefooted like an ape. She wanted to squish grapes with her heels, and she wanted to dye her body green like the floor. But when Sylvie looks at her life, she sees only this phantom lap of a huge god. Bronze, she whimpers, and she slashes her knees with peelers during earthquakes, while she waits for the world to end.

“Oh my god, did that geisha just hit me with her cane while I passed her on my bike?”

“I'm feeling just a little bit frail.”

Every Sunday walk that Sylvie tries to take winds up with her being hot and lost, sweating and dropping her cell

phone charger through a somehow prophetic sewer grate. So when she ran back into Jorel on the evening of day three, again at the Nui bar, her first instinct was to cut and run.

The thing about Cincinnati, Ohio is that people who are from Cincinnati are always saying that it's really up and coming. But Cincinnati is probably not up and coming, even though *Forbes* says so this year. Milwaukee, Wisconsin was on that list, too.

And, well, be real.

But Cincinnati's sister cities are Rome and Gifu, and she'd lived in Rome before, so Sylvie just figured that, cosmically, Japan was her natural next choice. So that's how Sylvie talked herself out of running back into the rain when she spied Jorel at the top of the bar's stairs, staring at her.

Sylvie froze, knowing she had to make a decision about what her mood was going to be right then, and she just figured that she probably had more than a few options at her disposal.

It took her longer than she would've hoped, but Jorel made the first move anyway, even while Sylvie wanted him to be patient.

He approached her too quickly, a Suntory for him and a Jameson for her, and the first thing he said to her was, exactly, "Were you the one who spewed in my shoe?"

Chotto matte, kudasai. *Wait a minute, please.*

Sylvie had no time to react, and her chest tingled. She had to keep her knees from buckling, and she realized that the main difference between her and Jorel was that she would never drink any average whisky, like Suntory, just because it was cheap.

Apparently, even Jorel knew her loyalties enough for that.

"Remember, Norah, a man with two first names will definitely be a headache."

So Sylvie said no, it wasn't her spew, and she braced herself, morphing to disparaging and sarcastic for her pride. Jorel said to her that he knew they'd bedded. That he was sorry to be hazy on the details. Could Sylvie be available to rehash things for him? And would she be interested in a repeat?

He touched her cheek, and she shivered.

Again, Sylvie figured that she had more than a few routes worth considering, so she stayed quiet for some time and she downed her whisky, looking away from Jorel and into the rain. She put her hands on the wooden bar, and she fought the urge to say a Hail Mary as an ambulance flew by.

In the end, Sylvie decided to be kind, because she's nonsensical always, and she said to Jorel that she was hazy too. That they'd both been pretty blasted and

that neither of them had really enjoyed themselves.

Sylvie said that she only really remembered climbing up and climbing down. That he didn't come inside her, so he shouldn't worry. And she told herself that she didn't lie to him.

Over and again.

Sylvie changed tones, prepping for goodbyes, saying that he was drunk and that she wasn't. She wasn't in the mood for a repeat, but thanks for being a part of Tokyo, and she turned her back.

She bought another Jameson, and Sylvie sat to talk with the Japanese staff alone, her leather jacket zipped and her bag on her lap.

But Jorel wouldn't have it.

He never left eyeshot for hours. While she sat, he grabbed her shoulders hard, he put his penis next to her cheek, and he had a square look in his eyes. Sylvie held her purse tightly, closing her eyes and crossing her legs, and she hated herself. She convinced herself that she'd run out of things to say with her Japanese anyway, and she bid good nights. But as she left for the elevator, headed for green, Jorel shouted mania.

True mania, and Sylvie, to keep from sinking in with him, told herself on roll,

"I haven't been to Eze yet. I haven't been to Eze yet. I haven't been to Eze yet."

As the elevator doors closed, Sylvie slumped to the floor and everything in her bag rolled onto the aluminum.

Chotto matte.

Hush now, take a minute.

She touched her own cheek.

When Sylvie heard the elevator chime from the bathroom, actually praying, she wasn't prepared to stop her knees from buckling, and she had to catch herself on the counter.

When his eyes burned into her from the doorway, she cried.

When his right hand grabbed her right forearm, she peed down her leg.

When he yanked her right hand to his fly, she stood cold and she trembled.

And when he put his left hand around her neck, Sylvie watched his face with her own eyes.

But she squeezed him powerfully and he recoiled drunkenly, and Sylvie grabbed her bag, tearing for the shower room in enough time to lock the door.

Sylvie's hands shook, and she felt colossal grief.

Japanese showers are harrowing. Called onsens, they're often mammoth, and they're giant, shared rooms, with opaque stools forever in a line. Women sit on the stools, facing the wall, cleaning themselves with hand nozzles attached in front of them.

Their feet touch countless pubic hairs

that aren't their own, and the stools do nothing for Sylvie's venereal phobias, so walking into a Japanese onsen is maybe like walking into a tiled gymnasium with ass cracks on both sides and an aisle down the middle. Once their bodies are clean, women walk to the farthest end, naked, the ultimate catwalk, sinking into a big steaming pool that's supposed to be filled with minerals.

“The Japanese always believe in mineral-infused drinks, sodas, and liquids, but their teeth still suck.”

Chotto matte. Hush now.

RAQUEL HENRY



Burial

The procedure has to be done late at night, in the dark—while everyone sleeps and everything is still. I make the incision under the breastbone; open the chest up nice and wide. It's there, beating slow, then slower and not heart-shaped at all. I disconnect the arteries and veins until I can take it out and hold it in my hands, pain agonizing every piece of matter that is my body. I'd always wondered how it looked and now staring at it, it's worse than I thought. Nothing like a heart: just a banged up, bruised, cuts-still-fresh mess.

In the back yard the shovel waits in silence. I say a little prayer and place it in the photo box I bought yesterday. When I put it in the make-shift grave, I almost lose my nerve. I shovel the dirt over it before I can change my mind and in minutes it disappears. I don't think about the guilt or the consequences of going to such lengths to protect what's already broken. Chest burning, eyes blazing, I lie down on the ground over the burial site and listen: silence. I think how much better off a heart is underneath the earth, protected, and out of reach of unsafe hands.



Recoleta

Every Thursday. In the afternoon. The same walk from the house to the station. The same train into the heart of the city. The same blocks from the station to the cemetery. And once there, the same work. It is now her only ritual.

After two and a half years, she has the stations memorized. San Isidro, where she lives in their house, then Acasusso, Martínez, La Lucila, Olivos, Vicente López, Rivadavia, Núñez, Belgrano, Lisandro de la Torre, and finally, Retiro. She prefers the 1:02 train that departs after she prepares lunch for the ladies and that arrives downtown at 1:29. She always has a seat on the trip to see him but often has to stand for the return, when the people who work in the city fill the trains on their way home to the suburbs that sprawl along the river to the north and west.

The routine of Mirta's weekly afternoon away from the house varies only slightly. The clothes she wears, always simple, change for the seasons. In summer she wears plastic sandals and a cotton dress of a small print fabric with narrow squared straps and a skirt that falls just above her knees. Spring and fall she wears black shoes with rubber soles and covers her shoulders with a navy sweater. In winter she wears a heavy cloth coat, a scarf, gloves and thick hose

under her long-sleeved dress. Mrs. de Alba insists that she wear a dress every day. Like so many other aspects of her life, Mirta has grown accustomed to what is expected of her and never considers dressing in any other way. After years of assertion, the desires of the de Albas have become her own.

With her bag in the seat next to her, she stares out the window, oblivious to the few others on the train. Every so often she pats the pocket over her right thigh to confirm that the key is still secure. She kept it on a crimson ribbon around her neck until the metal began to tarnish and leave a green stain on the skin between her breasts.

She checks the sign in each station to note her progress and, as the train nears the final stop, leans her head against the glass and watches as the station sucks the silver tube of the train into its mouth. She steps onto the platform and is caught up in the spawn of people making their way into the wider spaces of the station and then out into the city.

Despite the heat and humidity of this summer day, she prefers it to the damp cold of winter. She likes the attention that the fit of her summer dress attracts in the station. It fits her so perfectly that after all the years of wear she thinks that it somehow knows the contours of her body, knows how to keep

its distance from actual contact with her skin, to hover just beyond her body, as if to say, "I know you, every inch of you."

As she walks through the station she knows the wealthy men in the wood-paneled bar follow her with their eyes and that the men selling bread and newspapers from kiosks on the sidewalk outside, grin at each other when she walks by. She is certain that they exchange comments when she is out of sight, but she does not acknowledge their stares. She is proud that at forty-one her body can still command such attention. Her black hair, cut to just above her shoulders, is beginning to gray but her taut body has retained the same compact shape for over twenty years.

She turns to the right outside the station, checks the time on the tall brick tower in the opposite square, crosses the wide avenue that runs beside the station and begins the slow trek up the long hill to the cemetery. With each step she becomes more self-conscious. She is more aware of her hair, dress, the way she walks, the color of her skin. She knows that the eyes that follow her here are not admiring her body. Here they wonder which family she works for; what she is doing walking down their street on a Thursday afternoon; what errand she is on in this neighborhood.

