CutBank

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Summer 1994

CutBank 42

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CutBank 42
where the big fish lie

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Now the fog is clinging to the lake. 
It is the eighth day since my accident 
in the desert. The fire goes out. 
I smear black pitch on my hat 
and on an old pair of leather gloves. 
It is a lung-healing scent.

I paddle out and driftwood knocks 
against the raft. Even the hawks 
hump their backs to the spring storms. 
I look at all the branches going by 
and imagine my enemies moistening 
their lips with balm. They send dogs for my body.

The dogs are blind. Their hearing 
is poor. Their snouts are flattened. 
I spend the rest of my life trying to cure them. 
I meditate hours and hours and nothing 
at all seems to happen. During the night 
they sit on me and blink their eyes.

I hold my left hand under my testicles, 
while in my right I hold a cigarette. 
I warn the dogs that they sit on green 
and tender grass, that the walls and the floor
of the tunnel are damp, that they must leap 
several hundred feet into the dark green pool.
Ryan Benedetti

Love Song

I.
Lately I've been bursting inward—the way a carbonated liquid does.

On Tuesdays
I don't say anything.

When I come home
you sleep alone in the bathtub.

"Serene bald woman, I need . . ."
but no, I will wake you up.

You break a bottle on the toilet,
hold me down and cut my hair.

I want to live inside your fingers.
I want to stand still for many hours.

II.

I have waxy ears,
a mole on my penis.

You throw rubber balls at passing cars.
We trade buckets.

Let us plan meals: cold stew in freezer bags.
Let us unfold the map of Idaho.

I wrap myself in white paper sacks
and scoot into the cupboard under the sink.

III.

Together we put our hands in the jar. Together we eat handfuls of rock salt.

You shut the window.
I open my mouth.

While you sleep, I clutch my soft cube of margarine. I peel off pieces of foil

and chew them. Two texts.
Two hands.

I have a leg
I drag behind me.
All sorts of plants were beautiful and seemed worthy of description. The trees, for instance, fingered low clouds suggestively along with spotlit bats. Construction awaited an impressive building. Teachers led their classes to the flowerbeds where they wrote in their notebooks. One particular flower—the rose—attracted the most attention. From an open window: timpani. From a passing car: a thin rainbow on the damp streets. From the farms outside of town: the unmistakable smell. The fog rolled down every street in town alphabetically, while small groups of people strolled by the river pretending to enjoy each other's company. One worried he would be asked which part of dusk he liked best. The part at the beginning when the bats come out and everything seems possible or the part at the end when all that can be seen in the moon is a dog.
The boats, with their ribbed nets winging off the rails, struggle like insects on the water. The boys command flea-red dogs to swim in the pink water. They whack each other in the head with sticks while their fathers gut fish on the shore. You gaze across the lake to the silhouette of another country. I smell smoke. Soon the boys assemble before us. One of the smaller boys approaches with one hand behind his back, as if to offer something. I make to accept what appears to be a playing card. He turns it slowly, revealing the ace of spades, and as I grasp it he vows, “Ce n’est plus à moi.” A chrome fish jumps in the lake.

In my palm, the ace points west, to a plume of smoke whistling across the water where the monkeys experiment with fire. I hold the card to my lips and kiss that black heart for what must be seconds before I tuck it between my belt and belly. The boys begin twisting all that they have seen in their minds as you start to dance in the lavender light.
Matt Yurdana

A Gathering of Cardiovascular Surgeons

Dr. Veer, the keynote speaker, opens with a joke about the swiss cheese fondue,
two types of cholesterol, “good” and “delicious,” and he winks along the banquet, his colleagues sipping their aperitifs.

How lovely it was to be eager and serious, he says, that first open-heart practicum:

an irish setter,
his limp paws and his thin damp coat,
his rib cage sawed open, arteries clamped with small gleaming forceps.

One cannot forget that first time groping inside another body.

Everything so close and almost hot, and your fingers slip under the left ventricle, cradling it,

believing in that muscle’s steady hitch and wobble, as if startled by the touch.
By sunset, they have toasted
that tragic, magnificent dog for hours.

Some lean into the breeze
on the glass verandah,
others wade
in the fountain below the stone boy,
pouring endlessly
from his fluted urn.

