



LOTUSEATER

ISSUE 8

LOTUSEATER

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ISSUE 8

PROSE

MARNI BERGER	4
<i>Edith and Sweater: Two Ladies Chatting at Madeleine's Patisserie on West 23rd Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, New York, NY</i>	
DANIEL UNCAPHER	7
<i>Workshopping Borges</i>	
DOUGLAS COLE	8
<i>The Invisible Hand</i>	
SALVATORE DIFALCO	19
<i>Large Anthropomorphic Canary Waking the Devil</i>	
HÆLDYN SEIN	25
<i>Recrudescence</i>	

POETRY

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK	37
NATE MAXSON	39
<i>The Insect Kingdom Dawn Poem</i>	
JUDSON EVANS	41
<i>What the Laurel Is Not</i>	
DONATO MANCINI	42
MATT MORRIS	44
<i>What Are Today's Poets Doing</i>	
CONTRIBUTORS	47

Prose



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*Edith and Sweater: Two Ladies Chatting at
Madeleine's Patisserie on West 23rd Street,
between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, New York, NY*

Two old women sit on either end of a wooden, communal table at Madeleine's Patisserie, a warm little café where the employees answer the phone with 'Bonjour,' seating consists of antique Victorian couches or hand-carved wooden chairs, all meals are served on sterling silver platters, and signs on the walls begin with 'Dear Customers.' For example, 'Dear Customers, please do not bring outside food into the café;' or, 'Dear Customers, please keep cell phone conversations at a minimum.' There is a manner of politeness here that contradicts any prejudice about New York pushiness. Here it is possible to forget the rush of the city—the smell of the bakery overwhelms the combination of exhaust and subway fumes.

When the waitress asks their order, one woman decides upon quiche and the other a ham and cheese sandwich. Both dishes will come with salad.

For several minutes neither woman speaks. The one that ordered quiche is wearing a purple cable-knit cashmere sweater. The left side of her face is contorted so that the lip stretches toward her cheek bone, giving her a perpetual

grimace. Her grey hair is fluffed into a bulb around her head. She stares down at the table. Her cane tilts onto the edge of her chair.

Finally the woman facing her begins. Her voice sounds exactly like Edith Bunker's, and the initiation of sound to the table somehow makes it apparent that their small bodies are separated not only by the long grains of the thick oak between them but also by the porcelain container of *Sugar 'n the Raw* and *Sweet n' Low*, the carved boat-shaped sachet-holder, and at least three feet of space.

'Well, that looks just lovely!' Edith says, her speech instigated by the arrival of the food. 'Isn't that salad beautiful?'

Sweater does not respond. She takes a slow bite, scraping the silver fork onto her white dish. She chews for a moment and says, 'Yeah.' Her eyes glimmer in wet slits behind swollen lids, which slowly tilt back toward her food.

'What about the wedding?' Edith wants to know. Her speech is slightly gargled as if something is caught in her throat, but nothing is. 'The cakes?!' She swallows before each new idea. She speaks slowly and

eagerly, as if out of patience for Sweater's supposed deafness, but really because she wants to conceal the shake in her voice.

Sweater shrugs. Her voice is monotone. 'I am terrified about the cakes,' she says before lifting the quiche to her lips again.

'Well you must be very happy!' Edith grins, the upturned corners of her mouth twitching. She leans in toward the table when she speaks and leans back when she eats so that the conversation creates a rocking motion for her entire body.

'Yeah,' Sweater stabs another pile of cream and egg, 'I am.' Her cheeks pulse with the movement of her jaws.

'You're going to make the cakes?' Edith wants to know. Her hand shakes, causing the fork to shiver. She aims the glistening pieces of salad to her mouth, managing to wedge the leaves between her lips with the air of someone afraid of eating for fear of missing the mouth. She chews with her lips locked together, as if to keep the food from escaping.

'Yeah, I am. One cake each week. To test.' Sweater stares back. The quiche is gone, except for a few stray crumbs of crust left by the edge of her plate.

'One cake each *week*?' Edith's eyes expand to quarters and she has given the word week an extra syllable. Her body rocks toward the table, palms gripped to the edges and elbows splayed back behind her. Her posture is not unlike that of a chicken who wants to fly.

'Yeah.'

'Some of these little New York cafés like this one make these sandwiches open-faced.' Edith glances down at her

plate and sighs. She has rocked back.

Sweater sips at her tea.

'Less bread,' Edith adds.

Sweater nods, places the teacup back on its saucer.

'Why were you mad at me?'

Sweater stares at Edith with her glittery slits. 'I wasn't mad at you.'

'I had a distinct feeling you were mad at me.' Edith fiddles with the unused spoon at the right of her plate. It clanks against the thick oak.

'I didn't respond to you for a week. I think that's why you think that.'

'I'm sorry I brought up your ex-husband,' Edith continues to fiddle. 'I really have to apologize.'

'That's okay,' says Sweater.

Edith slurps from her coffee, blinking over the rim of her cup, momentarily checking Sweater's expression which remains unchanged. She sighs again as if preparing to resume speech. 'My husband went crazy in the Seventies. I was working on my Ph.D. I had the kids. My husband equated me to his mother, who was a Club Girl.'

The slits watch Edith. Five inches below, crumbs of quiche crust stick to wet lips.

'He calmed down,' Edith hurries, 'When I got a salary job. Now he's crazy in a different way.'

'How so?'

'Politically. I suppose. But he likes Obama! So that's good. He's actually very—the waitress comes to refill Edith's coffee—he's actually very protective of him. *He* says people shouldn't criticize Obama because he hasn't had a chance

yet.' She picks up her fork and places it across the dish, which rattles with the vibration of the table, which in turn shudders with the movement of footsteps. She then wipes her face with a paper napkin, drawing the moisture down along the creases that lead toward her chin. 'It's the first time we've agreed on anything political our entire marriage.' Her intonation rises with the movement of the sentence, finally breaking into laughter.

Sweater grunts. The ceiling fan blows a strand of white hair into circles above Sweater's head. Her contorted lip seems to stretch all the way up toward her eye. Finally: 'It's no big deal.'

'It's quite nice not to have a car in the city!' Edith shakes her head.

'You can take the train,' agrees Sweater.

'It's a relief,' says Edith.

When they stand up to leave Edith helps Sweater with her cane. 'Do you know you look wonderful now?' asks Edith. 'Better color.'

'Why, thank you.'

Their voices fade as they move toward the door.

'How many layers are you going to make?'

'Six.'

'*Six?* That'll take you a whole week. Do they know what they're asking you to do?'

'No.'

'That's why people charge \$5,000 for it.'

'Well, it's not going to be that elegant.'

Edith laughs. The hallway toward the door is narrow and long. 'Oh you

have to go down a long gauntlet here,' Edith giggles as they move closer to the exit.

Either Sweater's response blends with the voices around them or she does not respond at all.

Workshopping Borges

We're so eager to see what Borges has come up with next that no one says anything, not even behind Borges' back, when Borges is three days late with his submission. Borges offers no explanation for the delay and none is expected of him, not even by our workshop leader, the hardened veteran, because according to the hardened veteran Borges is, believe it or not, the real deal.

Frankly, I'm jealous. The submission isn't even all that terrific. It's another one of his classic who-done-it's, about distant relatives and a case of family resemblances. The twist at the end is about language, of course, resulting in a gruesome murder. The details of the victim's clothing and origin lead us all to suspect that she's based on one of us in workshop, and indeed today the person in question has excused herself from attendance, citing personal obligations.

I'd like to ask Borges about this directly but he's muzzled by the gag rule, which the veteran keeps in full effect. All we can do is ask questions, gently suggest our own answers, send out little hints like bats banging about with echolocation. When it's my time to talk I take the opportunity to lecture down at Borges like I'm his superior, or even his equal. We're all getting better here, but Borges is getting better the best. I'm not sure exactly what the mechanism of improvement is, but something about this whole situation is working, if not for me then for Borges, and victories for Borges are victories of a sort for me.

For we see in his stories the facets of all of us, but it's not for ourselves that we read Borges. Last year, under the young theologian who didn't let us use phrases like *I like* or *it's crazy*, everyone was too sensitive and ideological to make any mutual progress. Borges, who didn't consider himself ideological at all, struggled, and in that struggle grew. This year, under the hardened veteran, everyone is confrontational at all times and incredibly normative; the twist now is that Borges is the most ideological one of us all and has no one to challenge him, and in his stories Borges sees all we have of ourselves, and no one can challenge them.

For this reason Borges and I will never get along.

DOUGLAS COLE

The Invisible Hand

When he entered the showroom, it was like a carnival. Lights everywhere, cameras, news people interviewing the crowds and the players at the car. People standing around in the glare of light flooding through the high showroom windows. Light. Too much light. And Jones forded the waves and clusters, people laughing garishly, though he held no ill feeling towards them. They were simple people, like him, trying for something, trying to win something for... the thing? Not just the thing, but to win. Sign Up Here, words on a banner, and beneath the banner a table and another cluster of people. He made his way towards it. All right, like a prayer in his mind. All right.

He stood in line. He looked around. So many people. It was like a party. He stepped forward in little spaces. Once he reached the table, a young woman smiled up at him quickly. She was rushing them through. She was impeccably clean, washed, hair like a brown mane. Hello, she said.

Hello yourself.

Sign in here, and she handed him a clipboard.

At the table, he filled out a questionnaire, blurry questions on a sheet of paper on a clipboard, questions about his health, his demographics, income, living,

address, but only one sheet and a final statement absolving the dealership of all responsibility if he should suffer any mishap, injury, physical or psychological harm in the process of the contest. He signed and turned it in.

Very good, she said, and she smiled quickly at him and across the sea of faces and arms and took his sheet of paper and returned to him a sticker upon which he would write his name below a greeting of Hello My Name Is...

Good luck!

Thanks.

One last trip to the bathroom, crowds, faces in the mirrors, hands slicking back hair, hands washing faces. In the stall he downed his mini bottles. Ah. Sounds around him like a shipyard. And replenished, he emerged with the benevolent glow of the newly anointed, the baptized, the graced. He slapped his sides and waded out into the showroom. He smiled into the crowd. Let us begin.