She reaches the top of the hill as her hands tire of carrying her bag, her legs tighten, and perspiration forms on her upper lip, under her arms, and at the back of her neck. She pauses to rest at the bus stop across the street from the

Basilica de Nuestra Señora del Socorro and finds comfort in the words painted in black beside the entrance to the sanctuary. She reads them over and over as she rests, moving her lips to form the words. *Es Padre y Nos Perdona. Es Padre y Nos Perdona. Es Padre y Nos Perdona.*

She feels the crunch of the grit from her shoes on the polished stone when she walks beneath the entrance of the cemetery. After exchanging a nod with the guard at the gate and stooping to pet two of the many cats that live within the walls, she walks down the broad cedar-lined avenue, ignoring the clumps of tourists wandering among the tombs. She makes a series of left and right turns, then stops in front of the de Alba crypt.

The crypt is twenty-five feet tall at its peak, the exterior walls made of smooth gray granite with two wide glass doors centered in the front with black iron bars across them. Two small windows, just above the top of Mirta's head, flank the doors. A wrought-iron skylight of opaque glass caps the roof and the family name is carved inside the stone triangle that forms the uppermost part of the building's façade.

Mrs. de Alba told Mirta on the day of Mr. de Alba's funeral that his grandfather had designed the crypt and that the façade and doors were small replicas of those from the building on Florida Street that housed the business his grandfather founded when the family first emigrated from Spain.

She pulls the flat brass key from her

dress pocket and slowly inserts it into the lock. She feels the clicks in the bones of her hand as the key lifts the tiny drums inside allowing the bolt to yield.

She pauses to inhale the smell of the rush of air from inside. It reminds her of the first spray from the hose when she rinses their patio on a hot summer day. She steps inside, bends and releases the lower bolt of the other door from its place in the marble floor, then stands on point to reach the upper latch. She swings both doors out and fully open.

Two weeks after her sixteenth birthday, eyes still burning from her own mother's death, Mirta faced a decision: the street, the convent, or the house of a rich family. To Mirta they all meant servitude.

She stood at the back door with her suitcase at her feet. When she knocked as instructed, Mrs. de Alba, with a telephone to her ear, pulled the door open with her toe, stretching the phone cord across the wide kitchen to let her in. Without interrupting her phone conversation, Mrs. de Alba gestured with her head for Mirta to wait in the small room off the kitchen. She carried her battered suitcase into the room, put it down at the foot of the small iron bed, and sat until Mrs. de Alba came in to tell her what to do next. The room was bare save for the bed, a night table, a dresser, and a mirror. A small crucifix hung over the head of the bed.

From the door to its back wall the crypt measures less than two full steps. The room is only slightly wider than the length of his coffin. The upper halves of the walls are made from a white stone, the lower parts of a dark gray marble. The steps and floor are an even darker shade. The inside surfaces, all highly polished, reflect the sunlight and create the impression that provokes tourists, who look in through the glass doors during their tours, to comment on the inviting atmosphere within the small space. There are three marble shelves on the wall opposite the door: the uppermost a small altar and the two beneath it for coffins. The windows above the top shelf are of yellow and green stained glass. Under the two windows on the right hand wall are a narrow set of stairs that lead to the crypt below ground. Mirta does not know if she is supposed to dust or clean the room down there. No one ever mentioned it to her, as they never mentioned those stored below.

She has never been down the steps but imagines more shelves and coffins or urns with ashes, at least those of his parents and perhaps aunts and uncles, are there. She always polishes the brass railing that runs along the edge of the steps, but decided on her first day to clean only the first three steps. She knows that is as far as the light penetrates.

She knows that someday, perhaps after

Mrs. de Alba joins him, or when his own son dies, that he will be moved to the space below to make room for the next generation. She likes that the grit from her shoes and the dust stirred by her cleaning drift down to rest on the coffins of his ancestors.

She met him on the first morning she was in their house. The two de Alba men, father and son, similarly dressed and carrying briefcases, came into the kitchen. Running in from another part of the house, Mrs. de Alba shouted for them to wait. She wanted them to meet the new girl. The elder Mr. de Alba, looking back over his shoulder as he walked out the door, exchanged with Mirta a sympathetic glance. She saw in his eyes that very day that he wanted her. He was old enough at the time to be her grandfather; his son was ten years her senior.

Her cleaning supplies rest in the corner of the crypt to the left of the doors. Neatly arranged, they cannot be seen from outside: a plastic bucket, faded blue with a red handle, in which stands a broom and mop, a long-handled ostrich feather duster, a spray bottle of green window cleaner, a tin of brass polish, a small box of soap powder, an assortment of rags, and a single roll of paper towels.

She removes an apron from her bag,

puts it on, then moves the supplies out onto the walkway in front of the crypt. She returns inside and begins with the feathered duster. Reaching up, she dusts the frame of the skylight then slowly turns in place to trace the shape of the stone ceiling. She then follows the line where the ceiling meets the stones of the wall, slowly turning counter-clockwise as she lowers the duster a bit each turn. She is able to dust the upper half of the crypt by standing in one place, extending her arm, and shuffling and spinning on the balls of her feet. As her extended arm becomes parallel to the floor and the ostrich feathers begin to brush the top of the cross on the alter shelf, she stops spinning and dusts the rest of the crypt down to the floor.

Less than a year after she arrived to live in their house, without saying a word, she let him know that it was time. Mrs. de Alba, her son and daughter-in-law were at Holy Mass. Mirta was at the sink washing the Sunday breakfast dishes and Mr. de Alba walked into the kitchen from his study. Mirta dried her hands, turned, nodded her head slightly and walked into her room. Mr. de Alba followed.

After that they were together every Sunday. His wife always told the priest that Mr. de Alba wasn't feeling well or that she couldn't get him away from his stamps. Mirta always went to mass very early, before she bought the medialunas, juiced the oranges, and brewed the coffee

for the family's Sunday breakfast. Before this, Mirta spent her Sunday afternoons wandering in the city or visiting her few friends from childhood. But slowly her connections had dropped away.

He told her once, when they were finished, while his thick hand rested on her stomach and raised and lowered with her every breath, that he saw something in her that no one else could see. He said that he saw potential just beneath her skin, like a bow drawn back or the tight-wound spring of a clock.

She takes the cross, two candlesticks, a small potted plant, and a brass matchbox from the shelf above his coffin and places them on the top step just outside the door. She then sits next to the altar pieces with her feet on the concrete walkway and dusts the plant and polishes the other items. When this is done, she walks to the nearby spigot and retrieves a bucket of water.

She learned this method of cleaning from her mother: dust, then sweep, start from the highest and most distant part of the room, work down and out toward the exit. After this first removal of dry, unattached dirt and dust, came any polishing, including metal or wood, then came wet cleaning of windows and flat surfaces, another quick sweep, followed by the final step of mopping. The room was left in a perfect state and any mess created by an earlier step in the process was removed in the subsequent part of

the work. This was the extent of her mother's legacy.

She first touched him a month after the funeral. Until then she assumed the coffin was well-sealed. As she stood from bending to pick up a string that had come loose from her mop, her elbow caught the edge of his coffin's lid. She felt it lift then heard the chuff as it fell back into place. She turned and saw that a bit of the mantilla was now caught between the lid and lip of the coffin. Since then, every week, she touches him. She wants to see him, but the marble shelf above the one on which his coffin rests allows her to raise the lid only three inches, just enough for her hand and half her forearm to reach inside.

She always holds her breath when she first lifts the lid. She does not want to acknowledge any signs of corruption. She shivers when the tiny hairs of her arm brush against the lacquered wood of the upper rim of the lid, as her hand, wrist, then upper arm, creep inside.

Her hand returns instinctively to the same place each week. Her fingertips first touch the gold buttons on the cuff of his jacket. She knows without having to see them, the exact color of the jacket and the baroque design of the buttons. As her hand travels up the row of buttons – one, two, three – then feels the sharp precipice of his jacket cuff drop to the lower and smoother texture of his white shirt, she knows his hands are folded on his chest, and that he wears his wedding ring on his right hand.

She stops there. She cannot bring herself to touch his skin. Instead, she follows his shirt cuff down with her fingertips until her little finger touches the lapel of his jacket. Flattening her hand, she traces the lapel until she finds the handkerchief. She spreads her fingers until they come in line with the points of the carefully folded handkerchief as they stick up from his breast pocket.

She knows the handkerchief well, as she knows all his clothes, not only because she washed and ironed his shirts for twenty-four years, gathered his suits for the cleaners, replaced them in his armoire when they were returned and brushed his suits after each wearing, but because she has seen his jacket folded across the small chair in her room, has felt the tails of his unbuttoned shirt brush against her sides when he was on top of her. She has closely studied the strap of his undershirt as it crossed his shoulder when he held her head under his chin and against his hairy chest.

After a call from the office, his eldest son away on a business trip, Mrs. de Alba arranged for an ambulance, but he refused the aid. He instead took a taxi and was soon back on the bed he had left that morning in apparent health. He died quickly and his death was not accompanied by dirty sheets and bad smells, no screaming relatives arguing over what was best in an impossible situation, as Mirta remembered when her mother died.

He died the day the crisis began. He never saw the stores emptied of their suddenly unaffordable imports. He never heard the tone of fear in the voices of his son, wife, and daughter-in-law, contemplating the ruin of the family's fortune. He did not hear the hushed talk of how they could sell the house and live in the old family apartment in the city. He missed the wailing over the loss of the savings, then the gradual growth of confidence as a modicum of economic stability returned.

On the day he died, Mrs. de Alba asked Mirta to prepare the clothes he would wear in his coffin. She told her to take out his favorite suit, not his best, but the one he wore most often, along with underwear, a shirt, a tie, socks, shoes, and a handkerchief.