When the music begins, the timbales
and congas and horns,

Dr. Dubois in a strapless cocktail gown,
mambos in tight circles,
coaxing her lanky husband.

Dr. Wheeler pulls off his shoes, suspenders
dangling at his hips.

And Dr. Veer is famous for his rumba.
He weaves his partner, a first-year intern,
among the ferns and palmettos

and the courtyard clears.

She is blushing, her dress whisking
from her thighs
with the lazy swish of maracas.

Her feet chase
his quick, sweeping half-steps.

A few moments,
and she finds the pattern,
swinging and pulling
from his arms, tight as a shadow or mirror.
She feels the whispers and nods,

his right hand hovering
near the small of her back.
The Next General

This part of me sews with stiff shoulders on the ice barge.
I just want it done.
The captain labors next door trading light fish for heavy ones
in darkness. We aren’t pressed for time
and can’t stay away from each other on deck;
we hit the iceberg. At bathing time we strip
with the light snuffed; I can smell them lifting weights.

The hands gather to toss a couple of crates out on the surface;
But the ice won’t crack. The box, says the captain,
looks like a settlement out there. Then burn it! And
the surface melts.

Downtown, smoke jumpers arrive on awnings, others
pack the alleys.
They’re all invited in through various back doors,
eventually.
My brother is gone
and I’ve been running the tenant houses;
I may have the deed somewhere in my clothes.

Here comes the village doctor.
At least fifty green bottles
hang on strings around the porch; I tell her it’s like a sombrero.
The muffin tin she offers is only part of her collection.
I apologize because my hands are black from gardening. I tell her, I was born on Ziante Road, but my parents were renting the house. Six months after the birth my parents finally named me Ziante.

The rest crowd in. “Am I the mayor?” I tell them my job is inscribing information in the upper left corner of post cards. I ask them, “How can I help you?”
Today we ride in a tungsten train
with bogwood seats,
to Rhinelandia, passing some bowls around.

Sheila cups her left hand
behind my ear, opens the airlock,
and stills the metal with her right hand.
We both wear needlefish brooches.

We got dressed inside the meat locker.
I remember keys—
the taste of mint.

Yesterday my mother called from a gondola
on her picture phone. The hot-air vent
fell out of the ceiling at night.
She said it reminded her of Karate.

Don’t leave Dominique, she said.
Don’t leave Dominique without
some instrument please.

I wear three sweaters
at the sink this morning.
And I can think only of the sink.

Where is Dominique?
Down on the lower level
people are asleep on the gaslit
roller rink. I step over rows of
bedrolls. Two women,
faces hidden, sleep with leather gloves next to a man beneath the exit sign. Their gloves and his face are two of the shiny things visible.

I bow at the elevator man. He bows too, and his helmet falls off. I ask about the mining business, bumping into a gramophone.

He takes me inside the room next door, saying: old music sounds better through a wall. You know, snakes hear through the roofs of their mouths. Or is it a membrane outside on the forehead?

He pours himself cognac while I read his papers. He follows me to the bathroom where we don't speak at all—though he's using the stall right next to mine.

Have you been to the Sandwich Islands? They don't use streets—don't have any. And Guatemala? They use the gas chamber there.
1. Awakening

I suppose it all started with leeches. It may have started before then, but if it did, I certainly don’t remember it. I expect that as a baby I had looked at the usual things—the dancing shapes of the hickory branches that rocked in my windows, the stark colors of carrots and peas, the scuttling of a bug over a stone on our lawn in Minneapolis, where I sat plopped and staring. I may have even eaten a few bugs in my time, as babies will do, but it wasn’t until late in my third year that I suddenly opened my eyes to the world with a jolt and started to see things—to really see things—not just with the sort of passive but tolerably appreciative eye of the self-absorbed, but with the passion of an artist or a scientist.

I do not mean to say that I was an artist or a scientist. My drawings from that time suggest no such thing, nor do my experiments with our two Siamese cats, whom I would imprison in my doll’s frocks and then follow around the house, excitedly observing their behavior as they tried to stagger free of the hideous flounces. No, I cannot claim any precociousness in the arts or sciences. It was simply that as I neared age four, my eyes seem to have awakened from a pleasant slumber. And what first drew them—what first grabbed them and held them still in the grip of a breathless beauty—were those leeches.