At the car, he was handed a pair of white gloves, and he dutifully put them on. For the laying on of the hands, he said aloud to no one in particular as he moved in among the others poised there. Are we, after all, to handle a holy relic? But no one really heard him, at least that was what he thought as he stepped in between the shoulders of two other

people and slipped his gloved hand in, placing it on the rear left quarter panel.

The crowds were thick. He was jostled in, moved, but he never took his hand from the initial spot he had chosen, as if that particular spot, win or lose, were his to defend and hold. People laughed. People told jokes. The camera crews moved in. Then the Dealer came over and lifted his arms as if in opening to a homily. He wore a bright, starched white shirt and gray slacks, and his hair was thick and black and combed perfectly back over the top of his head. He had strong white teeth that gleamed. The cameras turned to him, and he spoke:

Good morning everyone. My name is Don Anderson, and it is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to Anderson's Dealership and to our seventh annual car give-away contest! He paused, nodding, and the crowd cheered. The lights of the camera crews intensified the whiteness of his face. As you know, each year we have done this, we have started off with quite a crowd, and this year seems to be no exception. Families and friends are of course welcome to stay throughout the competition. We only ask that in your support you conduct yourselves with courtesy and respect to all the contestants. Now, let us review the rules for a moment. First of all, contestants must keep one hand on the car at all times. Accidentally releasing your hold will result in dismissal. If your hand should come off the car, this indicates to the judges your desire to relinquish your place in the competition. There are no exceptions. We will have fifteen minute breaks every

three hours, and as you can see we will have food available at the signing desk, but contestants must be back at their places promptly at the end of the breaks or they will be disqualified. Any physical contact, pushing or harassment of other contestants will result in disqualification. If any support members harass or physically harm other contestants, the contestant they are associated with will be disqualified. There will be no exceptions to any of these rules. The contest will continue until all but one of the contestants has dropped away. The last contestant who remains in contact with the car thereby claims it. This is a promotional event, and no members of the dealership, their families or friends are eligible. Are there any questions? He waited a moment, during which the crowd twittered and muttered.

Someone then shouted out, What about a motorcycle?

They can start their own contest! he shot back, grinning broadly. Now, let the contest begin, and good luck to you all!

Camera crews moved in to interview Don Anderson and he soaked up the light and the attention and puffed himself up before the cameras like an octopus absorbing its prey. Then the news crews began coming around the car and to various contestants, asking them their names and their occupations and their strategies for success. When they reached Jones with their glare of overhead lights, the young reporter in his sport coat shoved the microphone in, although his eyes remained in quick scan. Jones squirmed to face them squarely while keeping his

hand firmly on the car. Yes, a bit awkward, here, can't you tell, but this is all really a test of fortitude, isn't it? The car itself is really symbolic, mostly, the goal itself an abstract reason for the attempt, for the game in which each of us tests his mettle, finds his inner bar of strength, faces his demons and so forth... but before he was finished, the crew moved on.

Then the camera crews left, and gradually the crowd of onlookers diminished until the only people who remained were either the workers or families and friends of the contestants or the odd few people who had actually come to shop for a car. The first few hours after that were like a boat trip in which all of the contestants more or less got acquainted.

Here we are! and they all laughed.

Yes indeed. We are the chosen few.

Not so few, yet.

It's rather like Noah's ark, don't you think?

Except without the pairs.

I heard that last year it went for three days.

Three days!

The hardest part is having to go to the bathroom.

Thank god for the breaks!

Just hope they come when you need them!

And the primary joke was, who would be the first to fall away?

The afternoon drained away quickly. They had settled into an early pattern, some struck up friendships, some attended only to their friends and families, but everyone was friendly, everyone was hav-

ing a good time. Jones kept up a more or less unbroken monologue, the contents of which were the more obscure benefits of the contest, such as the chance meeting over a material possession, you see, which itself is really meaningless, our being here and staying here the real challenge.

Then why don't you step away and just visit?

Yeah, the competition just started.

We're all in it for the car.

If the car was meaningless, or if we believed it is meaningless, as you are trying to convince us, then losing would be a weakness of character, is that what you mean?

That's it!

You're trying to talk us into dropping off!

Ah, you sense the subtle force of my argument.

Everything you say has a more subtle meaning.

The meaning of all oration is persuasion.

Did you get that out of a fortune cookie?

Maybe I just mean for myself.

That's right, you're talking to yourself.

We don't exist.

Ah but you do. Soon I'll be able to list you by name. What I mean by the car not existing is that we cannot be attached to the qualities, here, that put us into the chain of cause and effect. You see, if you really listen, I am giving you clues on how to win. Qualities and change have their origin in nature. I'm saying that if you see the car as the

object of your desire, you set it off in value from other things, but if you see it through the discipline of one who really sees, you will be master of the field!

Okay, preacher.

Yeah, you using this as an opportunity to proselytize?

I represent no official denominations. And what is your message?

The three gates of hell that destroy the self are desire, anger and greed.

Then what are you doing here?

Ah, training the mind. As long as one is focused on the act without craving the fruit, then one remains free of illusion.

And disappointment.

Absolutely.

So why not step away?

To step away from this chosen act would be a failure in engagement; relinquished in delusion would become a way of dark inertia.

You're going to feel some dark inertia all right.

Lucid. The object is to remain lucid. That is what I'm here for.

I'm here for the car, and that's lucid enough for me.

Good luck, preacher.

And to you.

And they passed into the evening with no one dropping away. On breaks, they stretched and went to the bathroom and ate from the complimentary food buffet provided by the dealership. Jones replenished himself in secret, but he already knew his supply would never last the entire three days, should he go that long, or even the night as things were going, and so his mind worked busily on

a plan for obtaining drink. But he could conjure up nothing, which raised the specter of the possibility that he would run out. And what horrors would that bring? Of course, he could always just as easily walk away if the desire became too much, and as he pulled the last of his mini bottles from his pocket, as he drained its contents and left it up-ended in his mouth long past the last drop in order to fully draw its vapor, this thought both comforted and despaired him. Yes, he could walk away, that was true, if the need were too great. But to walk away simply from a need for drink? And what was it he was after really, a car? A car? A vehicle? The great wheel? Ironical as his statements about the fruits and remaining lucid, he was not altogether immune from such a purpose, even if it had only occurred to him on the spot as a kind of joke.

Thus the trial began. It began in the legs. They began to ache. He stepped from foot to foot in order to keep the circulation going, but he felt his legs beginning to cramp and brief and unsettling moments of numbness. The calves rippled with a fiery tingle. The joints rocked, grinding with chalky opposition, and he had no way to escape from the intense awareness of his bones, his flesh like strained fabric. Little sharp pains flared up, little spikes of weird electric fire leaped through his thighs and his spine, and he seethed inwardly and breathed fiercely. Even the air seemed to singe as though his nerves were exposed in some kind of horrible whole body root canal.

And as the effect of the alcohol began to slowly drain away, he felt the first

weight of an enormous weariness. An overwhelming desire to lie down. His eyes closed for long periods until he lost balance and leaped awake and clung more tightly with his gloved hand to the edge of the quarter panel. Glancing around, he saw that some of the others also had their eyes closed, trying for little shots of sleep while standing. One man at the taillight stood grinning with poker maliciousness, a fire edge Dobbs smiling and praying for you to drift off and fall away and so relinquish your hold on the treasure. Thus the game began to change.

The first to drop away was a young woman at the fender who simply shook her head and smiled and stepped away, peeling the glove from her hand. The group quickly noticed and everyone awakened and turned towards her, and the general sentiment was an initial shock and brief disappointment, then a spark of predatory glee that rippled out as they came together in a sudden cheer. The woman smiled and waved and said, I'm going to go have a good night's sleep. See you all! And as she walked away, they all felt the exhilaration of lasting past the first fall away and coming that much closer to winning.

In the early morning hours before dawn, Jones began to pass through the fire of the coming hangover. He saw family and friends of the other contestants sleeping on the floor around them, and in the red waves of his mind they were circling sharks. His eyes burned. He drank water on the breaks, but he remained as parched as a man who drinks from the

sea. His nose began to run and his head reeled with a glaring white hot pain that burned behind his eyes. Nausea persisted, and on breaks he sometimes vomited.

You'd better give in, preacher, Dobbs said, as Jones now considered him in his mind. He was a small, wiry man with slick, gray-black hair and a stubble of beard that seemed in excess of the time they had stood there. He wore a green plaid shirt rolled up at the sleeves, and in his breast pocket was a little device with a wire winding up to an earphone in his ear.

Quite all right, Jones said. I am only freeing myself from delusions.

You think that pain in your legs is a delusion?

Quite so. It's not so bad, now.

Well, you know, I'm really sad for you because that's really a bad sign. That means your legs are dying, your blood is pooling up and you're more and more susceptible to clotting. That's really dangerous. You know that?

Are you saying your legs don't hurt?

They do, but I haven't been drinking like you have. I've been in training for this. I'm healthy. I'm strong. Look at you. You look like you're dying.

Another delusion.

That's a bad sign, too, that way you're thinking. Now you don't even see what kind of danger you're in. I feel really sorry for you.

I appreciate your concern.

The man smiled a malicious smile. Jones closed his eyes on this face and drifted for a moment in the void, losing

the feeling of his legs, even his hand on the car, his body entire. Yet he did not spring back from this, not this time, even if he did fall away from the car. He traveled forward into it, and his spirit flew over the mind and its memory and he saw and inhabited his earliest moment as a child, as a crawling creature in a crib, climbing up the bars in the dead of night, maneuvering his body between the crib and the wall and working his way to the floor. He found the door and climbed up onto the back of the couch and somehow opened the lock and then the door. The night was silent and dark. He went out into it. He moved in the tall grass of the yard. He stopped and listened and heard the breathing of the night, vast and feminine. He floated in a swirl of stars. He drifted towards a pale light wave moving slowly, slowly, then flaring in a sudden blast of intensity and brightness as the sun rose, and he lifted his arms as if to his mother and beheld there the vast source of all, the opening from which he had come.