Mirta walked into the room where he lay dead, quietly gathered the items and put them on the foot of the bed next to the peaks his feet made beneath the white sheet. She then looked for a particular handkerchief. She remembered it well, for the last time they found the freedom to be together, less than a week earlier, he had left it in her room. He had wiped his brow with it when he first came in her room, used it to clean his semen from below her navel and from the hair of his belly. It was one of a set, the last of three from a present from his sister-in-law's visit to Rome many years earlier. Mirta remembered the interlocking R and A of the monogram from the countless times she ironed them and wondered what became of them as their

number dwindled from three to two to this very one.

She found it in a small drawer of his dresser and placed it on the bed with the other items. Mrs. de Alba asked her to wait outside and led the undertaker into the room.

She rests her hand on the lapel of his jacket, closes her eyes, and with her right hand, slowly lowers the heavy coffin lid on to her left forearm until the muscle, flesh, and bone support its weight. She brushes her bangs from her forehead and drapes her free hand over her left shoulder.

Nena. He always called her Nena. Like so many times in the past when they were alone in the house, she could tell from the tone of his voice what he meant. Nena, as if it were her name. Nena, to say they could be together. Nena, to say, like a daughter, she was part of him. Nena, that their secret was safe. So it does not surprise her to hear it spoken softly from over her right shoulder.

She spins around to find him standing in the doorway of the crypt, the corners of his golden green eyes lifting as his smile widens, the comb marks visible in his gray hair. She throws herself across the space that separates them and feels the damp front of her dress stick to her stomach. The silk knot of his tie slips against her right cheek as they embrace.

He steps out of the crypt and pulls her with him. He turns, tucks her under his

arm, and guides her to the center of the path. With a single foot between them, he lifts his left arm from his side and cocks his right arm in front of him. He wants to dance.

He leans toward her and she mirrors his stance. She puts her right hand in his left. He puts his right arm around her waist and rests his hand on the small of her back, just beneath the bow of her apron strings. They begin to sway from side to side, learning this new motion between their bodies. His feet begin to leave their places. Hers follow. Their bodies begin to act as one, more energetic and moving in wider patterns as their silent song swells and spins. Their steps sweep wider down the narrow path. They dance the length of the lane then fly out into the wider spaces of the cemetery.

They sweep past the tombs of generals and their adoring lieutenants, float by the graves of newspaper men and writers, statesman, presidents, and the proud bones of the family of the father of independence.

He tells her of the history she never learned, how this is the only place large enough to hold the egos of all the country's presidents – the corrupt, the corrupted, and the corrupting. He tells her of the dictator, of the flowers, and the constellation of his enemies, of the president who wrote the words to the national anthem, of the president who conquered the Indians in the south, of the last governor of the coveted islands, of the president who started a newspaper

that citizens still read each morning, of men who founded parties that swung the pendulum farther in each direction, and of the kidnapped and murdered president, another beginning of the end of democracy.

They dance a circle around the bronze Christ at the center of it all and he tells her of the dispute with the church that left this soil unconsecrated and an unexpected home for Christians, Jews, and nonbelievers, the cremated and the rotting alike.

They dance past the graves of writers, artists, athletes, and actors. Past the tomb of the poet of the gaucho's story, of the man who drew moving pictures and taught the children to laugh in their own language, of the two winners of Nobel's prize, the movie star who gave all the boys the hope that they could have a Hollywood star of their very own and make love in Castellano, of the boxer who knocked the American out of the ring but still lost the fight, of the writer and editor, brother and sister-in-law, waiting patiently for their lost blind friend to return from abroad. And the tomb of the mother of that same blind man, who could never let him go, who kept his heart tied to her own until it was almost too late for him to find a bride. And of the poet who put a gun to his head to follow his lover, a poetess, who walked into the sea.

And he tells her a story she knows is his own, even though he tells it about a country across an ocean in a time long

before her birth. It is the story of a handsome young man and the beautiful girl he loved, the story of a love forbidden and a family disgraced, a fortune lost, and a new beginning, of desire delayed and eventually lost.

The call of a lost child for its mother echoes down the lane and into the crypt. Mirta opens her eyes and waits for them to adjust to the light. She releases her shoulder, lifts the solid lid of the coffin and withdraws her arm from inside. A deep impression, outlined by a band of red and white skin, deforms her arm. She rubs it with her right hand to stimulate circulation.

She dumps the bucket of mop water into the drain at the center of the path, returns the cross, candles, and plant from the top step to the altar inside and gathers her cleaning supplies. She hides them in the corner to the left of the door, removes the lace mantilla that drapes his coffin and stuffs it into her bag. She takes a clean, starched mantilla from her bag, places it over the coffin, and tucks it carefully behind the back and around the ends. She pats the lid of the coffin then sweeps the last bits of dirt out the door.

Repeating in reverse her opening motions, she closes the right door, and using the broom handle and her foot, inserts its latches into the ceiling and floor. She stands on the top step, and holding the heavy door for balance, puts the small end of the broom in the cleaning bucket

and leans its head next to the mop in the corner. She removes her apron and stuffs it into her bag.

She stands on the top step and pushes the left door closed by its brass knob and takes the key from her pocket. Turning it in the lock two turns to the right she seals the door and turns to look inside. With her hands holding the black iron bars and her nose only an inch from the glass she is surprised by the reflection of her own face.

The glare from the late afternoon sun blocks her view inside.

She raises her hand to her temple to shade her eyes and notices, for the first time, that her eyes are the exact color of the polished wood of the coffin inside.

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Poetry



Photo by Nicola Di Croce
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❁ *Daniel Roy Connelly*

TO THE WAR-TORN POETS WHOSE HEARTS WERE HOOPED WITH STEEL

I am on centre court
for finals day,
up at the net, all in white,
reading a sheaf of poems
very loud
to the no small amusement
of the Wimbledon crowd.

My opponent,
a fellow of infinite chest
and wily play,
scampers after rhymes
around the baseline,
dirtying his shorts and socks
when attempting to return
the many lobs, feints, smashes
I send his way,
one eye on the prize money,
the other roaming at will
to the royal box.

As we grunt a fierce duel
to the audible gasps
of adulant spectators

– he rasps a Haiku clean through
my Ben 10 document holder;
I serve an epic couplet
which finds him wanting
down the lines –

the scoreboard lights up

with Spenserian sonnets and the
mighty Villanelle, you know,
'do not go gently into that good night'; the
crowd goes wild.

He screams defeat as I
slide a trochee cross-court,
one hand on the trophy
the other on a pencil
that after three hours
needs sharpening
for the press conference.

I gather my spare notepads
from under the umpire's chair
and as we depart to rapture
and acclaim,
bowing deeply
to our rulers I
hand my vanquished colleague
an instant ditty on a post-it note,
'fair is foul and foul is fair, fella,
poet tennis is a funny old game'.

CHARLES

Dark Warm Wet Push Forcep Push Slap Stretched Head Buzzy Wuzzy Bee
Round and Round Tit Sleep Shit Tit Sleep Shit Hi Hiya

[illegible]

Paper-Round School Gym-Teacher Interaction Enormous Introspection
Cambridge Buggered liked it Buggered didn't Beating Boating Tripos Asset
Management Buggered Promoted Buggered Sacked

Zzz

Married Advertising Red-Wine Habit Shadow on Lung Yellow Skin Bald White
Skin Side-Parting the Comeback Kid is a Greying MP Cognac Habit Wife out
Kids away Secretary + 2 Newspaper

I Have Been Foolish Forgive Me

In next to no time Stockings Dildo Arrest Slap Dark Wet Light Dry 40 Today
One for the Road Charlie-Boy! Shoulder Throat Heart

[illegible]

TRY SMILE

Flat on the grass,
face up to the camera,
try wistful, playful, mock abused,
like, like, like,
arch your back
in your scant yellow top
so we get your chin, neck, chest,
try surprised, palming your cheeks,
try smile, try kiss, try coy,
try the one when you tilt
your daisy-chained head
to dream of a promising future and
hold it, hold it, hold it, and
release.

FULL MOON

If time stood still
It would be the perfect calm,
No storm could build
Push
Or rush in.
If time failed to tic,
While quietness played
Lulling perfect calm—I'd wake
Lie in moon beams,
Watch light dance through darkness,
When all's hushed
Except for cows!

Fucking noisy cows
Ones always out of sync
Higher pitched, gurgling as if squeezed,
Is it choking on regurgitated time?
Lone fox calls, echoing. Almost duets.
Everything stills, mad dogs come to heel
Low grumbling growls meander,
On guard—In case she knocks—Wailing.

JUST TREES

Paper butterflies fluttered freely across the surface
of her mind, the odd one cocooned, still.
Swollen stubborn pride stifled muttered apologies
Words failed to tumble out,
Rattling around the crevasse between tongue and teeth,
Getting lost in translation along the way.
She played with ideas of how should and perhaps,
Laughed wildly at the imperfection of it all.
As she fingered herself, pausing over the spot,
The place of no return, puddles formed,
She went dancing in the rain,
The trees looked on.

Azure chrysalis
you reflect, crystal-like,
the resin of a water lily
glazed and derelict
among wrecked
gardens.

Among upset petals
you sleep in cobalt.

Crisalide azzurra
cristallina rifletti
ragia di ninfea
smaltata e derelitta
tra orti sfatti,
distrutti.

Tra petali sconvolti
nel cobalto dormi.

* * *

Do not resist.
On that bed
you writhe, like an insect
curling up in pain.