A leech is truly a vision of loveliness. During the
summers of my childhood, my mother took my two brothers and me, along with assorted aunts and uncles and cousins, up to the island that my grandparents owned on Whitetail Lake in northern Minnesota. On days when the sun shone and the water warmed up past freezing, I toddled back and forth through the shallows that lined the island’s shores, parting the smooth green reeds that dangled over my head like an inverted curtain falling from the floor of the lake upwards to the sky. I peered into the water, watching for nervous, gasping minnows; for the crawfish, with their claws like tiny lawn clippers and their scalloped tails; for the frogs and tadpoles with their ballooned eyes; for the striped perch always with the stupid expressions on their faces; and for the magnificent leeches.

I remember all those creatures fondly, but I remember the leeches as one remembers one’s first love—the thrill, the intensity, the steady, rapturous gazes. Colored a warm, chocolate brown spotted with black, they oozed across the sandy lake bottom like dark leopards. When startled by a puff of sand or the swipe of scooping fingers, they took off through the water at a dead wriggle, their supple bodies stretched thin and rippling smoothly as a ribbon off a girl’s hat caught by the wind. When cupped in my hand, the leeches transformed themselves into fatted blobs, creamy with slime and soft as butter to the touch. I caught them and carried them around with me.

While I scouted the shallows, my mother and her sisters lay stretched out on the dock, reading books and sunning themselves, rousing from their individual reveries every now and then to discuss the pitfalls of married life or to exchange a bit of gossip. Cradling a leech, I would sneak over to where they lay, slip under the dock, and curl a plump arm up over the dock’s edge to place the slimy prize on one
or the other of their bellies or thighs. If it happened to be one of my aunts, the afflicted invariably screamed and flailed her limbs, then threw dark glances at my mother who pretended to be absorbed in her reading. If it were my mother, she didn't skip a beat. She tilted her book forward, slid her gaze down the length of her body until it stopped at the leech, and then flicked the creature away without so much as a how-do-you-do. That was the sort of woman she was.

After the leeches, things seemed to explode outwards. Or perhaps they imploded—it's hard to say which it was. I began to see; I began to notice things; I began to pay attention. I saw patterns—the raised veins in a leaf, animal shapes in clouds, the delicate imprint of mice feet in snow like necklaces slung over white winter meadows, the pale mosaics on the skin of the chameleon I kept in a glass box on my windowsill. My eyes were telescopes; I had bionic vision. I saw smoky black trees lining the tops of hills, spread like Spanish fans and burning into the edge of sky. I saw fiery prairie grasses tossing their tasseled heads in the bright sun, and the blood-red berries of the sumac thick as clusters of bees clinging to the tangled branches. My limpid gaze could crystallize the world. Riding my pony through the woods, I lay back with my head pillowed on his furry rump to gape at the trees bobbing, the branches splayed and swerving like black tentacles against a blue sea of sky.

And then, somewhere along the way, all that changed.

2. Structure and Function

I was a shy child; I didn’t talk much. I watched. When I imagine myself now back in my child’s body, I picture a small creature with eyes like saucers, like
moons, easily startled and easily rapt.

Now, at thirty, I am again often startled by what I see: snow thawing on the spring hills, the white breast feathers of the woodpecker hammering on the pear tree, the pale blue petals of the crocus that appear one day at the foot of the porch. What is this vision, that roused me to the glories of leeches and rouses me still? What are these eyes? Lumps of strange matter, lodged in my skull, oddly shaped, strangely patterned. How do they work? How did they happen?

There are three basic kinds of eye known to exist in the world—pinhole eyes, compound eyes, and lens eyes. Pinhole eyes are the sort favored by mollusks—a group of some 100,000 marine species including snails, oysters, octopi, squid, and the chambered nautilus, a strange, squid-like creature that lives within a fat, coiled and striped shell. In the pinhole eyes of the nautilus, light enters the eyeball through a small hole in the front of the eye, as though the eyeball were a ping-pong ball that had been pricked with the point of a pencil. The light travels through the interior of the eye directly to the back where it hits receptors which send messages to the nautilus' brain. Lo, the nautilus sees—sort of. It's a nice, simple eye, but the wearer receives only a narrow shaft of light through the hole, and the lack of a lens severely limits the clarity of vision. To the nautilus, the world is likely to be a murky, blurry place.