Others drifted away during the night, but he was not aware of their departure, and as the light came through the show-room windows he counted and saw that, now, only twelve remained, including himself. A boy of about eighteen was standing on his left and a woman in her mid-thirties stood to his right. Jones nodded to each of them and said, Good morning. The woman, it seemed, was the boy's mother, and his father stood directly across from Jones at the other quarter panel. Dobbs stood fiercely at the rear left taillight, a grim and complacent

sneer etched indelibly on his face as if he were some demon posted to monitor their pain. Jones turned to the mother and said, Increasing the old chances by coming as a group, eh?

She smiled. She was a petite woman with short brown hair and deep set eyes that were now barely open with fatigue. She stood with her shoulders slightly hunched in the posture of coming defeat. I'm not sure how much it will increase our chances being together, she said, and I'm not sure how much longer I want to stay with it. We mostly want to win the car for our son, Carl.

Oh do stay. You're doing fine. You've made it this far. Surely you can make it a little further.

Yeah, mom. You can do it.

Carl retained the bright demeanor of a kid for whom it was still a strange and amusing game.

And from where do you hail? Jones asked.

I go to the university, the boy replied.

And what are you studying, there?

Environmental engineering.

Most noble. Most noble. We need your help, I'm afraid. Any specialties?

General community design, mostly, although lately I've been pretty fascinated by the possibilities of bio remediation.

Bio remediation?

It's a way to use naturally occurring enzymes and organisms for environmental clean-up, which in combination with good urban planning can help to remedy some of our current environmental problems.

I have hope just standing next to

you. You'll save the world one day, I'm sure, if my generation doesn't foolishly try to interfere.

They're the ones giving me my grades. I'll put in a good word.

The supporting friends and family had arisen and now they were all back to a sense of support and community. Some news crews had returned and were interviewing them. The general commentary was a complaint about fatigue, especially in the legs.

As the sunlight rose, so too did the heat, and in his bleary minded, hungover and sleep-deprived state, Jones felt his body wavering with a woolly kind of dissipation, as though the borders of his own form were giving way to the morass of the afternoon air, and he watched through long, trance-like moments as time seemed to slow down and move in tedious, incremental steps, as though the escapement of the grand clock of the world had been mired in thick hot wax. The people around him moved more slowly and fixed in brief moments into complete and disturbing motionlessness. Two boys stood opposite each other on the other side of the room, tossing a baseball back and forth, and as Jones watched he saw the baseball's trajectory leaving its tracer patterns of infinite identical images of the ball one succeeding the other from hand to hand.

Now more than ever came the urge to sleep. And after the afternoon break, he saw that several did not return, including the mother who had stood beside him, and while Carl did not appear

disappointed, he, too, now took on a vacant gaze and seemed to drift from himself at moments, as did many of the others, several of whom could no longer keep their eyes open. Only Dobbs at the taillight seemed implacable, immovable, almost malevolent in his obstinacy and enjoyment of their suffering.

The fatigue of standing in one spot becomes ludicrous. Pain comes in waves. Why choose to do this to yourself? To choose this pain for the obtaining of material wealth, to choose this pain when others suffer for no reason at all, there is in this some moral desuetude. Pain returns in waves. It settles in places, lodges like a spider gathering to its source a collection of bones and antennae which like a cite of animated refuse begins to radiate outwards more and more. To move is not to dislodge it but to open up breaks in its general fabric which themselves fill in and begin to radiate outwards even more. The only way to deal with this is to take one's self out of the body. The only way of taking one's self out of the body is to let go. Letting go is like that first dive from the tower at the beach club, the first moment looking down at the black water, wakes rolling in. What will it be like, striking that water? Something is moving. Light breaks through the face of the water. Crows are watching. I love the grace of the gull coming in on the air from the sea, and looking down he saw his hand plunge through the metal fabric of the vehicle.

She appeared like the queen in a three card monty game. A few faces shuffled, a few hands reached in across the bar

for drinks, money hit the counter, and there she was. He waited for his drink. Where was his drink? He had ordered it, hadn't he? So where was it? He wanted to complain, but he didn't want to make a scene in front of the woman. She was beautiful, with black hair and black lips and stone coal black eyes. Her skin was like white parchment. Her movements were like pure improvised grace. He watched her, and she watched him and smiled. No one around them interfered. There was a crowd and noise and yet her proximity and coolness were clean and clear enough to convince him that they were there alone together.

Still worried? she said.

He smiled in return, as though his expression were aligned to hers. I'm reminded of the man who kept a Gideon Bible in his bedside drawer to maintain the transitory sensation of living in motels.

Every move is an everlasting one, remember?

Do you mean California?

She laughed. Yes. Loss is the hardest shell.

That's true, that's true, and when I had to leave all those things of mine packed up in our old house because all we could take with us was what we could carry in one suitcase, I thought I needed them. I really did. But after a while, I couldn't even remember what I'd left.

And the hat?

The slouch hat? The top hat?

The hat on the billboard.

Oh, the recurring hat. I never got that one.

No?

No, I never did, but I kept seeing it everywhere.

Try again.

How?

Try. Free associate.

Hmmm. All right. Hat rat cat... head... top of the head... consciousness... hat... hats... jobs... selves... identities... I still don't get it.

She laughed again. It's a joke.

What is?

Hats.

I don't get it! He smiled lamely.

In a strong wind?

What?

Picture it.

Okay. A strong wind. The hat blows off. Naturally I go chasing after it...

She laughed. Don't you get it?

He smiled. Oh, I think I do.

The problem is how to live without feeling trapped in your own skin. Books are not enough, buying time on quick Sunday, the clock, this moment going slow as a slow breath I breathe, and see, time moves aligned to inhale, exhale, to hold suspended as long as you can, forever, logged into the indelible fabric of air.

And as she moved forward, coming closer to him, he felt himself falling back, falling, falling.

Night. Only nine remained. Carl had left, but the father remained. Dobbs stood smiling at the taillight. A man at the hood did not look well. He was an older man, perhaps in his sixties. He was bowed forward with his head leaning down on the arc of the hood. A friend or relative stood beside him, rubbing his back and whispering into his ear.

Occasionally the man would lift his head and on his face was a look of such agony that it was painful to see. Those nearest to him turned away. Only Jones and Dobbs looked on unflinchingly. Jones felt locked into his gaze, felt the ache, the nausea, the torpor, the desire to relinquish. Relinquish. The word itself came upon him like a blade, and one edge cut his desire for himself, the desire to stand down, to rest, to let go, while the other edge went to releasing the man who appeared in such distress that Jones, in his own compromised state, believed him close to death. And as he watched, the friend at the man's side became not a friend, as he appeared, but a kind of succubus with puckered mouth and tentacled hands that drew at the life energy that rose like a vapor from the man's back and head. Relinquish and stand down. Save yourself. The man looked up. Tears were in his eyes, and yet, as if given permission, he slowly lifted his hand and stepped away from the vehicle, and the succubus returned to friend and led him carefully away.

Well done, Dobbs said. Well done. Now you're learning.

What happened to the support, preacher, the father across from him said.

What? Jones suddenly realized that he had actually spoken aloud.

Yeah, said a woman at the headlight. That was pretty opportunistic of you.

The man was obviously suffering.

We're all suffering, the father said.

Lighten up, Dobbs said. He saw a weakness and he took a shot. It was the right move. May have saved the guy, too.

Jones closed his eyes. He stood on the tower and the water moved below, light constellating over the surface. Let go. How would it feel, entering the black water? The first strike? He took that step forward, hands poised above his head, and dove. The air for a moment was cool, but a rich heat rose from inside. He hit the top of the water, and as if someone slapped the top of his head with a stick, he heard and felt a quick crack. He dove free and deep into the absolute darkness, and once inside the water his limbs loosened from their tight form and he felt the force of his momentum slow and suspend and stop. Nothing moved. Then he turned and drifted up and saw the light from above splayed out around him, bars of grainy light like spindle fibers arching down and dividing all around him. And he lingered in the vast water, drifting with his breath abeyed, calm, motionless, all thought blown out.

I'm the devil, you know, Dobbs said. And you're going straight to hell. You know that, don't you? I'm here for you. I'm here at this crossroads to help you, didn't you know that? I've been here all along even before you knew it, and in fact it was my idea for you to come down here. I've been listening in on your thoughts. I've given half of them to you, tuned your mind for this and every moment like this. You can't lose, now. Look at these people. They're dying. But not you. You're feeling good, aren't you? You have to admit it, and you haven't had a drink in how long now? How long has it been? What do you think you should

be feeling like right about now? What would you feel like any other time going this long without a drink? Think about it. You don't have any explanation for it, for how good you feel. You could go three more days. How many days has it been? How many nights? You can't really remember, can you? That's because I took you out of time. It can't touch you. You could stand here forever. Look at those people. Look at them. That guy there, he better give in because he's surely going to have a heart attack if he doesn't. Why don't you give him a little nudge, a little healthy advice? I think he needs it right about now. He would listen to you right about this moment. Just tell him to slip away. And look at that poor father. He wants it for his son, but he doesn't have more than a few hours before he passes out. Look how hard he's breathing. And that one there. That's it, don't you know? Just the three of you. You're all that's left. Amazing isn't it. You didn't notice the others had left already. Now it's just the three of you, and you're the clear winner. Isn't it obvious to you now? Just look at you. And you owe it all to me. There can't be any doubt about that in your mind. Not now. Just look at how good you feel.

It's not you, Jones said.

No? Dobbs smiled. How can you be sure? Are you willing to take that risk? To risk your soul?

Then the mother appeared before him, her face drawn tight. Why don't you give up! she cried. She stood facing Jones with a look of bleak and hysterical righteousness. You're killing him.

Just stop. Stop this right now! And then she was gone.

He closed his eyes.

Look at me. I'm as helpless as a kitten up a tree, not knowing my right foot from my left, my hat from my gloves: I'm too misty and too much in love...

Where was his drink? He slid his hands across the piano surface. How long ago had he ordered his drink? Why wasn't it here? A couple across from him sat with their heads together. They had drinks. Why didn't he have a drink? A few hands passed over his eyes. A few faces. The piano singer telescoped down a long tunnel formed by the surface of the piano scrolling up into a funnel. He looked up through the long tunnel at a point of light far away. He strove for it. He willed himself towards it. But he did not move. He willed again and this time felt himself rising, slowly, but when he relaxed his will he slipped back and the light became more distant and he felt an anxiety rise somewhere behind his vision which seemed to drift in a place of its own though still attached to a blind will. He concentrated again, this time on letting go the weight of his anxiety, and this gave him buoyancy. He flew upwards, or rather the light seemed to grow, but as he approached it he became self-conscious of his power, and this distraction caused him to fall again. He gathered his will again, this time to fend off all thought other than light. He rose. The light approached. He broke through.