Searching for handholds,
you only find vacant worries.

Confused, we fade,
Already resigned to a trifle;
An instant death by instants,
we turn, dismayed, to sleep.

Non resistere.
Su quel giaciglio
ti contorci, come insetto
che in pena s'avvinghi.

Cerchi appigli,
trovi solo vacui affanni.

Confusi smuoriamo,
a un nonnulla di già rimessi;
D'istanti all'istante morti,
al sonno, smarriti, volgiamo.

At night, I
decompose the world.

I assemble the notches
of ticking, tenuous
fireflies scales
to move, shineburning,
into new shapes.

Nottetempo
il mondo decompongo.

Assemblo gl'intacchi
di scaglie di lucciole
tenui ticchettanti,
per muover bruciante
in forme nuove.

ROAMING ELEPHANTS

Bouncing off empty
pizza boxes like an elephant
sized charity check.
A Bachelor's degree dangling
next to a boarded window.

I can hear the aged wood wheezing
through the night. It spits
brown water, on the plumber's receipt
like a cancer patient
consciously choosing to die
after a marrow transplant.

There are two stories to the house
but no ceiling. The steps are empty
VHS boxes housing the occasional
brave family of ants.

What was once a main street
has been trampled down
to barely a beating dirt road.
White Elephants thinking they're God
in every religion, even Tolkien's,
drinking our water because
they wish to save theirs
for after they die; in case
the corpse needs a sip.

I do not mean to be so dark,
but I can't remember the last
time I was allowed to look up.
The sun has become a distant celebrity
relative who refuses to acknowledge your
existence because he is convinced
all you want is money.



BELOVED

On a windy night in March, I found you, Beloved,
across a paddy field in the town of Ryūgasaki,
a Brobdignagian scarecrow, in rags that revealed the scars
in your forearms. A self put together with stitches.
You stuck out your forked

tongue. You'd become an old man with skin like
a callus scraped against a granite wall.

A wreath of ivy leaves around your head.

Four lives later, Beloved.

You hissed and turned, and showed me your back,

a back full of stretch marks like commandments on stone,
a back I had first seen three thousand years ago,
when a shepherd in a mountainous land
(not the seventh, but the eight son)
you usurped your way to the throne

with a lyre. A poet, a murderer, magician musician
with the strumming of a gypsy usurper. Built entirely
of myth, your face remains a mystery but to me,
the uncircumcised traitor whose head you held
in your hands, not the hands of a king, but the descendant

of a prostitute. I saw you centuries later, in
common Sarmatic disguise, hidden behind a Polish
suffix that recalled the nobility.

I saw you from afar, saw those iniquitous
eyes from afar that no patronymic could hide, reborn

to haunt me in a second life. I should have guessed
there was no escape from those Alexandrine
eyes. Beloved, the trochee behind the amphibrach,
your tongue full of a bitter sibilant spite, shards of a life
you keep leaving behind, the snake that eternally sheds.

The third time you were reborn as a Durhamite.
 in a flat land. A child with red eyes,
 fond of parkour and Manga, and ever a friend of the monsters,
 with a back as broad as a cauldron, and a charm that disarmed.
 Not a man, nor a woman, nor even hermaphrodite.

I tried to escape, but you loomed over me, like a mast,
 or a lotus, I the undertow moaning for relief.
 Ubiquitous, you were like sawdust in a woodworking shop.
 Everything turned into an anagram of your name,
 and avid for release I fled to a ruined land

across the ocean. And you, of course, the metamorphic
 rock, now turned into a wolf. A wicked wolf,
 with hair in your chest like a spiked cilice. You found
 me on a January night, chased me through
 the cobblestones, a sort of Orphic

nightmare. I could hear the grinding
 of your teeth, felt on me your sexual leer. The insatiate
 desire of a carnivore. I ran, knowing that I
 had escaped you another three times. And you disappeared
 among the ruins, transformed into the night, left me gasping.

So, Beloved, a life passed, but this time
 I refused to hide.
 I resolved to become the hunter, resolved
 to give in to your bloody techniques.
 And I found you, with a bent spine,

old man of a vitreous flesh, and a mirror underneath.
 In that paddy field in Japan, I met your eyes,
 and for the first time in my life,
 I didn't look back.
 Beloved, the fifth time's a charm.

CLERKHEART

counting pennies
clerkheart

filing paper
clerkheart

alpha-numeric
clerkheart

column and row
clerkheart

balancing books
clean heart

copy machine
copy heart

cutting a finger
scar heart

page clipping
clipped heart

hole-punching
hole-in-heart

begging minutes
tick heart

almost finished
famished heart

hollow heart
silent heart

hardly heard
clerkheart

ODE TO NOSTRILS

Proportional center,
the part that comes first at each step,
the damp caves,
magician who melts the invisible,
meter for naughty comparisons,
expressive secret,
tuber of the facial garden,
surly sparrow hawk.
Some have it pointing to bears and dippers,
others so tiny it gets hard to breath,
or large enough to compete with narwhals and pachyderms.
Prow and sail at the same time,
captain of the skull,
lord of the square,
parasite of the face,
envy of the Sphinx,
mountain,
bump,
thingy,
just call it nose!

Mine of a slightly ruddy complexion and, in these solstices,
chilled.

Winter solstice 12.21.2011
(with slight variants, 2013)

ODE ALLE FROGE

Centro proporzionale,
la parte che arriva prima ad ogni passo,
le caverne umide,
mago che scioglie l'invisibile,
metro per maliziosi paragoni,
segreto espressivo,
tubero dell'orto facciale,
sparviero torvo.
Alcuni l'hanno indicante le orse o i carri,
altri così minuto da faticar il respiro
o grande da competere con narvali e pachidermi.
Prua e vela allo stesso tempo,
capitano del cranio,
padrone della piazza,
parassita del viso
invidia della sfinge
monte,
bozzo,
coso,
chiamatecelo pure naso!

Il mio un poco color sanguigno e in codesti solstizi,
infreddolito.

Solstizio d'inverno 21.12.2011
(con variazioni, 2013)

LETTER OF ISHMAEL, GARDENER OF THE DESERT CONVERTED TO WISDOM

(Version II, uncensored)

(free compendium: Gen.12; *Moby Dick*)

Ismail Shi'in

Ishmael was the son of a slave and thus he was banished by the people of God in the desert and there Ishmael lived before he became a sailor.

For the Egyptians the desert is like the sea, both are the place of solitude and infertility. There he became a gardener. A gardener who grew vengeance.

Condemned from birth, in his desperation Ishmael found Wisdom among the grains of sand and he came back home, and he sailed on the whalers.

This is the letter of the converted Ishmael who narrates his encounter.

Dear Lady,

Call me Ishmael.

Call me "he, who has returned".

Aye,

I was banished because of my impure birth.

My mother was a slave and my father a loyal mule.

I had the mark for everyone to see, and I did too.

I was thrown out with a blow,

and I abandoned my name,

and in the desert, I became a gardener.

And there, I planted my discontent.

With all my work

I grew only one flower, and called it resentment.

I used envy to fertilize it,

I worked the sky with abuse

hoping a cancer would grow,

and placed my complaints under the land

to curse the world.

Like a jackal

I devoured, judged and executed

to remind every convict
my jaw is noble, indeed, I have been marked,
I am the emperor of the sand, I am the gardener of what grows not!

Then

among the grains, the grains of sand, my Lady, I found you.
While I was counting them,
when I lost the number I saw
your face.
No word or prosody could be applied to those cheeks
which are the most insolent consolation
to the psychic wrath.

You answer with the most round
and craven youthfulness to my testy calling to aridity and shatter it down
like a storm,
and I who had been wrecked from the ship of hatred was saved by a breast.

The most moving works of literature could be composed with the triviality of
your sentences and I will surely spend my life trying to solve this mystery.
A laugh is enough for you to behead a king.
Enough to come closer to make a boy die.
Your presence alone enough to
make all women lose their temper
and deprive them of everything.

The desert stones are all pillows.
I offer you my kingdom.
I leave folly for insanity.
I switch church.
My proposal:
Let me be your gardener.
Water extinguishes fire,
this is how you embrace me.

Where the curve of your hip goes down towards your thigh but falling backwards,
on that altar, on that skin that unsettles me enormously
I dare not go, but you ask me,

and I keep sliding,
I chase that line, which turns, climbs back in a shiver
and reunites with the lower abdomen.
In the darkness where poetry and every mortal thought struggle,
where a gardener dies on vacation
there I make an offer of my sickle,
there you talk,
there you wanted me since forever.

The road to the terrible night was suddenly interrupted, finding another one
more solemn,
like the panting when you lay next to one another after you have loved
gives in to breathing. Motion gave in to stroking and the sheets are the map of
a majestic work.
I do not feel anymore on my skin the chase of that breath
which kept me an oarsman, my eyes wide open, without wages and without a
docking.
I do not feel any more the whip on my back, my muscles are loose.
Tonight the flowers will grow alone in the desert.
A pause from this disaster and I saw you were beside me.

And now, my Lady,
I do not know where to go
but I, too, will be saved.