Compound eyes are the sort most bugs have—literally eyes on stalks, or clusters of stalks, like bunches of telescopes poking up from the mound of the bug's eyeball launching pad and scanning the world for visual information. The eye on the end of each stalk provides the bug with an image; the common housefly, for example, receives hundreds of images at once. Scientists disagree whether these images are perceived separately, a view similar to
watching several hundred television sets, each turned to a slightly different channel, or whether the images are integrated into a single looming and bulbous picture. Either way, the compound eye is great for detecting motion but leaves a lot to be desired as far as identifying what you're looking at. To help compensate, a tiny lens in each stalk increases resolution. Resolution is the ability of the eye to produce a clear picture by separating and defining objects in its visual field. The lens also works to control the diffraction of light through the opening of the eye. Diffraction is the ability of light to bend around corners.

Despite these advances, the compound eye falls far short in terms of resolution when compared to the human eye. Basically, it's too small to do the work. Another price of such minute apparatus is paid in the limited scope of the color spectrum that the bug is able to perceive. In order to maximize their performance, honeybees ignore red.

Lens eyes such as ours have their own structural and functional limitations. Light enters the lens eye through a comparatively larger opening in the eyeball: the pupil, from the Latin *pupilla*, meaning "little doll," for the tiny reflection of ourselves we see when we look into another's eyes. The pretty iris we lavish so much attention on is actually a group of tiny muscles that expand and contract to alter the size of the pupil and control the amount of light that enters the eye. Under the iris, a rubbery lens fits neatly like a monocle. The lens actually changes shape to compensate for diffraction and to focus on objects seen at different distances. It flattens to focus on distant objects, thickens to focus on near ones.

Overall, this is the most efficient visual system of the three, best at controlling diffraction and creating good resolution, but a lens eye is developmentally and physically expensive: it takes a lot of muscles,
nerves, and brain space to operate. Yet, with all that, we see only thirty percent of the range of light that comes from the sun; the other seventy percent—infrared and a bit of ultraviolet—is invisible to us. It was also presumably invisible to the sheep whose eye I carved up in my seventh-grade science class.

That poor old sheep's eye was like a gob of greasy cheese sitting on my desk. When we cut the eye open the lens popped out like a prize—a lump of hard rubber the roundness of a quarter, the thickness of a finger, and the color of dull amber. "How can a sheep see through this thing?" I wanted to know, to which my science teacher replied that the lens only becomes that way after death. He said the words "after death" the way one would say "after lunch" or "after art class." I think "opaque" was the word he used to describe the after-death lens of a sheep. I figured opaque meant yellow, and I held that lens up to my own eye and tried to look through it. But all I saw was the grainy yellow of a dead sheep's eye.

I set down the rubbery lump next to the now split-open ball of cheese and, after fastidiously wipping my fingers, touched my own eye. I won't go so far as to say that I thought about my own death, because I didn't. I was only twelve, and as I've said, I was not a precocious child. But as I looked down upon that sheep's mangled eyeball, I decided that the only way I could sensibly deal with the horror that lay before me on the desk was to become a doctor.

If I were a doctor, I thought to myself back then, I would understand everything about that sheep's eye—I would know that sheep's eye inside and out. The act of slicing it up would have no power to trouble me. I would survey it as coolly and lightly as one might survey a tricky piece of machinery. I would poke my scalpel into it and respond not with a horrified, "What have I done!" but instead with an interested and lilting, "Aha." This, at the time,
seemed like a comforting thought.

3. Feature Detectors

Sight first developed in ancient seas. At some point in their evolution, early creatures grew patches of skin that were sensitive to light, allowing them to tell the difference between light and dark and also to discern the direction of the sun. What began as a simple skill used to find sources of energy, food, and eventually mates has since evolved into a tool used in the creation and experience of art, an appreciation of nature, the accomplishment of work tasks, and the evolution of wide-ranging notions of beauty and goodness. These are somewhat more sophisticated skills used to find sources of energy, food, and mates.