Just you and me, buddy. Dawn was coming through the showroom window. The others had all left. And for

the moment, Jones and the other were alone. He stood facing the man with an odd feeling of compassion. Then Dobbs smiled and said, you remember what I told you? I'm taking you to your peak. I'm taking you to that point where you don't think you can go any further, then I'm going to step away, and when I do, you'll have the car and I'll have your soul. Look at that thing. It sure is beautiful, isn't it?

The news crews returned, and they asked how the last two contestants were doing. Dobbs said, I think we're both feeling pretty good. We might go a couple more days. Dobbs never took his eyes of Jones.

The dealer arrived and circled the last two men and said, Well, well, we're at the final showdown, I see. The last stand-off. Let's see if we can't make this a dramatic finale, eh boys?

You should be feeling pain right now, Dobbs said to Jones. Why aren't you? You asking yourself that? Why aren't you feeling any pain?

Time moved in slow, blar moments, and people and images shuddered in and out of his consciousness, moving on the periphery but gone when he slowly turned his head. Vultures fluttered at the windows. Jackals moved in the shadows flickering near the showroom doors, and the floor rippled like a sliding reptile, rising and falling, rising and falling, and little blue waves rolled out from his chest as he breathed.

Why aren't you feeling anything?

A boy with a baseball cap approached from outside, and as he opened the

door a breeze knocked his hat from his head. He turned and chased it along the ground behind him.

It's a joke, get it?

Light glittered along the new vehicles. Light gleamed along the tight fabric of his gloved hand. Light emanated from the bodies of the people around him.

I'm taking you to your peak. I'm tuning your mind.

Slow wax world slowly, slowly grinding down, coming to a stop. Dobbs stepped away, smiling, backing away, and it was as if he simply vanished into thin air and was gone. Jones was alone, the last one standing at the vehicle, claiming it with his touch.

And we have a winner! the dealer shouted. Our winner!

The news crews gathered around him in a tight circle, their cameras in his face, their lights blinding. How do you feel? How did you do it? What are you going to do now?

We have our winner, the dealer kept shouting like a side-show barker. You are our winner!

And Jones looked out through the shell of his skull, through the tunnel of his eyes at the strange circus swirling up around him.

Large Anthropomorphic Canary

The only failure is not trying. That's what I believe. And I have not been afraid to fail. Ask my agent. She knows. At least I think she knows.

But in many respects, as I explained to my agent last time she answered my call, failing was a necessary step toward amelioration. For instance, if not for failure, would I ever have learned to roller skate? Or swim? It flies in the face of logic to think that someone like me can roller skate, or swim. But I learned. I almost broke my neck, almost drowned, but I learned. It was what the act required. Had a performance necessitated learning capoeira, I would have flung myself into the dance-fighting chanting Portuguese like Ronaldinho. Whatever was required I provided: the mark of a true professional. You meet many triflers in this walk of life, but how many true professionals do you ever encounter? Not many, I would hazard to guess. Not many.

'When did you retire?' a spider-webbed woman asks. Behind her looms a woman in pink with a furious face.

'Retire?' I say, slighted by the assertion. 'I am always prepared to take on a new challenge—that is to say a new role.'

'No, I mean from the kid's show. When did that wrap up?'

'Nellie,' says the woman behind her, 'keep your voice down.'

Turning to her and pointing to me, Nellie says, 'Do you know who this is?'

'Of course I know who it is, but keep your voice down. The other residents are trying to eat their dinner.'

I glance around. White-haired and hairless people surround tables clattering and murmuring. Am I trying to eat my dinner? I look down at the plate set before me. Wilted leafy vegetables and creamed corn. No protein source? That's unusual. Where is my protein source?

'I think they left the meat off my plate,' I say.

The pink woman fumes. 'Today is chicken à la king day. Remember what you did the last time we served you chicken?'

An aversion to chicken? Me? As it improbable as this seems, I must admit my short term memory has of late failed me, and perhaps I had indeed denounced chicken at some point. If so, it was out of character, a novelty. I can recall cast-and-crew fried chicken feasts at the Kaufman Astoria Studios, and beer and chicken wing blow-outs at joints and dives in Queens. If I suffered a change of heart at some point, I have no memory of it. While things from the past appear neatly arranged in my mental

filing cabinet, the present resembles an overturned trash can.

‘Stop staring, Nellie!’ the pink woman barks.

Nellie studies me from behind the silk veiling her face, eyes like bloodshot sapphires.

‘You’re so yellow,’ she says.

‘Well, yes,’ I say. ‘That is true.’

‘Do you ever get tired of it?’

‘Tired of yellow?’

‘No, tired of pretending you’re someone you’re not.’

These words give me pause. I’ve always embraced Meisner’s precept that acting is behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances. Problems arise when I am asked to behave truthfully under unimaginable circumstances, such as these.

‘I will pursue my vocation for as long as I am able to walk and talk.’

Nellie shuts her eyes and claps her talc-dry hands.

The pink woman scowls as if I have uttered an indecency. Perhaps she has an aversion to performers, or to yellow.

‘Excuse me,’ I say to her. ‘But who the hell are you?’

She rolls her eyes. ‘You really want to do this again?’

The suggestion that we are reprising some hashed out scenario confounds me, as I have no memory of it. When she points to her name tag—Merrily—I am further confused as I know for certain I have never met anyone called Merrily.

‘Do people ever tell you that life is but a dream?’ I ask.

She lifts her lip, exposing a clutch of beige teeth.

I chuckle to myself. Perhaps this is some kind of trick meant to trap me into admitting an absurdity—that I have met this Merrily before. Why would I even pretend to have met her? Was she in the business? I highly doubt that. There isn’t a performative bone in her body. She leans over Nellie’s shoulder and grabs a fork. She stabs a piece of something gooey and white in the plate and brings it to Nellie’s lips.

‘You have to eat. You have to eat every bit.’

Nellie rears her head and clamps her mouth shut.

‘What’s for dessert?’ I wonder aloud.

Nellie says: ‘Rice pudding or cherry pie.’

‘You’ll get none of that,’ Merrily insists, ‘unless you finish every bite.’

‘Do you love children?’ Nellie asks me, clasping hands to her chin. ‘I adore them.’

‘Of course,’ I say. ‘Children *are* my bread and butter.’

‘I have six grandchildren.’

‘You have five,’ Merrily says.

‘Five? Oh my. Did one disappear?’

A man who looks parboiled starts screeching at a table. Everyone stops eating and looks over at him. The man slaps the sides of his head percussively. I wonder why. Has the food gone down poorly? Is this a form of protest or subversion? Shortly, two broad-shouldered men in white with thick black belts and shoes dash to his table and

without ceremony grab his arms and drag him out still screeching.

Merrily looks at me. 'Aren't you going to finish your dinner?'

'I'm not hungry, dear. But I will have a piece of cherry pie.'

'Me too,' Nellie says. 'I like cherry.'

'You have to eat your dinner,' Merrily says, pounding the table.

Nellie's silky face drops and she stares at her plate.

'Why are you being so harsh?' I ask. 'Kindness will go a long way toward achieving your goals. I'm proof of that. Do you know I never once lost my temper on set, not even when I caught that swine and batrachian canoodling in a dressing room.'

'What are you going on about?' Merrily says.

'Even though they got all bent out of shape about it, and threatened to cashier me, I veritably killed them with kindness. And it worked! We had a good run despite the rough patches. We were *professional*. What are your goals today, Merrily, if I may be so bold?'

Nellie opens her mouth and vomits into her plate. This so startles me I knock my fork off the table. Merrily summons the two broad-shouldered men in white who rush over posthaste. Each take Nellie by one skeletal arm. She doesn't resist. They lift her out of her chair like a papier-mâché dummy and hustle her away.

'Why did they do that?' I ask Merrily, standing there, hands on her generous hips.

'She disrespected her food. Now are you going to finish yours?'

I glance at the limp greens and congealed corn on my plate and throw my napkin over it.

'Guess that's a no,' Merrily says.

'I want some cherry pie.'

'*I want some cherry pie,*' she repeats in a mocking tone.

'You're not very professional.'

Merrily glances at her wristwatch. 'They should be back any sec.'

Sometimes when I get anxious I like to sing. Singing is a way of releasing withheld emotion. I am not a good singer, but after many years of training and performing I can hold a tune. Children like to hear me sing—at least they used to back in the day.

'*Row row row your boat...*'

'Stop it,' Merrily says.

'*Gently down the stream...*'

'I'm warning you!'

'*Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily...*'

Merrily comes to my side. I stop singing but continue humming the melody. She says nothing but I can feel her hot breath on my cheek.

'I've had about enough of this act,' she says quietly. 'Eventually you're gonna have to let it go. You're gonna let it go or we'll make you.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Of course not.' Merrily smiles, but it is not pleasant or happy. It is the smile of the tormenter. It is a smile engaged by thespians portraying villains, fangs just visible, left eyebrow raised, brain boiling with malevolence.

The men in white arrive before I can respond. They seize my wings and pull me to my feet. They are thick, strong men, but I tower over them.

‘Take it easy, big guy,’ one says, tugging me left.

‘Don’t fight it,’ says the other, tugging me right.

‘Take him to the Quiet Room,’ Merrily says. ‘He’s being aggressive.’

They pull me away from my table. If I wanted to I could crush these men. I could knock them down and stomp them until they were pulped. But suddenly I feel tired.

‘Come on you big galoot, move those clodhoppers.’

‘Fucking weirdo.’

‘Is he gonna stay in that getup?’

‘Yeah, yeah. That’s right. Long as I been working here. Anyways, we don’t ask questions, man. We just follow orders.’

‘I hear you.’

The lock clicks and the silence of the Quiet Room envelops me. Despite this I do not despair. I am not unhappy. I am not lonely. I am confused, yes, but one way to be less confused is to summon what you know, what is real and true to you—and to use your instrument. My instrument has always been myself, its truest version. And when I reach into myself mere walls cannot enclose me. But I grow sleepy. My eyes close. I’m not certain what this is or what this has been. Unless I’m dreaming I hear music. They’re pumping it in over the speakers:

Gently down the stream,

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily...