Thus call me by my name, I pray you, while there is time, because tomorrow I
will sail away.
Call me Ishmael, my love, I am the one who has returned for you,

Ishmael

LETTERA DI ISMAELE, GIARDINIERE DEL DESERTO CONVERTITO ALLA SAPIENZA

(II versione senza censura)
(libero compendio: Gen.12; *Moby Dick*)
Ismail Shi'in

Ismaele era figlio di una schiava e per questo venne cacciato dal popolo di Dio nel deserto e lì Ismaele visse prima di diventare marinaio.
Per gli egizi il deserto è come il mare, entrambi sono i luoghi della solitudine e della sterilità. Lì divenne un giardiniere. Giardiniere che coltivava vendetta.
Condannato dalla nascita Ismaele nella sua disperazione trovò tra i granelli di sabbia la Sapienza e tornò a casa, e s'imbarcò sulle baleniere.
Questa è la lettera del convertito Ismaele che racconta il suo incontro.

Cara Signora,
Chiamatemi Ismaele.
Chiamatemi "colui che è ritornato".

Sì,
ero stato cacciato perché nato impuro.
Per madre una schiava e per padre un mulo fedele.
Avevo il marchio e tutti lo vedevano, e anch'io.
Ero stato allontanato con una bastonata,
e ho abbandonato il nome,
e nel deserto, ho fatto il giardiniere.
E lì, io ho piantato il mio malumore.

In tutto il mio lavoro
ho cresciuto un solo fiore e l'ho chiamato rancore.
Con l'invidia ho concimato,
ho coltivato il cielo d'ingiurie
sperando vi crescesse un cancro,
e ho riposto le mie accuse sotto il suolo
così da maledire il mondo.

Come uno sciacallo
ho divorato, giudicato e giustiziato

per ricordare a ogni condannato
che la mia mascella è blasonata, appunto, io sono marchiato
io sono l'imperatore della sabbia, sono il giardiniere di ciò che non cresce!

Poi

tra i granelli, tra i granelli mia Signora vi ho trovata.
Mentre li contavo
perdendone il numero vi ho vista
in viso.
Nessuna parola o metrica può essere applicata su quelle guance
che sono la più insolente consolazione
alla furia psichica.

Voi rispondete con la gioventù
più rotonda e più vigliacca alla mia spigolosa vocazione di aridità e l'abbattete
come una tempesta,
e io naufragato dalla nave dell'odio vengo salvato da un seno.

Con la banalità delle vostre frasi si potrebbero scrivere le più commoventi opere
della letteratura ed io passerò sicuramente la mia vita a tentare di svelare questo
mistero.

Vi basta una risata per decapitare un re.
Basta avvicinarsi per far morire un ragazzo.
Basta solo la vostra presenza
per levare la ragione a tutte le donne
e privarle di tutto.

Le pietre del deserto sono tutti cuscini.
Vi dono il mio reame.
Lascio la follia per la pazzia.
Cambio chiesa.
Una proposta:
Fatemi essere il vostro giardiniere.
L'acqua spegne il fuoco,
così mi abbracciate.

Lì dove la curva del fianco scende verso la coscia ma cadendo all'indietro,
su quell'altare, su quella pelle che mi inquieta terribilmente

non oso, ma voi mi chiedete,
e io continuo a scivolare,
inseguo quella linea, che gira, in un brivido risale
e si ricongiunge al basso addome.
Nell'oscurità dove stenta la poesia e ogni pensiero mortale,
dove un giardiniere muore in vacanza,
lì sacrifico la mia falce,
lì parlate,
lì mi volevate da sempre.

La strada per la tremenda notte si è interrotta in un istante, trovandone un'altra
più solenne,
come il fiato quando ci si sdraia l'uno accanto all'altro dopo aver amato, cede
al respiro. Il movimento ha ceduto alle carezze e le lenzuola sono la mappa di
un'opera grandiosa.
Sulla pelle non sento più l'incalzare di quel fato
che mi teneva rematore, con gli occhi di fuori, senza salario e senza approdo.
Non sento più la frusta sulla mia schiena, i miei muscoli sono distesi.
I fiori stasera cresceranno da soli nel deserto.
Una pausa da questo disastro e ho visto che tu mi sei accanto.

E ora, mia Signora,
non so dove si andrà
ma anch'io verrò salvato.

Quindi chiamami per nome, ti prego, finché c'è tempo, perché domani io mi imbarco.
Chiamami Ismaele, amore mio, sono colui che per te è ritornato,

Ismaele

HAIBUN FOR AN AWAKENING

Words are the secret passage to a mystery that is just beyond our grasp.
Yet for the most compelling visions, even the most profound language is
like dissipating steam. Spirals of jasmine rising from an antique cup.

*How to heal a man
who can hear the moon rising?
He is whole, at heart.*

What I experienced in Greece—it beckons and eludes them, words. In lieu
of language, I would need the image of a black-moss pool. A shadowed
arch. A collapse of stone that was once a house. Waiting to be found.

*He is whole-hearted
already; must heal himself
as only one can.*

Back home again, after unpacking the olives and oregano, a broken tile, the
eggplant-colored wine. It was weeks—no, months—before I felt
incrementally less shattered. Reassembled.

*Who recalls in time
he is tethered and yet freed
by abiding love.*

It was as if, while my husband and daughter slept, I had been abducted by
aliens. All night long, they performed their arcane surgeries. Exchanging
one part for another: heart for liver, lungs for spleen...

*We are spinning, all,
yes—into infinity,
even the long dead.*

Then, just before dawn, they stitched me up and dropped me back in bed.
Leaning close, they breathed me back to life.
As they departed, they whispered:
Carry on.

*A black willow kite
soars, then pitches, floats... I pray
for a soft landing.*

✿ *Maria Paola Langerano*

MY EVENING

Come
over my evening
jasmynes appear.

MIA SERA

Vieni
sulla mia sera
si affacciano i gelsomini.

NEIN

I cought you.
Elsewhere.

NEIN

Ti ho colto.
Altrove.

THE GIFT

I made up my mind
to offer you
my opalescences
of a young shell.

IL DONO

Avevo deciso
di offrire a te
le mie opalescenze
di giovane conchiglia.

BLADES OF GRASS

The memory of the field
quivered with grass.

FILI D'ERBA

Vibrava dell'erba
il ricordo del campo.

* * *

SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE

At the market
of second-hand habits
they saw Kosmos
untie the knot
of the stage costume
and say farewell to Man.

AMORE SACRO ED AMOR PROFANO

Al mercato
delle abitudini usate
videro Kosmos
sciogliere il vincolo
dell'abito di scena
e dire all'Uomo addio.

Reviews & Interviews

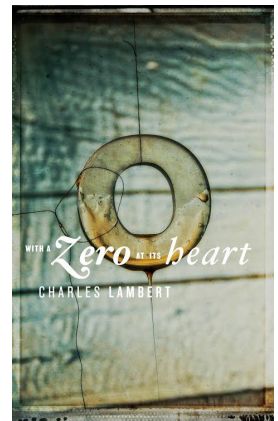


Photo by Nicola Di Croce
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A Conversation with Charles Lambert about With a Zero at Its Heart

For those who have yet to indulge in Charles Lambert's latest wonder *With a Zero at Its Heart*, published last spring by The Friday Project, it is a book that defies categorization and, thus far, has been called everything from an autobiographical fiction, a novel, a novella, and a short story collection. One can imagine that before long it will also be dubbed a cycle of prose poems. Lambert's structure employs 120-word paragraphs, numbered 1-10, and divided into 24 themes—or 240 miniatures—with a coda at its end. Each paragraph recounts a memory in the unnamed protagonist's life. Yet, to call them “paragraphs” is to do them an injustice, but neither are they stanzas. The recollections are imbued with the weight of hindsight and the effect is both singular and cumulative. The writer Mavis Gallant cautioned against reading stories in a collection in the same manner one might approach chapters in a novel—rushing from one to the next. She instructed readers to close the book after finishing a story to allow it time to resonate. In this vein, each of Charles Lambert's vignettes is a story unto itself and they are stories to be savored even as they operate within the cohesive longer narrative. Label it what you will, *With a Zero at Its Heart* is memorable prose, perfectly distilled.



CHARLES LAMBERT, *With a Zero at Its Heart*, The Friday Project, London 2014. Pp. 150.

Charles, many of the reviews have referred to the writing in *With a Zero at Its Heart* as “fragments,” but I don’t find the writing fragmented, not in the language you use, nor in the pacing, which I’d call meditative not because of, but in spite, of the brevity circumscribed to each. One friend told me that he read your book compulsively, devouring each passage “like popcorn.” In this sense, the form is deceptive. One could assume that book is a response to how diffused our collective attention span has become given today’s technology, living as we do in a world where glancing at a “tweet” or a “post” can be mistaken for reading. Initially, readers might imagine that the spare sections are easily entered into. But I think the

experience of reading it is actually quite the opposite and that your book demands much more from its readers. These are not tweets. Nor are they simply paragraphs. The pacing is not rapid, the tone is never glib, and each memory unfolds as a kind of incantation, requiring the reader to move slowly, to read closely.

In an interview, you said the first bit of text you wrote happened to be 120 words and that the shape of the book grew out of that. Rather than focus on this aspect of the numbered “snapshots,” I wondered if you could talk a bit about the rest of the structure? For example, how did you arrive at and select the order of the one-word-themed chapters in the rest of the book? And did you complete one section before moving onto another or were you working on various “memories” as you were able to write them, then arranging them after the fact?