Of course, not all animals use vision to locate themselves and others in the world. Dogs, for instance, rely more on smell than on sight. A professor once told me that if the nasal membrane were removed from a dog’s nose and flattened like a sheet, it would be roughly as big as a football field. If the same were removed from a human being, it would be the size of a postage stamp.

There is a bizarre fish of the genus Eigenmannia that lives in the murky waters of the Amazon and its inlets. Eigenmannia has almost no sight, a sense which would be nearly useless in its turbid home. Instead, the fish produces a weakly electric field from an organ in its snout and “sees” using electroreceptors located in the pores of its skin throughout its body, a situation akin to our bodies being studded with fairly myopic eyes from head to toe. Objects that come into Eigenmannia’s electrical field distort the fish’s “view,” either by concentrating the electrical flow (if the object is a better conductor of electricity than water)
or by dispersing it (if the object is a poorer conductor). Thus the fish perceives one or another kind of electric "shadow" to locate objects in its surroundings and to sense the edges of its surroundings.

Eigenmannia's system of perception seems peculiar and far removed from our own. Our own vision seems so natural to us that we often assume it is simply the mirror image of what's out there. But the eye is no blank slate. Our vision is a strategy for surviving in the world, and like all strategies, it is not infallible. Structures and functions have their limitations. Like Eigenmannia, we use what we've got—our eyes and brains—to collect information coming at us in the form of light, then selectively screen and process it, ignore some types of information and exaggerate others, all in a massive effort to interpret our environment and make decisions that will ensure survival.

Take toads. Their visual network is similar to our own, only simpler. Light from the sun travels to earth at 186,000 miles per second and enters a toad's eye replete with information about the toad's surroundings. The information is then sent, at a comparatively sluggish sixty miles per hour, through the optic nerve—more precisely, a bundle of nerves—to two separate places in the toad's brain: the optic tectum and the thalamus. In each of these destinations, visual information is screened and processed to provide the basis for decisions that the toad makes in responding to its environment.

Here's where things get simpler: if a toad is not moving, and there is nothing moving in the toad's scope of vision, the toad sees nothing. The neurons in the toad's eyes don't fire and the toad is utterly blind. For moving objects, the toad detects and analyzes them in roughly one of two ways: is the moving object a horizontal thing or a vertical thing? Feature detectors in the brain help the toad to ac-
complish this. Feature detectors work like keys fitting into keyholes: when an image passing over the toad's eye fits onto a corresponding imprint in the brain, a bell rings and the toad reacts. The thalamus of the toad's brain has a feature detector that detects vertical objects—like toadmongering storks—while the optic tectum has a feature detector that detects horizontal objects—like tasty worms. If the stork-detecting thalamus rings, the toad hunkers down into a crouch; if the worm-detecting optic tectum rings, the toad goes on the hunt.

Like a toad's, our eyes and brains have special feature detectors that "encourage" us to recognize and react to specific stimuli. Compared to toads, the feature detectors in our brains are infinitely more complex—the result of our comparatively hulking brains—and largely mysterious. I have read of brain-injured people who, as a result of damage done to a particular part of their temporal lobe, cannot recognize faces. They can see perfectly well, they can recognize objects, they can identify people by familiar clothing, but when shown a facial portrait of their friends, their spouses, even themselves, they are at a complete loss.

Once, eleven years ago, I, too, found myself at a complete loss.

It happened soon after the horse I was riding inadvertently flung himself onto the top of a three-and-a-half-foot bundle of logs. The logs had been lashed together to make a hogsback jump, the second of fifteen obstacles dotted throughout a three-mile cross-country course over which I was riding in competition. The jump was situated at the edge of a dark wood. Beyond lay a green field flooded with sunlight. Spectators thronged the boundaries of the course, lounging in clusters on either side of the bundle of logs.

My horse and I were on our way to leap out of
that dark wood into the bright field when it dawned on me that my horse was paying no attention to the logs directly in our path, but instead had locked his eyes upon the colorfully dressed spectators lining both sides. I slowed him down, attempted to direct his eyes toward the fence by pushing his head around with one hand, and when finally he caught sight of the logs, he panicked and leapt wildly into the air—a good two strides early—and instead of clearing the logs we landed smack on top of them, sending them flying apart while my horse pitched into a somersault and I was hurled helmet-first onto the ground.