Waking the Devil

Some bastard was playing the bagpipes under my balcony first thing in the morning. All my grunts, gasps and growls could not penetrate that screechy wall of noise and reach the silly bugger. So what it came down to was myself going down to the street, spinning like a dervish, telling the kilted cretin that he had woken the wrong devil if that was his aim.

‘Stop it!’ I cried. ‘Stop it before I tear you to pieces!’

He spotted me and disengaged the slobbered blowpipe. The wheezing and screeching subsided and expired in a whiny diminuendo.

‘Ay, laddie,’ he said, his tam o’ shanter squint, kilt atilt, hairy arse exposed like a gnome needing a shave. ‘You don’t like me playing?’

‘Are you asking for a subjective aesthetic evaluation, or a general assessment?’

‘You’re gatherin’ your brows like a gatherin’ storm, sae help me god. Care, mad to see a beast sae unhappy.’

The gibberish, the gibberish, always with the gibberish. People are fucked. Do they know they are fucked? Perhaps they do in some deep recess of their hollowness and insignificance. And I was accused of being primitive, of wallowing in my own primitivism. I never fully understood what that meant. But I’m certain it was pejorative. They mark you, then they tell you your services are no longer required. They ask nothing

about your family, the little children, the little lady, working so hard to feed and keep them clean, and how you will finance all of that activity and growth. No, they ask nothing.

‘Why, oh why,’ I said, ‘did you choose to strangle a banshee under my balcony this morning? How do you know I wasn’t sleeping?’

‘When Mungo’s mither hang’d herself—a doublin’ storm roared thro’ the woods. I went thither and played me heart out bold like Johnny Barleycorn.’

Oy, where was this guy taking me? The music was one thing, but the incomprehensible badinage rubbed vinegar into the wound. And yet, I felt no immediate need to violent the man. To violent him now, after we had established rapport, would be crude. Moreover, the idea of touching him repulsed me. My nostrils twitched. I smelled horse. I glanced down the cobblestone street and saw no horse or horse shit and heard no clop or whinny, and yet the unmistakable stench persisted and ripened with each moment. The Scotsman looked guilty as hell. He either slept in a stable or had dropped hygiene classes in prep school.

‘Yo, Scotty, a little spritz of b.o. juice for the armpits after showering works for me. And you might wanna check out scented wipes for the nethers. My next door neighbour, a retired cartoonist who lost his colon, swears by them.’

The bagpipes sighed.

‘The swats sae ream’d in Tammie’s noddle.’

‘Don’t smart me, Scotty boy. Don’t gibber away like that thinking because I don’t know what the fuck you’re saying I’m gonna let you off the hook. Yo, I’m not known for my forgiving ways. By the way, do know who I am? Do you know who I am, you fucking haggis-munching, ass-smelling tosser?’

He took offense to this and without relinquishing the bagpipes started circling me like a Highland warlock—raised hands and arched brows suggesting sinister magical powers or magical thinking at the very least. Who can keep a straight face with all this? He was going to turn me into a frog or something. Unless it was an unfamiliar bagpipe fighting style. I could see the chanter causing problems in a dust up. Something about the airbag also made me hungry, hard to explain. But I had missed breakfast.

‘Wi’ tippeny, we fear nae evil, we’ll face the devil!’

‘Don’t call me that, boy-o! That’s copyrighted!’

‘I’ll coost your duddies to the wark!’

‘Fuck was that? Coost my what? What did you just say?’

‘Do cutty-sarks cleekit your mind?’

That was a slur. In any dialect that’s a slur. Enough with this bozo, I thought. I started spinning. When I start spinning I create a powerful vortex. Ask anyone who knows me. The Scotsman went flying head over heels and any eyes that happened upon the tumble witnessed

the saga of hirsute bollocks knocking like clackers as they rose with his thighs and bouncing like naked mice back to Earth as they fell. The bagpipes whined and it was this unmusical, dissonant whining that cinched it for me.

The Scotsman rose to his feet and straightened out his kilt. He picked up his fallen tam o’ shanter and fitted it on his head. Blood trickled from his right ear, further blushing the ginger mutton chop framing that side of his face. The bagpipes remained shouldered despite the vortex, and he began to pump his arm as though he wanted to start up again. I was having none of it.

‘Final warning,’ I said. ‘You play one more note on that thing and I will end you.’

‘To give music is me charge. I want to scre’s the pipes and gart them skirl.’

‘But I cannot tolerate it! A violin, yes. An accordion, of course, or even a gentle hornpipe. Hoot hoot. How simple and nice. But not this, my man. Not this ungodly—’

‘A tomahawk, wi blude red-rusted, are you, wi’ a wee heart rotten an’ black as muck.’

Fu-kit, I thought. I started spinning again, faster this time, faster. Things flew around, wrappers, twigs, dust and leaves. Buddy with the bagpipe and the speech impediment lost his bearings and wound up flopping into a polluted trough across the street where horses once drank before it killed them all. Finally, I saw the tam o’ shanter soar above the vortex like some kind of strange plaid bird. It amused me.

Recrudescence

How long had it been, Sol?

When last had you felt of another, a delicate, twitching hand spread out across your chest, the tickling sensation of hundreds of fine hairs fluttering in the wake of your breath, a weary head floating sinusoid at your chin, crestto-peaktochresttwopiques, all perfectly synchronous upon your languorous disport?

Where were you: Spiritually, Emotionally, Psychologically, Physically? Divulged, and in reverse order: Localisation: a disheveled bed, your quarters, the tenements for which you forfeited between six-hundred to six-hundred fifteen dollars monthly (your share), the Largest Libertine Metropolis in the meridymost-reaching groin at the border of Dis, the New World (est. 1492), Arda (i.e. the Green planet, est. 4.5 b.y.a.) the nearest lactic-denoted neighbor to our fettered coeval, Uranus, *there*; Psychoanalysis: signs of frequent depression possibly stemming from unspecified trauma (*un autre temp*), a predilection for deleterious treatments of the self (deprecation, depreciation, mutilation, masturbation, indignation, resuscitation), and an overwhelming yet under-recognized complex of Oedipal alignment (D); Compartmentalisation: upstream and downstream, stationary, stagnant, stoic,

stolid, and (stop) staunched, austere, astute, ascetic (or so you would wish) yet wondersome, winsome, loessome, licentious, and lascivious; Gnosticisation: purgative.

(Did you lose yourself amidst those wiry burgundy tresses? Shine your luminescence, hew the roots and trunks and return thyself, exhumed, shrewd, as one of so noble blood as yours should, seated, alert, and subservient to the Grand Inquisitor!)

How now didst thou found such grounds for plantation? Preceding your repose, your adjournment, her adjuring and subsequent relocation, your discussion, her deheeling, her greeting, your opening, inquiring, perambulating, closing, placing, stooping, raising, selecting, calculating, casting, powdering, pouring, casting, powdering, spreading, laying, pouring, pouring, casting, powdering, laying, pouring, simmering (twentyfive to thirty mins), boiling, stirring, stirring, seasoning, stirring, seasoning, emptying, emptying, browning, sautéing, scraping, shaking, peppering, cloving, oiling, heating, dicing, defrosting, how found you at her. Knocking. Knocking. Knockcockocking? Startling. Preparing. Expecting. Anticipating. Desiring. Hoping, hoping.

What, Sol, were those conditions of your tryst, impromptu as it were? Your

forearms trembled, surely as those of the unseasoned soldier first in line to clash against the Brobdingnagian opponent whose mere eclipse produced a shade more fearsome when the telephonic tintinnabulation generated a reverberating whine which sluiced through the chamber and burrowed itself in your ear, therein remaining in the hours following, yes, persisting even now, tensor tympani-latched some eighth of a day following first contact. But hoist yourself above those precipitous peaks, where above they seem only a murmur, faint as a murmur might venture, and recall: a moment's lapse into the amnesiac state of *then* often rebounded to *now* bearing a name, unspoken *mais familier*, slung o'er its back. And with its arrival that moment dropped its name to the floor, drawstring stretched ouroboreal, and in hastily peering within, out sprung eyes, nose, hair, breasts, hips, croup, feet, and mouth. And you saw it was very good, so you permitted aforementioned moment extension. That moment spoke in keenness and you, ere hesitant buckled (quite as she knew you would) and submitted to her coquetries. A deal was struck, documents signed, stamped, and notarized and a destination was settled upon. 1312. Three-hundred sixty degrees around the globe from your precise location, longitudinally, latitudinally, altitudinally, in such a time as would require a-walking, a-stalking, a-flailing, a-hailing, a-sitting, a-quitting, a-climbing, a-chiming, and pre-supper-time preparation interruptions. Where whilom that moment had only existed

theoretically, in extension, it now existed physically, undeniably certifiably present before you with no possibility of abrogation—and no pressing scruples to commit to either; your moment had arrived, Sol, a concupiscent brach, soused, aroused, and expecting.

Who was this young woman pining at your door, trull, troll, trollop, nor hoyden? Naye, she was familiar to you—and she was not—a sibling's dear friend, one known by you but one to whom you were inarguably more well-known. You recalled the gauche demeanor of her youth, that anxiously yearning quiddity proliferated by all meiotic minds, the hop in her gait and jigsaw curvature of her lip, all details of a life lived some six to eight years previous. But, simultaneously, this was not the woman standing before you—inasmuch as you perhaps were not the same man who cracked wide your door. Indeed, you were Solomon Faolainn, the name which in solitary times dipped itself within and waded about the stream of her thoughts—but only in name did you bathe there; knowledge of your cognitive machinations, the upheavals and placidities of your quotidian existence had never once entered her ear nor hitched a car to the locomotive of her excogitations—not until now. Primal desire impelled her to your door, beforehand inspiring the actuation of her calling and inquiry, and the same instinct, in you, provoking an assenting response. *Mais*—

Pourquoi?