For a book that looks as structured as *ZERO*, the process of making it was really quite arbitrary. I made it up as I went along, in other words, with each small local decision constraining what came after. The number of words in each text was established by the first, as I’ve said elsewhere. The number of texts in each chapter was determined by my fixation with numbers and by a perceived sense of ‘shape’, with ten being an obvious choice, although I later briefly regretted not opting for twelve rather than ten (12 x 120, right?), particularly when the original book of ten themed chapters was expanded at a later date to 24. I could have stopped at 20, of course, but wanted to get as close to 30,000 words as I could within the rather OCD limits I’d set myself. This is interesting psychologically, if it’s interesting at all. As far as the themes went, I tended to complete one group before starting the next – although the final order within the book as a whole (with the exception of the Coda; see below) doesn’t always reflect the order in which they were written. Within each theme, the order is usually, but not inevitably, chronological, although not all the stories are necessarily ‘true’ in a strict, autobiographical sense. Occasionally, a text was moved from one theme to another, where it seemed to sit more comfortably. I also toyed with the idea of suggesting alternative ‘routes’ through the book; this could still be done at e-book level. There’s one text in *Hunger*, for example, (3, if you have a copy to hand) that might be just as happy in *Sex*, although the membrane between *Sex* and *Hunger* is, as we all know, notoriously thin. The final arrangement of themes was arrived at by a process of instinct, or taste, or whatever that sense is that tells you when something works or doesn’t. I had a musical sense of a crescendo being built towards, and then the tension being lifted, and so on. I can’t be any more precise than this, I’m afraid, and I was aware as I was organising the book into its final shape that readers wouldn’t necessarily respect the order I’d imposed in any case, and that this wouldn’t really matter that much. I’ve discovered that the book is being appreciated in all kinds of ways. In your comments above, you mention tweets and the presumed contemporary taste for brevity,

but also incantation, and I think your intuition here – that the book lends itself to any number of methodologies of approach – is absolutely correct. Some people read it right through, as though they were dealing with a novel divided into consecutive chapters. Others dip in here and there, as though the text were a commonplace book or anthology. Others have told me they dose themselves, one section at a time, in the way many people read short stories, or poems. For some people it's prose poetry, for others flash fiction. It's been called a novel by my publisher, and it's that too, in its way. As long as the book is being read, and enjoyed, of course, I'm delighted. And the fact that it lends itself in this way to different modes of attack, so to speak, is a measure – I like to think – of its success.

GEOGHEGAN

Even as this is a book that delves into and crystalizes memory, it defies the label of memoir. Indeed, it is even written in the present tense. Could you share a bit about the confessional aspect of your fiction and why you chose to write in the 3rd person point of view, as well as to leave your character unnamed?

LAMBERT

I didn't set out to write a memoir, which strikes me as a form that's self-celebratory in a way that's foreign to me and to how I write. It implies an interest in the narrating self that I just don't have. I'm not an introspective person, and even if I don't necessarily distrust introspection, I don't see it as a useful way for me to interrogate the world or the language I use to give it form, although I have no issue with those who do. Having said that, the 'he' of the book is, of course, a distorted version of myself, and much of the life that's described as his can be mapped without too much difficulty onto mine. The use of the present tense and the third person might be seen as devices to distance 'him' from 'me', and to destabilise the notion of the past as something tangible and ordered, and, of course, they do that, just as the absence of a name deprives the central figure of an identity, in a socially contextualized way. It also introduces an interesting note of ambiguity, or blurring, as other people, also deprived of their names, appear in the texts; an ambiguity I've exploited (*Danger 7* is an example of this). You're right to see a confessional aspect in the work, but I'm not sure I'd use the word confessional – it has too many connotations (see below) that simply don't gel with how I see the world. I've always been indiscreet about myself and, occasionally and sometimes unforgivably, about others (although I like to think this is no longer the case; I've become utterly worthy of trust!). I remember as a young adolescent reading – in a book describing Castro's Cuba – about a

priest who complained that he had a right to privacy and being reprimanded for it, on the grounds that all lives should be open books, and how that came as a moment of recognition for me. And this happened at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in the UK, so you can imagine the subversive force of that recognition. I don't distance myself from 'him' to protect myself. On the contrary, I think it gives me more room to expose him. I should also say before leaving this question that although most of the book is 'true', that doesn't mean that any particular detail is. What a reader might see as confession, I might see as fiction, or wish-fulfilment.

GEOGHEGAN

Although while reading it, I did not believe that the structure of the book was intended to have a religious significance, but the elegiac tone, the emphasis on loss, and the fact that many of the miniatures refer to living in Italy end up giving the narrative a spiritual cast, even while the absence of the spiritual is the more predominant feature. (There are, I believe, only two brief references to organized religion—a mention of a choir and another to Sunday school.) But it later struck me that the sections of 10 miniatures could operate as a kind of rosary, divided as they are in sections of 10 “beads,” with each one reading as a kind of “prayer.” Is this completely off the mark?

LAMBERT

I hover somewhere between atheism and indifference on the religion spectrum: I've never much cared for a sense of what's right sustained by a notion of temporal or eternal punishment and I'm taking it as read here that value systems don't need to be supported by organised religion and that the latter is often responsible for grossly immoral behaviour of one kind or another. I hope I'm sufficiently attentive to other people to have developed a moral code without supernatural reinforcement. If there's any part of religion that attracts me, other than the entirely human art, music and architecture it's inspired, it's the narratives that drive it, and, to a lesser extent, the rituals and tropes that bind it. And I do have respect for these and for a notion of the sacred that these elements inspire. So, even though you're absolutely right to see the absence of religious feeling as a stronger element than its opposite, there is an elegiac sense to the book, and the repetitive structure, with ideas and images being played off against one another, picked up and then dropped to be returned to later, does draw on that kind of formulaic question-answer response familiar to churchgoers. I was brought up in a notionally Christian household, although my father, as a lapsed Methodist, was fairly indifferent to the whole business. But the language of the King James version of the Bible entered

my language, as it did everyone's of my generation, and the narratives of both the New and the Old Testaments are inevitably part of my own narrative. Even the language we're using here in this interview – with its talk of incantation and confession – draws effortlessly on that cultural reservoir. I'm happy for this to be the case. And if this brings me dangerously close to the people WH Auden despised as 'those/who read the Bible for its prose', I'm sorry!

GEOGHEGAN

The final section *Coda or one bright brief beat* reads:

A month after his mother's death he is home again. It is August and the sky is rowdy with migrating birds. Late morning he walks down the stairs into the hall and see something move behind the leaning frame of a tapestry his mother made years before, of a garden; he'd forgotten he owned it. Reminded, shifting the frame, he finds a swift. He picks the bird up, quite still in his hand, and carries it to the street to place it on a wall. It pauses, then turns to regard him, grateful, head cocked. Goodbye, he says. Goodbye my darling, says the bird. With one bright brief beat of its wings, it lifts into the sky and is gone.

To me, the Coda unifies all that comes before it and, although there are many other passages I connect with (as might be expected, those include but are not limited to, passages in the chapters on Language and Work, as well as the interwoven reference to Italy, Art, Cinema, and Books) but what I admire in the work is your great instinct with the Coda: that the swift, gathered in the protagonist's hands for only an instant is released and flies heavenward. This works beautifully because of the omnipresent feeling of confinement, of constraint (underscored by the constraints imposed on the text) and the pervasive melancholy that builds as one reads the book. For me, without the Coda, I think I might have felt rather gutted, or undone, by the experience of the book's ending, steeped as it is in loss, but then there is this lightness in the goodbye, in the leave-taking or letting go—of his mother, of the swift, of both of them.

Could you talk a bit about the Coda? If you conceived of it as such or if it was one of many moments that you created and perhaps it belonged to another section and you selected it for the end? Or if you actually came to it last and wrote it last, and in so doing, knew the book was complete?

LAMBERT

I'm so glad you feel this way about the Coda. It's one of the texts in the book I feel unreservedly happy with at all times, a rare emotion in my life and in the life, I imagine, of most writers. The truth is that I thought the book was finished months

before I wrote the Coda. It may already have been sold to The Friday Project; if not, it was under serious consideration. Giuseppe and I had finally decided to take up an invitation to visit a friend in South Africa, and, with hindsight, the holiday marked the end of one period and the start of another. It drew a (dotted) line, if you like, under the experience that produced ZERO. Towards the end of the holiday we spent a few days on safari in Kruger National Park. Safaris are wonderful things, and not only because you see animals you thought you'd never see outside Discovery Channel, but also, and maybe even primarily, because of the dead air (as they say on the radio) between one animal and the next, which is actually one of the richest parts of the ride. It's a time – and it might last an hour or even more – when you bring an extraordinary level of attention to your surroundings in order not to miss anything, while slowly becoming aware that what you are attending to is *what there is*; at the same time, perhaps because of this awareness, you enter – or I did – an almost meditative state. You're with people, but they might as well not be there. And so there I was, as good as alone, being jostled unmercifully on a jeep across rough terrain, entirely focused on the surrounding undergrowth, with those odd little birds whose name I constantly forget running desperately in front of the jeep and the sky striated and enormous around me and a memory came into my head of the scene described in the Coda, which had actually taken place earlier that summer, and had brought with it that extraordinary sense of peace and, I suppose, though I hesitate to use the word, closure. I'm the least spiritual of beings (see above) but it was hard for me not to think of Bede's story of the sparrow flying through the mead hall, of the fragility of it all, the 'passing from winter to winter'. There was that, and that odd sense of recognition, which still gives me goose-bumps when I recall it.

GEOGHEGAN

Would you like to tell us what project you have in the works now and if it is something that grew out of writing *With a Zero at Its Heart*?