A pervading taciturnity governed you now, your guest and you, as if

the doors of communication had been barred and a sentry placed before them precluding access to any form of exchange, unprejudiced to bruits and yowls and all manners of interface between. In the quietude that arises between all those beings servilely piloted by rational souls, there also results a deficit of temporal retention and awareness. Curious, you inquired within: when last had one of you spoken—and who last had? Could you even recall the final word that escaped her lips or yours afore this interminable dearth? No, it was as if a great hand had fallen upon time and memory itself, effacing all remnants of their immediate and respective acuities. Chronus himself had bared his back at you, leaving you and your stillwinking companion to your own machines.

Though permeating this sensory doldrum seemed, it was not without its limitations; for antecedent events of a prurient nature had transpired (or transgressed) and peradventure adumbrated the most recent solitary ones and were, as is their plangent nature (particularly in the masculine sex), tenaciously indelible. And such being their nature so they would remain: unfolding and churning; constantly and inconstantly repetitious; perseverating *ad infinitum*. She uttered not a single word to you as her foot, raised by six inches of indurated cork, passed through the threshold. Like her, you maintained your silence, your words and thoughts consorting with hers down the hall in your bedroom; and to where your minds were your bodies followed, your hand wrapped tenuously about

the exposed skin of her waist, her eyes floating just at the surface of attention, sensate but lacking sensibility. The dark of the hallway twisted its jaws around you, consuming your forms and begirting each with the unction of inscrutability, and with the trained legerdemain on which you prided yourself (though now an *onus vestigial*), you discovered with your secondary digits the ingress-consenting brass bulb, those fingers obverse contemporaneously wandering a round denim surface just below their prepositioned locus. And as you effected a thirtyfive degree clockwise oscillation of the bulb, *Manu Prima* ushered your mute companion through the arch and into the imponderable black beyond, a faint glimmer, some fiery waxen lucency begot from the hall's end playing in the sheen of framepaint—a cautionary beacon—irradiating the periphery of your eye. But blinded as you were you could not fathom the light; and so sealed became the twomb.

How could this stone be displaced, Sol? None but you possessed the acumen to dislodge him from his rut. With benevolent guidance shorn by the darkness you were without your strength, the inducements of your gallantry, first to protect and prevent the manipulation of an acquaintance, were now perverted, reshaped into the same bestial urges that gave flight to her wonderings. The tenebrousness of your chamber offered no expostulations, and so your submission was expedited, your desires equally as implacable and ineluctable as you heard the two successive thuds

of her heels tumbling to the floor like the crosscounty pealing of a cloistered church bell. That an incalculable time had passed since your last intercourse with a new partner was readily observable from your eagerness, for erstwhile restrained by the manacle of introversion, you wasted no time in greeting your rediscovered compeer with a firm embrace and copious salutational oscillations. Thenceforth you assessed your interlocutor, adjudging her raiment, sartorially truncated, to impede the pursuits of proper and unhampered confabulation. So, being the gentleman you were and certainly not wishing to make of yourself a lout, cad, caitiff, nor poltroon, you, mid *tête-a-tête*, and without arousing severance, relieved the young woman of her puzzling external encumbrance. Deliberations carried on at the berth's foot in such a manner *und till* that time which her arguments gained her the upperhand, placing her in dominance to you, which you accepted with Priapic dignity and guerdoned with an undulating service of obeisances. Descrying her points tried and true, you poured upon her an inundation of admiration, paying compliment to her lips, cheeks, neck and cleft, all of which from your new stance suggested an Hellenistic conceptualization of repose, *sans* Plutonics. And it was in such a perspicacious state you, at the base of her salience and sapience, deemed the time felicitous to examine and attenuate those hitches which might threaten to ensnare her rationale. You tangled with them, tugging and sliding, fighting

to free her logics from any trammels of egoism or self-centeredness until, at last, following what in your mind perpetuated itself as eons of sedulity: your supererogation remunerated. Having shed the yoke of guised and superficial discourse, you were both now free to chart all surfaces of dialogue, nook and cranny, mound and fissure, spindle and stalagmite, from trenches Marianaeen to apexes Kilimanjaric.

From the blackness there gathered a convocation of flora upon which you dallied, oriental poppies, white pansies, hollyhocks, pink and yellow, tulips, petunias, sunflowers, calicos, orchids and rose. Water lilies and the gypsum weed and all other clada of variegation served to support and inspire your eruditions, each submitting inconstantly to the tumults of the other.

In the sways of adventure, she found herself stripped nearly bare of all reticence while you, Sol, maintained your consanguineous surfeit. Indeed, there was an unwillingness in you, of which she was in her exuberant affection first incapable of detecting but one under the scrutiny of her reemerging prudence veiled itself poorly. Repeatedly she queried your intentions, the bent of your bite and the wont of your want, and though you aspired to prescribe yourself to her echelon of inhibition, you could not in honesty disrobe entirely nor deny your convictions. Yes; for causes that were at these stages but a mere germ, the dialogue never covered such topics of the unitive; nay, he remained at the doorstep of his habiliments, ensconced in insecu-

rities and in part pacified by the brook of life.

Amidst the stuporous abstrusity you extended your hand, seized the nearby chain, and with a hasty blench from your thumb ascended winged Lucifer, halting all coils within his sight as he rose, drawing out all rapture and ecstasy, all the dross of creation and the pleasures of physical delight. This nascent star peaked over the horizon and gliding through and over the ocean abandoned its flanked parhelion for the shores of sand and clay and blades of grass and root and trunk, teeming each crag teemed and touching every bound with the newborn incandescence, and signaling the triumph over indiscretion.

And with that fall of day arose your night.

In the dawning lambency you saw for the first time the young woman as she was—in her current sate of undress—recumbent beneath you, gazing up, the shadow of your arm veiling her eyes which, though redolent of a mask, failed to obfuscate the disconcerted mien below.

—Why did you do that?

—I wanted to see your face. I haven't even gotten a good look at you yet, you responded in a shortness of breath.

—I'm... can you turn the fan on, do you mind? I'm a little warm.

You nodded and rose from the bed, briskly crossing the room to activate the overhead fan, a relief, as you had been in the back alleys of your thought

crying for some brief palliation to the heat, physical and climatological. But as you turned away from the switch panel, plotting your return jaunt, a look from across the room, trained by your partner, inspired an inert moment. In that slight glance, measuring no greater than a half a second, you observed a glare in her eyes, one framed by a minute strain of the lids and a heaviness of the brow, one suggesting dichotomous relations to you: both estrangement and overfamiliarity.

Although retarded by her inebriated state, she quickly suppressed the gaze, though you caught her unintended variance and like in the flashing of a bulb her discountenance was branded upon your memory. You surmounted the mattress and again addressed your lover, the neo facsimile of her disillusion as dormant in your mind as beneath the haze of her coquettish, albeit erubescant, olive eyes.

The resumption of your rapturous activities was plagued by a marked difference, the fervent exchanges of passion now quickly waning into a tepid motion approaching lethargy and one of which you were quick to take notice of, as in the clarity you could now see in the midst of your ardors the two verdant globes peering at you in a perceivably divining fashion. In that moment you felt a self-consciousness akin to the observation not of by a lover, but an authority, whose eyes were not cast *toward* but *on* you in judgment. A coldness, like the gelid kiss of ice, crept up your lower back and hung there in a persistent vapor. To escape this sensation, those punctilious

eyes, your mouth meandered below the gently sloping acclivity of her jaw and down the length of her neck in a series of hastened pecks, your lips eventually retreating to her unburdened chest. You wondered why this young woman lie before you, why truly you truly had accepted her proffer, what your mother would think were she peering down upon you, how long your partner would stay or if she might pass the midnight hours bedded beside you, and why those green orbs, which you pictured in your mind aflutter with elation, those green orbs, to which you glanced for approval, those green orbs, iridescent from your angle appearing for a moment limpid lazuli, now glared down at you in balmy disenchantment.

—Is something wrong?, you inquired, drawing your mouth up from her breast, a string of saliva snapping with bullwhip elasticity back upon her chest.

Her eyes rose with you, a surreptitiously nauseous look possessing them with incensed redness.

—No, why?

—Are you sure you want this? The words spilled from your mouth, unfiltered, in as such an unrestrained manner as one would have expected from the drunken party.

—Yes, I do.

—You seem a little... distracted. As you said this she cast athwart her eyes, affixing them to the blanket pinioned beneath her arm, trying to bury her corneas as far below her lids as possible. What is it?

She returned her gaze, softened to

one such as fit for a child. She raised her hands, up from her sides to the length of your neck, and combed her fingers through the golden umber mop of your hair, repeating the action in gradual meditative succession with what to you seemed a surfeit of familiarity given the circumstances.

—You look so much like them, you know—your brother and sister.

—We *are* siblings; we *do* tend to resemble one another...

The irony of the moment, the juxtaposition of your prior thought and her foregoing utterance, did not escape you. Your response began with a chortle that carved into your face a smile, one that would persist throughout your truncated colloquy.

—That's not what I meant! She playfully remonstrated, gripping your hair in fists, rolling her kaleidoscopic eyes, searching for a riposte at the corners of the room. We're good friends, your sister and I. What would she say?

—I don't know. I was under the assumption we would not be telling her...

—Oh, never—she would kill me. She did tell me there was no way you'd agree to this when she gave me your phone number though, she admitted in a musing cadence. As she said this you lowered yourself supine upon her, your chin resting just at the rim of her pelvis. She tightened the halyard grip on your hair, either keeping you close or at a distance. Her jocular countenance diminished and was desultorily supplanted by one bordering on gravitas. Why did you, say 'yes,' I mean?

—I don't know. There a subterranean answer lurked, one which had been burrowing its habitat from the moment you raised the telephone off its receiver. Mere inches prevented the surface of your tranquility from collapse; but as the answer was pressed, pressure mounted your buttresses. Why not? I mean, how long had you... you hesitated, unable to pose the question of how long she had been interested in you, a query that was nonetheless already communicated as coherently as if it were verbally expressed.

—Years, she pled with a sudden sobriety, I honestly could not tell you how long...

A silence washed over your two incongruous forms, she stretched out on her back, hand propped up by two feather pillows, nude save for her underwear, several of the pins that ere held her styled hair, having fallen out in the earlier throes, resting on the sheet beside, and you lying atop her, aye sporting a pair of slacks, your shirt having long ago been deposed and cast to the floor with every other dismissed article, your palms now cupping her breasts, your chin inauspiciously dug into her stomach. No breach in contact befell you, much to your surprise. She did not evade your gaze in these minutes; she only stared at you, as if essaying to recall who you were.

—You have her nose... and her eyes, and her lips—their lips, no, you have their lips, she complained, withdrawing a hand from your hair, dragging her fingers down your forehead, past your eyes,

and halting them at your lips where she began tracing their perimeter with her thumb. As you lie there, she delineating the contours of your lips or your brother's or sister's, you began to ponder how long she ruminated on this night, what she had in nights past dreamt would come, how her gallant would hold her, what secret benedictions Tristan vouchsafed into Yseult's ear. You questioned if she had ever pictured the likelihood of this reality, if ever she had considered the familial resemblance and, if she had, if that had galvanized her inebriation. But in your ponderances there were no answers, no fiats nor proofs, only assumptions which could neither unmask her dreams nor perceive her trepidations.

—I have to do something, she mumbled, a sickened pallor flushing her cheeks.

Beckoning you off she promptly abandoned her impression in your cushions and scrambled across the mattress, in the process clasping your shirt off the floor and pulling the clothe over her bare torso. She steadied her feet on the carpet, offered a fleeting orison as she balanced the weight of her figure on her heels, then toes and darted into the restroom, closing the door with an unanticipated lepidopteric delicacy and leaving you to your own company. Seconds passed before the canned resonance of a plastic lid knocking ceramic emanated from the furthest left of the three doors in your panoptic view from the corner, accompanied next by a retching and resolving in a recitative of expulsions and submersion.

Ere the first illumination, suspicion

of your current predicament, the ever-so common disgorging symptom of intoxication, had declared itself to you *vox populi*, albeit in tones hushed and conversational. In the resounding amphitheater of your wills, his voice was overpowered and diluted by peremptory opinions far more sonorous. But cool heads spoke wisdom, and as you sat upright on your bed studying the restroom door, you wondered what other voices had been overwhelmed in the tempest. Another heave carried past the doorway, arousing one such voice to paramount stature. Leaning in, the voice, without falter, asked, 'Why?' Why was she in there, meaning, what animus inspired her departure and subsequent hermitage? Was her current state of illness simply the contractions of the smooth gastric muscles, reverse peristalsis, respiratory spasm, gastric contractions, and simultaneous fundus and cardia relaxations, then. Or was it: her nose, her eyes, their lips?

Another perennial silence. You listened astutely from your posturing on the bed, descrying an exasperated gasp, a pained swallow routing the imperialist alliance of Salivam and Acidam down the esophageal pass to its home shores. Anon peace was assumed by the two nations—then uprising! and again the sounding of clarions shrill and clashing of weaponry, the eternal descent of shields and the clanging of armor as it sank to the ocean's bowels.

In your solitude, as a measure in evading the raging battle, you attempted to recall her face as it had been not

minutes before. In doing so, in summoning her visage, you were startled that the first image that answered your adjuration was not her. In your efforts to reconstruct her countenance, you had selected the incorrect color eyes, for these were not—at that moment you were incapable of picturing her eyes, of recalling their color, of even offering an educated guess—hers, but were in fact a wintry cerulean hue, lifeless and yet at once electric. Were these her eyes? No, unequivocally no; but they were familiar, yes. You had, many nights past, gazed into them, pled with them, shouted at them, screamed hoarse vituperations in their direction, hounded and hurt them, and ultimately banished them, portals which once you loved, ridges framed by a gentle brow positioned at either side of a thin nasal bridge terminating in a strong nose which rested perfectly within the groove of your own; a nose that topped thin lips positioned equidistantly at the center of a triangular jaw. The cords of her hair, the tresses which she preferred dangle down the side of her face, that fell upon your cheeks, tickle your eyelids, wavered as feathers in your breath, were tawny; and were of a honeyed tincture; and were a raven black; and a flaxen hoar. These features returned to you, each of a precision seemingly superior to the previous, but unilaterally succinct, conjured from the recesses of your memory and adhered to the fortifications of your mind. They belonged not to one singular face but many, owned by others, evidently all others but her, and existing for you now only in retrospection.

A submerged hook raised the pulley triggering evacuation, the swirling emptiness decollating your anamnesis, and before you could pass another moment reflecting standing in the darkened doorway stood the face you could not remember.

On you the face concentrated, statuesque, freed from the same slab of granite that produced the doorframe from which hinged the door, each of the three now as frozen as they had been whilst entombed before. Laurel green: those were her eyes. In the dark you formed another face, other eyes, a different body, and in offering to Venus your votives, you enjoined the goddess to slacken and animate her flesh. But this was not Galatea. And it was.

She resumed a position on the bed, crossing to with a freshly developed timidity, mounting the port bow and resting beside you, a heightened and chagrined docility powering her now.

—How are you feeling?

—I think... I think I should go, she responded in an intonation foreshadowing her proleptic departure. You could not meet her sight, elsewhere turned, perhaps in the direction for which her mind had embarked, and you very nearly agreed with her, almost aided her in gathering her affects, dressing, in the process calling her a handsome cab hoping anon her physical form might migrate hitherto where her mental one had wandered. But a memory, of lying

asleep, wrapped in the dozing tranquil body of another, accosted your yearnings, seized the wheel and directed you to destinations long untrampled.

—Do you want to stay the night?

—Oh, she said, repeating, oh. The proposition apparently struck a chord within her, she falling silent, deliberating within herself—but nonetheless remaining undeterred. No, I cannot. I have to get going soon. Sheepishly she said this and her response, for which you had turned to with only a single hopeful eye, smote you with an unexpected dint, and such to the extent that your gaze was altogether lowered from her. Your next utterance, unintentionally enervated as it was, escaped your lips upon an impetus far less puissant: Will you lie with me then—just for a little while?

Time became inestimable as you awaited her answer, she turning over the request in her mind, in mid-thought drawing her knees up to the chest still bearing your shirt, stowing her feet beneath your blanket, you watching her from your corner, patiently dreading her diktat, your sentence. The pendent fan blew a breeze overhead, producing in the current of air an ominous, low-pitch roar. Finally, she raised her head from its pensive droop and canted it to your persuasion. Okay; but only for a little while, bookending her decision with a quick, furtively somber steal at your eyes.

—Thank you, you confessed, extending your hand behind her back. At your behest she slid across the Egyptians and deigned her crown to your chest, lastly

towing her hand across your navel and smoothly positioning the palm on the pec opposite her head a dactyl's stress from your chin. Here at the meeting of all lines, walls and bedsides alike, lie her head, resting at the edge of the cyclonic wall of circulating air that inspired an excitation in her hair akin to the incertitudes of a bayside gust: rising, falling, rising, falling...

—How long has it been, Sol?

—Since?

You understood what she meant. And that she neither clarified nor repeated herself, nor spoke another word in your company, only served to assert and ingrain her inquisition with greater significance. Had you the knowledge your next words would prove the last you shared with her that night—and possibly for the remainder of your subsistence on the material plane—you would have sought a response less disingenuous than, 'I cannot say. I really cannot say.'

You told yourself she ceased to respond from exhaustion, whether from the purging, the lateness of the hour, the soporific aftercourses of binging, or perhaps an amalgam of some parts or the whole. From your vantage you gleaned her eyelids, capriciously visible, quivering, though from your angle of vision you could not ascertain their state of closure.

A quarter of an hour having passed, you confirmed within yourself that she had, in fact, been lulled to sleep, no doubt aided by the metronomic thumping of your heart, which beneath skin, sinew, cartilage, and bone beat only centimeters

from her ear, providing a similar hypnosis to the swaddled infant lying in the same position at her mother's breast. In centuries past, her imperturbable stillness would have fooled an unpracticed doctor of sleep into declaring her expired, but the protracted exhales issuing from her mouth and pouring over your chest at a regular rhythm proved the night had not bested her yet. A string of hair whipped up by the cyclone caught your lip, and in removing and tucking the stray strand back you grinned, relocating your hand from her waist to her head, caressing her hair, assuring not another lock fell from place, a sentinel staying siege at the city gates, a surgeon fending off infection, a shepherd protecting an ewe from the jowls of Lycaon.

Was that it, Sol? Were you defending her from the inimical forces of misogyny? Were you, as you told yourself then, in stroking her hair, protector, defender, shepherd, soldier? Or were you one of them, wolf in shepherd's hame? Could you have been both? Why *did* you accept her offer? An alarm began to buzz. Through your bedroom door, though muffled, the basstone whine was unmistakably that of your oven timer's. But why sound now, you thought, when did—dinner. Your attention switched from the door to her and you thought to test your maneuverability: she seemed quite deep in sleep, but you knew any movement then might run the risk of disturbing her. And if she awoke, might she leave?

Again, you extended your hand to the lamp switch, and with a bend of your thumb the room was again embossed in

night. You continued stroking her hair. In time the alarm slowed, dropped in pitch, and died.

Having succumbed to slumber, an acrid scent awoke you, one which suffused the air, condensed, sank to the floor, clawed at the carpet, crawled beneath your door, and besmirched the virginal air, vaunting, vaunting: burning. Thoughtless, you cast her from your chest and rushed to the kitchen, she groaning a semi-conscious execration as she rolled over and retreated back into sleep. In all the meal, which required an hour and a half of preparation, whose ingredients cost you a sum total of eighteen dollars and ninetythree cents, spent twenty-nine minutes cooking at four hundred degrees additional to its prescribed baking time of forty and was consequently burnt to a sereness and ash far gone from edible. You set the pan on the stove, turned off the oven, and drearily yielded to your quarters.

Sealing your door, you noticed for the first time the smotes of moonlight breaking through the shades, sticking to the bedside and spilling on the floor, elucidating her shoes, shirt pants, and other accouterment still lying there. Had tonight been any night previous or following the full moon would not have provided reluctancy enough to drape the room in what was actually a dark grey light, and bereft of that diffusive cloak you would have not been able to discern the pillow around which she had wrapped her body in your absence, possibly marking your being there inconsequential.