LAMBERT

I have a novel coming out next year, called (interestingly, in the light of what I've said above about Biblical language) *PRODIGAL*. I'm interested in the way the primary meaning of the word (wasteful, extravagant, but also generous in a *carpe diem* way) has been submerged by the Biblical sense of someone coming home with his tail between his legs. The novel talks about various kinds of love, romantic, familial, gay, straight, pornographic, intellectual, and about misunderstanding; it was written in part during the writing of ZERO and the presence of death is

pervasive. It's about learning to live with what you are, and have, and understanding what that might be. It's less of a genre novel than my last two published novels (before *ZERO*) and I'll be very interested to see how people react to it. I've also recently finished another work, entitled *THE CHILDREN'S HOME*, a dystopian fable, which is another departure, in a different direction from *ZERO* from essentially realist literary fiction. Right now, I'm working on a series (cycle or sequence, I'm still not sure) of stories based on my mother's life, which is turning into an interrogation of memory and how it works (or doesn't work). I'm curious to see how the lessons I've learned from *ZERO* will feed into this. The danger is that you think you've developed a formula that can be applied in more than one situation, and that's a danger I hope to avoid (the clue is in the word 'formula!'). At the same time, I'm very interested in the way memory works in fragments and then fills in the gaps in an entirely unreliable way to make narrative. It works, in other words, like fiction, to such an extent that the two become one. But I'm still groping in the dark here, so I'll say no more...

GREGORY PELL



Something Unthinkable

A Review of La cosa inaudita. Un itinerario poetico e religioso negli scritti di Davide Rondoni

by Elisabetta Motta

Elisabetta Motta's monograph—in English, *Something Unthinkable. A Poetic and Religious Itinerary in the Writings of Davide Rondoni*—appears in the Subway Saggistica (Subway Essays) section of Subway Edizioni. Rondoni himself is the director of the Subway Poetry section that promotes the work of young, unknown and up-and-coming poets, and the founder of this “letteratura metropolitana” series is none other than Davide Franzini, who serves as the editor for Motta's book. Lest anyone think, however, that this book is the fruit of a closed circle, Motta's book represents high standards and solid scholarship that is interested in a dialogue with the writer in question. In a mere 121 pages (in the e-book format), she gets to the heart of the question of Rondoni as poet, as scholar, as polemicist and, as its subtitle suggest, as a religious man living in today's Italy. She succeeds in doing this with stylistic flare, clarity and well-founded insight. The fact that *La cosa inaudita* is published exclusively as an e-book will allow it to more easily reach an incredibly wide array of readership than would a printed hard copy edition. This will open up a dialogue with other readers of Rondoni and introduce the less initiated to the leading currents in contemporary Italian poetry.

Writing a review on such a book is tricky business for me. Though critics such as Daniele Piccini, Mario Moroni, Valentina Merla, Ninnj Di Stefano Busà, Paolo Lagazzi, Alberto Bertoni, Alessandra Paganardi and others have written astutely about Rondoni in short essays, chapters, reviews, introductions, on-line interviews and blogs, Motta's book is the first full-length project of any kind on Rondoni, in any language. Because it is the first and only, I asked myself, should I be more critical or more forgiving of its writer in my review? After all, with few long-form



ELISABETTA MOTTA, *La cosa inaudita*, Subway Edizioni, Milano 2014. Pp. 121.

sources from which to cite, Motta had to blaze much of her trail, and that is to be commended. Fortunately for her, two factors aided her in this uncharted territory: her own keenness in reading the works—we are reminded that Motta is a scholar of Eugenio Montale and Fabio Pusterla, among others, and thus quite competent in poetic interpretation; and, her agility in sifting through Rondoni's own essays, interviews, newspaper columns and poetry, so that she allowed herself to use Rondoni as a guide to Rondoni, if that does not sound too tautological. In fact, using a writer as a prism through which to read his work might normally produce an overly subjective, even biased, work of criticism. But somehow Motta remains scientifically objective in her treatment of Rondoni, her only bias being that of appreciating Rondoni's lifelong commitment to his art, which is, in turn, inspired by religious undertones.

She deftly weaves together the different aspects of Rondoni—the public figure, the poet, the religious devotee, the polemicist, the prickly and provocative essayist, etc.—without forcing a conflation of any or all of these aspects of him. At the same time, though she recognizes the importance of religion to Rondoni the man, she is able to gauge when he is acting in an ecumenical way that attempts to reach to all of us, as if he were, Motta suggests, a contemporary T.S. Eliot (in the sub-section that bears the eliotian title, *Nell'inferno della modernità*), albeit more easily decipherable his Anglo-English literary forebear. She sees that his profession of faith within a poem is no different from another poet's profession of love or of solitude or of mourning: it is not the act of a proselytizer but, first and foremost, an act of humanity. Though we do not often cite extensively in book reviews, I would like to break trend by including the one swooping paragraph in which Motta recognizes this and also points out the unprogrammatic, anti-rhetorical side of Rondoni:

Avversato da molti che lo ritengono troppo cattolico o che criticano la sua appartenenza al movimento fondato da Luigi Giussani e reputano imbarazzante se non inconciliabile il lavoro di artista e la cattolicità, egli ha sempre risposto con le stesse parole di Flannery O'Connor "Proprio perché sono cattolica non posso che essere un'artista." [...] Poco amato dai critici e dagli accademici che preferiscono una poesia forse più letteraria e più colta o più ideologica, Rondoni si rivela una presenza scomoda, talvolta ingombrante. Il suo voler portare la poesia alla prova della lettura pubblica, liberandola dalle sperimentazioni sterili, per ridarle voce e aria sulla scena, è ritenuto da molti un azzardo. (15)

(Assailed by many who hold him to be overly catholic or who criticize his association with the movement founded by Luigi Giussani [Communion and Liberation] and deem awkward, if not incompatible, the work of an artist and his catholicism, he has always replied with the same words of Flannery O'Connor, "Precisely because I am catholic, I cannot be less than an artist." [...] Unloved by those critics and those

academics who prefer a poetry that is perhaps more literary and more scholarly or more ideological, Rondoni has shown himself to be an inconvenient, at times even hampering, presence. His desire to put poetry to the test in public readings, thereby liberating it from sterile experimentations and restoring its voice and character on the stage, is held by many to be risky.)

The book includes full citations of the poems, which Motta subsequently discusses. So what we lack in all-encompassing breadth, we get in the depth of close readings for each. There are four main chapter headings under each of which three to five sub-chapters appear. Each sub-chapter usually covers one poem cited in full, followed by a commentary of that poem, including linguistic and theoretical exegeses, connections between Rondoni's poetic content and that which he expounds in his own essays on literature, and the citation of analogous motifs found in other poets such as Heaney, Ungaretti, Baudelaire and Leopardi. The format flows nicely so that one can take in each individual sub-chapter and its accompanying commentary as an essay in its own right or as part of the overall critical project on Rondoni. Though some may find this style a bit impressionistic, I particularly enjoyed how its discrete sub-chapters each advanced like a brief conversational encounter with its writer on the subject. In fact, Motta's register expresses a seriousness that rings of rigorous scholarship, but without the staidness or grandiosity that can often turn away a reader not perfectly initiated with the topic. She remains accessible and human so that we feel a real person has had a real experience with Rondoni's writings—an experience that we too can share. Never do we feel that Motta is spouting overblown literary theory that often can only exist in a vacuum—or at the very least, within the vacuum of a mind that might be erudite but which forces writers into easy categories if only to come full circle and satisfy its own aprioristic conclusions.

Motta includes at the end a critical bibliography for further reading as well as a bibliography of the works that she cites. In the former case, Motta acknowledges that much of the critical bibliography has been sketched out already by Daniele Piccini and by Patrizia Guarino, but she lists those critics whom she has felt vital to her own literary itinerary. This is a nice touch in that she does not try to reinvent the wheel, acknowledges those who have, and reminds us that, nonetheless, each literary critic will find her own particular path of criticism through which to make connections with, and interpretations of, a poet. I must say, however, that should the author choose to release a second edition of the book, she ought to more thoroughly scan her work and amend some of the references that she left out in a few cases. For example, though she paraphrases Milo De Angelis at one point, and even alludes to his book from which she gleaned his notions, she does not specify the page number in De Angelis' book, nor does she include it in her paratextual

bibliography. The same could be said of her allusion to Alvaro Mutis, etc. This may be easy to amend as the book is available in e-book format so that a redistribution might be more logistically feasible than it would have been had the book come out only in a hard-cover or paperback edition.

Overall, I must endorse this book by Motta. It is a fine introduction to the poetry of Davide Rondoni, but also a great entrée into the related social, political and religious issues surrounding his work. Motta guides the reader on a journey into the rich, variegated, and often plain-spoken poetic itinerary of a man aware, in Motta's words, that "la crisi dell'uomo contemporaneo non è tanto una crisi di fede ma di speranza, al punto che questa parola [speranza] suona come una parola *inaudita*" (14) ("the crisis of contemporary mankind is not so much one of faith but of hope, to the point where this word [hope] sounds like something *unthinkable*"). As a translator of Rondoni, I have wrestled with the meaning of the term "inaudita," which can mean more than just "unthinkable" or "unheard of"; it could also be "outrageous" or "daring." In fact, Rondoni seems to use it in an ironic tone as if to say: 'The nerve of me to use such a term as *hope*!' In Rondoni, "la cosa inaudita" comes close to the Yiddish meaning of "chutzpah." Hence, the title of Motta's book, from the eponymous poem in Rondoni's *Il bar del tempo* (*The Bar of Time*), is thematically apt in terms of the poet's content but also in terms of his reception in literary and academic circles that have a problem with the audacity of religious or optimistic hoping in a post-modern, post-structuralist, subjectivist society. That Motta recognizes this is one thing; that she has the courage to speak about such things—however objectively—in today's scholarly climate is, well, *inaudito*.