You took your place apart from her,

wrapping the blanket around your shoulder, holding the corner close to your chest as twere a crucifix or some other holy relic, wondering whom that pillow was to her. Was it you? Had there been others, lovers of days lost, unfathomable to your imagination? Who was that pillow to her? And who were you to her? Your sister? Your brother? Your mother, your father? Were you only a body, a crop of hair, a set of teeth, lips, eyes, arms, legs, and genitals? Following that vein of questioning... what was she to you?

At that moment she was the very same. She was your mother; she was the breast you suckled at as an infant; she was the face you imagined in your isolation; she was Deirdy, Dorothy, and all the others, every goddess, every feminine figure across the myriad deific pantheons of human fabrication. It did not matter that she would not spend the night, that in respite Somnus would not fain again entangle your coils, nor that she would levant while you lie in your corner ruminating. It did not matter, for at that moment you had every woman in creation and imagination at your side—and at the same time no one at all, no one with which to connect, no one to pain nor be pained by, no face to remember nor memories to share with, nor to yearn for nor be yearned for by. But it did not matter.

It did not matter.

It did not matter.

And it did.

Poetry



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F. Daniel Rzicznek

Bardolino and tamales: *my old friend, good to see you.* Announce your rust, starling. I once wrote a letter to you. You responded that the whole of Illinois is an L.A. stage set with fans blowing to replicate winter. Under the next umbrella: seizures and confusion. Opera: the binge-a-thon was nothing but presidents tightening collars and ties in mirrors before speeches. *Christ-on-a-cross*, they each muttered, lifting the stray hair back into place. A tipped universe, the lamp hoisted mindfully around the body's rooms. It remains the season of isolation, of coercion, of fear. A man wakes up with his hands frozen to his twelve-gauge and the sound of an icejam tearing the river between his ears in half. It was a sign of sanity. *Why are you telling me this? Are you trying to scare me?* Just a quick note to you while you're in the shower. Snow again. Light a candle. A dream of buildings that once stood near here. A dream confusing food with music. Woke seven times. Going back to see how the thread began challenges the unity. No spiders for four months. Only webs. The earth? The earth is a grave.

Chimney swifts—the final morning of May and I’ve been thinking about chimney swifts. One day of rest is one too many. I extract the strange screw from between the tire’s treads and *whoosh*—the whole thing deflates. A beech is slowly outliving a wire fence. Bedside table: an owl figurine tangled in your rosary. A clump of meat, a wisp on one side, some flies—then I notice the rigored legs and before I can blink the dog has the bird-corpse in his mouth. Only when he drops it do maggots emerge. A text is a snare: the spirit is held for something like an instant then frees itself. Asleep, but writing in a journal: *the bravest die first*. Push it into the current and the white horses will take it, it which meant nothing: an anger swinging slowly up through the maples leaving only the twelve gongs of midnight, that turning over of a tune that can only repeat: daylight and dusk, starlight and dawn—noontide, noontide, noontide.

Nate Maxson

THE INSECT KINGDOM

Pinned to the walls under glass,
Or hiding under plaster stones and blacklights,
Some alive and some smoked out and frozen
The names of the collection almost create an illusion of prescience to the lay
weekend visitor

The Painted Lady Butterfly: born with wet wings,
The Blue Death Feigning Beetle...

Someone names the small things like they would the night sky

*In my dream, all the eggs I tried to crack for breakfast were filled with blood
What does it mean?
-The Starbellied Orbweaver Spider-*

If you meet the Buddha on the road
You'll know what to do

DAWN POEM

There is something that gives itself towards the morning
The folded black wing under the streetlamp
The stray dog on the trot
But also
The ripple of one's lover's back
In the moment between
Breath falls to breath

WHAT THE LAUREL IS NOT

In 700 years when the laurel grows green again...

Last words of Cathar Perfectus, Guillam de Belibaste
(before being burned alive)

Not to be mistaken for the *mountain laurel* - state flower
of Pennsylvania, of the Wyoming Valley childhood with its shale cliff
fox caves, chanterelles and the sticky wicks
of this most resistant, most un-pickable
flower: *Calico bush* or *spoonwood*, every part
bitter emetic, even the honey drawn from it,
poison...

Not those low growing shrubs wound
with broken eight track tapes flung
from muscle cars, those stubby, twice-blasted lime-accreted
outgrowths of graves that break into
bud like an army knife in harshness
before spring—
the ones that bleed when cut with paranoid
regrets, the ones of that circle, the ones of that bardo, the shrubs
of the dead place you return
to with offerings from the *Flower Shoppe* where you tell
the bleach-blonde saleswoman not to wrap, not to bother
with the little plastic feeding tubes—
they won't need these
where they are going...

Donato Mancini

*Perhaps I was not
born to channel surf*

Perhaps I was not

recent, giddy midst

brief with liquid, deep

joint stream on state ground

clay walls shook, house

doubts, remain in small

books without real points

scoured voices spit gist

lyric veins jigsaw

flounced gaze, did she look

born to channel surf?

“Respectfully,” yes
but not “humbly”

“Respectfully,” yes

necrophiliac
macrobiotics

apolitical
altogether

I’m not offering
knowledge this time

suppose a list
for your own purpose –

in theory, it’s
a chameleon

but not “humbly”
“Respectfully,” yes

by “pointless” I mean
slightly shopsoiled

“pointless” yet fan-
tastic impressions

sure, but will you whis-
per it first? “burnt”

a couple, “burst” a
couple stitches?

once more you’re put-
ting your foot in it

but not “humbly.”

Matt Morris

WHAT ARE TODAY'S POETS DOING?

Some ride bikes along
the boulevard, unnoticed,
while others, sprawled on
park benches dedicated to
the memory of—well, it's
hard to remember
whom—recite George Meredith
to ducks. One poet
strolls past, hands in pockets, head
bowed, troubled by world events,
& yet another
browses the cold & flu aisle
of a pharmacy,
comparing ingredients
& prices of over-the-
counter remedies
to—what's an apt simile?
Many live below
the poverty line, & more
live several floors below that,
down dank, unlit, creaky steps.
Far away stands one
silhouetted in the bay
window of a high-
rise apartment, gazing out
upon a city landscape
as if trapped inside
a snow globe whimsically
shaken by a child,
pondering ponderous stuff.
Others live outside the law.
When they drive downtown, they dis-
regard the meter
& park their silentious blue

hybrids wherever they want.
They don't care about
the integrity of the line,
but cut in ahead
of you at the movies, then
text all through the show. They like
being difficult.
They're constantly clearing their
throats as if they know
something they know you don't know.
If you don't understand them,
that's on you, stupid.



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Contributors

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DOUGLAS COLE has published four poetry collections and has another forthcoming this year called *The Gold tooth in the Crooked Smile of God*. His work appears in anthologies such as *Best New Writing*, *Bully Anthology*, and *Coming Off The Line* (published through Mainstreet Rag) as well as journals such as *The Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Owen Wister Review*, *Slipstream*, *Red Rock Review*, and *Midwest Quarterly*. More is available online in *The Adirondack Review*, *Ithaca Lit*, *Talking Writing*, as well as recorded stories in *Bound Off* and *The Baltimore Review*. He has been nominated for two Pushcarts and a Best of the Web. He received the Leslie Hunt Memorial Prize in Poetry; the Best of Poetry Award from Clapboard House; and First Prize in the "Picture Worth 500 Words" from *Tattoo Highway*. Interviews and publication links can be found at douglastcole.com.

SALVATORE DIFALCO's short stories have appeared in many print and online journals. He is the author of two collections, *Black Rabbit* and *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press). He splits time between Toronto Canada and Sicily.

JUDSON EVANS was Director of Liberal Arts at the Boston Conservatory for twenty years, and is now a Professor of Liberal Arts at Berklee College of Music (following a merger of the two institutions). At Berklee, he teaches courses on theories of cave painting, utopian societies, ancient Greek literature, Japanese poetry, and a variety of Poetry Workshops. In this fertile environment, he has been involved in a wide range of collaborative experiments with composers, choreographers, and other poets. His writing life includes six years in which he was a member of *Off the Park Press Writers' Collective*, N.Y.C., and one of the founding editors of the three anthologies the press published in response to contemporary painters. In 2004, he was chosen as an Emerging Poet by John Yau for The Academy of American Poets. Some of his more recent poems have appeared in *Volt*, *1913: a journal of forms*, *Cutbank*, and *Laurel Review*.

DONATO MANCINI makes visual and procedural poetry, bookworks and visual art. His books and chapbooks include: *Snowline* (2015), *Loitersack* (2014), *Buffet World* (2011) *Fact 'N' Value* (2011), *Hell Passport no.22* (2008), *Æthel* (2007), *58 Free Coffees* (2006), and *Ligatures* (2005). Notable exhibitions of his visual artworks have included exhibitions through Artspeak, VIVO Media Arts, Western Front, Gallery Atsui, Malaspina Printmaker's Society, Open Space (Victoria) and CSA. His books have twice been nominated for the ReLit award in Canada. *Same Diff*, his most recent book, was a finalist for the highly prestigious Griffin Prize, alongside books by Susan Howe and Tongo Eisen-Martin. Having spent much of his life in Vancouver, Canada, Mancini is currently a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of English at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore MD.

NATE MAXSON is a writer and performance artist. The author of several collections of poetry, he lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

MATT MORRIS is the author of *Nearing Narcoma*, winner of the Main Street Press Poetry Book Award, and *Walking in Chicago with a Suitcase in My Hand*, published by Knut House Press. His work has appeared in various magazines and anthologies.

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK is the author of three poetry collections, *Settlers* (forthcoming from Free Verse Editions/Parlor Press), *Divination Machine* (Free Verse Editions/Parlor Press) and *Neck of the World* (Utah State University Press), as well as four chapbooks, most recently *Live Feeds* (Epiphany Editions). He is coeditor of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice* (Rose Metal Press), and his recent poetry has appeared in *West Branch*, *Colorado Review*, *Willow Springs*, *The Adroit Journal*, *The Collagist*, and elsewhere. He teaches at Bowling Green State University and lives in Bowling Green, Ohio.

HÆLDYN SEIN is a U.S. expat currently residing in County Galway, Ireland.

DANIEL UNCAPHER is an MFA candidate and Sparks Prize winner at the University of Notre Dame from North Mississippi whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tin House Online*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Harwai'i Pacific Review*, *Wilderness House*, *Posit*, *Neon*, and others.