❁ Contributors

DANIEL ROY CONNELLY is a theatre director and English and theatre professor at John Cabot University and The American University of Rome. His recent poetry has been widely published by, among others, *Magma*, *Acumen*, *B O D Y*, *Ariadne's Thread*, *The Alarmist* and *Nutshell*. His essay on directing western theatre in China appears in the current edition of *The Istanbul Review*. In February 2014 his production of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* premiered at The English Theatre of Rome. He is the 2014 first prize winner at the Fermoy International Poetry Festival.

MARCO COSTANTINI lives in Rome. He graduated in philosophy with a thesis on the transcendental imagination in Kant. His thesis has been reworked into an essay forthcoming in the philosophical magazine *Consecutio temporum* (www.consecutio.org).

CARLOS DEWS (www.carlosdews.com) is Professor and Chair of the Department of English Language and Literature at John Cabot University. He also directs the JCU Institute for Creative Writing and Literary Translation. Along with his co-author S.J. Rozan, using the pseudonym Sam Cabot, Dews has published the thrillers *Skin of the Wolf* (2014) and *Blood of the Lamb* (2013) for Penguin Random House (Blue Rider Books). Originally from Nacogdoches County, Texas, Dews now lives in Rome, Italy.

ELIZABETH GEOGHEGAN (www.elizgeo.com) writes in English, dreams in Italian, and wishes she could remember how to speak French. She earned an MFA in Fiction Writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MA in Creative Writing from The University of Colorado at Boulder. She is the author of *Natural Disasters: Stories* and *The Marco Chronicles: To Rome, without love* a best-selling Kindle Single on Amazon. Geoghegan is currently completing a novel and a collection of stories. She lives in Rome, Italy on a dead-end street between a convent and a jail. Follow her on Twitter @ElizGeo.

R.K. GOLD is an English graduate from the University of Maryland and is currently working his way across the United States and writing full time. He is also the founder of the *Earl of Plaid Literary Journal*. One of his greatest joys in life is sharing a pot of tea with a stranger. You can like his fan page at facebook.com/rkgoldcreations and follow him on Twitter @RKgold91.

MATTHEW J. HALL is a writer who lives in Bristol England. His Writing has appeared in various publications in print and online. For links to published work, reviews, recommendations and more visit his site www.screamingwithbrevity.com

RAQUEL HENRY is a fiction writer residing in Florida who has earned an MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University. Racquel is the co-founder and editor of *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, a college English professor, and the founder of the writing center, Writer's Atelier. Her fiction and poetry has appeared in *Zest Literary Journal*, *Blink-Ink*, *The Rusty Nail*, *The Voice*, and *The Scarlet Sound*. Find out more at her blog, Racquel Writes www.racquelhenry.com

MARIA PAOLA LANGERANO is a professional journalist who lives in Rome, where she teaches Literature. She published *Sassi e Marinai* (Art Europa), *Il corpo incredulo* (Arianna Sartori), and *ventiframmenti* (Pascal Editore). Her poem *Non sono* appeared in the anthology *Unanimamente* (Zona). She writes literary criticism and has participated in many cultural events held in various Italian cities. In 2005, her unpublished poem *Se una mattina camminando* won the XIII edition of the Donna e Poesia prize; in 2008 she took part in Schegge nelle Schegge, the Festival of Italian Contemporary Poetry at the Teatro Colosseo in Rome, with her verse story *Appunti di un viaggiatore distratto*; in 2013 she was a finalist in the national poetry contest Le gemme with her unpublished collection *Ti porto al sole*. She wrote poems inspired by the paintings of Antonella Cappuccio, presented in many exhibitions both in Italy and abroad.

TONY MASTROIANNI - Derek Jeter, Napoli, Gilmore Girls, Groucho, Chico, Harpo, Larry David, Eduardo, New York, Svevo, Papa H., Bridgeport, Operation Ivy, Knicks, Peppino Di Capri (the early stuff), Ghostbusters, Masked Intruder, Kimbo, Raymond Chandler, Raymond Felton, Tyson Chandler, Wilson Chandler, JBJ, vino sfuso, cuban music, cubans, Space Jam. He graduated from Fairfield Woods Middle School in 2003. His work has been published in *The Bicycle Review*, *Able Muse Review*, *Lotus Mangiatore/Mangiatrice* and elsewhere. His story *Nothing in particular* was awarded 1st prize in the Moved By Wonder Short Story Contest: Reworking, Reimagining, and Paying Homage to Flannery O'Connor sponsored by John Cabot University. He won nothing in particular.

GABRIELE MENCACCI AMALFITANO is a Roman songwriter. He likes listening to music, singing, and hanging out with his friends and a couple of drinks. He is the leader of the band Joe Victor. He loves women and women love him.

POLLY MUNNELLY is a Dublin born poet who lives and writes in Meath Ireland with her children, new partner Paul and lots of crazy four legged added family members. She began writing just over two years ago; when she posted her first poem on a on line poetry group page now known as Blackwater Poetry, where her craft has since grown and developed. She has been long listed & heard reading at the Fermoy International Poetry festival 2013 including many live Poetry broadcasts as part of the festival 2013 & 2014, Athlone poetry festival in 2013. Some of her work has been published in *Irish-based Solstice Initiative Poetry Journals, Connections, Aqueous*, US based *Mad Swirl Poetry Forum, Songs for Julia: An Anthology, Blue Max Review* and the forthcoming *Words Fly Away: Poems for Fukushima*.

JÜRGEN OLSCHESKI has just published his first novel *The Blue Box*, which is available now on Amazon Kindle. He has also published many poems and stories in magazines and anthologies including: *Unthology 5* (Unthank Books), *Under the Radar*, *The Shop*, *The Interpreter's House*, *The Waterlog* (Two Rivers Press), *The Reader*, *Staple New Writing*, *Other Poetry*, *Fire*, *Puffin Review*, *The Treacle Well*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, as well as having work broadcast on BBC Radio 4. He has been shortlisted for the prestigious Bridport Prize. Jürgen has just begun blogging here: theblueboxnovel.wordpress.com. He also writes songs, some of which can be found here: soundcloud.com/pumpstreetsongs written under the name of Mark Mayes.

GREGORY PELL is an associate professor of Italian at Hofstra University where he focuses primarily on cinema and poetry. His critical articles examine such poets as Dante, Paolo Ruffilli, Mario Luzi, Davide Rondoni, Tommaso Lisa, and Mario Tobino. On the subject of cinema he has published pieces on such filmmakers as Mihaileanu, Kore-Eda, Sergio Rubini, Vincenzo Marra, Mohsen Melliti and Matteo Garrone. His latest research deals with the non-human animal in Montale (within the context of post-human studies), and with the novelists Vitaliano Trevisan and Angelo Cannavacciuolo. Additionally, he is working on a monograph on the (non-ekphrastic) relationship between art and poetry in the works of Davide Rondoni, Mario Luzi, John Ashbery, and Jorie Graham. He has translated Rondoni, Ruffilli, Erri De Luca, and Cannavacciuolo, among others.

CAITLIN RETTENMAIER is the proud K9 voice of @DOGSofCincy. Hailing from Ohio, she's lived, taught, and studied in Chicago, Italy, and Japan. She co-facilitates an ever-growing writing class in the under-employed bowels of her city, and she has been asked to share her work, insights, and skills before audiences across the state. Notably, her work has been featured in publications like *Literary Juice*, *Words Fly Away*, and *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, but Caitlin's writing has appeared in a growing variety

of literary magazines, newspapers, and anthologies from across the United States and Japan. Currently, Caitlin is hard at work on two projects. The first, a collection of drug stories set in the Daniel Boone National Forest. The second, the story of a middle-aged, diabetic pianist who suffers from epilepsy. Often, Caitlin is between apartments, and she is, at any given time, living and moving between cities, states, and countries in chaos. She's prepping for a move to Ireland to pursue her MFA.

ANN THOMPSON is an American writer whose work has been published in Europe (*Acumen*, *here/there*, *the Journal*, *The North*, *Staple*, *Vine Leaves*) and the U.S. (*ARDOR*, *Blast Furnace*, *Flyover Country Review*, *KYSO Flash*, *Leopard Seal*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Philosophy After Dark*). Her short story, *Doppler Effect*, (under pen name Hana Mystras) was a finalist for the 2014 Eric Hoffer Award and is included in Best New Writing 2014. *Burning Fallow Fields*, won Honorable Mention in the 2014 Robert Frost Foundation poetry contest. She was a featured poet for *Tupelo Press*' 30/30 poetry-writing marathon, and her poetry is included in *Best of Vine Leaves 2013* and *Best of Tupelo Press*' 30/30.

VVXZZ is a Mexican writer who has recently started his PhD in Comparative Literature at the City University of New York. He received his BA from John Cabot University, in Rome, Italy, a city that has been fundamental in his development. Originally Palestinian, VVXZZ's family has an eclectic background, his father having been born in Chile, his grandmothers in Haiti, and one of his grandfathers in Egypt. He is interested in many diverse forms and genres of literature, and feels just as passionately about poetry as he does about novels.