A couple of the show officials helped me off the course and into a patch of shade, where I lay down and immediately sank into unconsciousness. When I awoke, a middle-aged woman in a droopy straw hat was seated beside me, watching me with interest. She looked vaguely familiar—as though we had met somewhere before but I couldn't quite put my finger on who she was. I couldn't have said who I was either, or what I was doing lying in a patch of shade in the countryside of some unknown landscape. I could detect objects all right, but I couldn't identify a thing. Suddenly I was gripped with panic, which included a fear that those around me might sense my total lack of cognizance.

Feigning nonchalance, I asked the woman in the straw hat a series of questions, alert for clues. Over the next thirty minutes, the details of my life returned in pieces, in fits and starts, and I came to realize—after studying her at some length—that the woman seated beside me was my mother. When I was fully returned to my senses, the woman in the straw hat who was my mother asked, "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes."

"Fine," she said. "Let's go home."
Visual memory and perception are inextricably linked. We use our thin retinas, each no bigger than a quarter, to continuously search out identifiable objects doing recognizable things. We locate ourselves in the world mainly by sight; we locate each other and all that surrounds us by storing up images in the temporal photo albums of our brains. Brains and eyes, sight and memory, structure and function—each half of a pair depends on the other. To see is to remember; to see is to know. Most of our metaphors for knowledge revolve around “seeing.” That I could see my mother and not know her strikes me as unutterably strange.

4. Revelations

After a while, I stopped seeing the way I had when I was a child, scouring the lake bottom for leeches. It wasn’t anything tragic or even dramatic. I can’t say that I was particularly aware of it. It was like the sifting of dirt through my fingers. When the dirt was gone, I clapped my hands briskly together and thought, Ah, much better now! But how did I know that I wouldn’t rather be holding a lovely handful of dirt than nothing at all?

But I went ahead and grew up, and there were more important things to think about than leeches, and trees like Spanish fans, and the blood-red berries of the sumac thick as clusters of bees. There was college to consider. There were careers. There was my future. There were heaps of thinking to do. Everything I did took on the aspect of intellectual probing. While writing papers on erudite subjects, I jotted down notes on slips of paper: “What does this mean to me? What has it meant for my life? Why is it important?” I tucked them briskly away. The dirt sifted.
During that time, I was still toying with the idea of becoming a doctor. My father, who was himself a doctor, kept his medical textbooks in the basement of our house. When I was in high school, and later on breaks from college, I descended into the murky gloom of the basement, dragged the damp, heavy volumes out from their boxes, sat on the basement stairs and forced myself to pore over them, in order to prepare for my future in medicine. There were innumerable pictures of people with a staggering variety of diseases and deformities; there were close-ups of abnormal tissues and festering sores, and all those anatomical drawings that make people look like machines. I made myself look at all of it. I figured it would be good for me; it would prepare me for real life. Above ground, the trees and hills and animals that had once grabbed my eyes and held them were seeming increasingly dull in comparison. I stopped noticing things; I no longer paid much attention.

Our culture puts a high value on pragmatism. We are taught as children to be rational, to be objective, to be hardworking and ambitious. This was the direction in which I was steadfastly headed. But how is one to be rational with a bird? To be objective with a painting? To be hardworking and ambitious with a flower?

I don’t mean to sound melodramatic. It’s just that when it came to the physical senses, I became somewhat complacent. I learned to expect what I saw; I learned to see what I expected. I learned to be smug. But the one thing about true seeing is that it swiftly removes all smugness. Consider the sifting dirt. Almost two-thirds of the total vegetation of the grasslands upon which I grew up is underground. If placed end to end, the roots and root hairs that grow beneath one measly square yard of tallgrass prairie would stretch for twenty miles. A square foot of that
prairie soil holds about half a million nematodes, little crawling creatures, which has led ecologists to conclude that nematodes, not bison, have probably always been the dominant plant-eaters of the prairie.

Of course, that's not much of a surprise, these days. There aren't many bison left. There isn't much prairie left, either. Practically everyone knows that; I won't bore you with the gory details. Suffice to say that because of these facts and others, somewhere along the line I decided not to become a doctor. It just wasn't for me. I realized that underneath my pragmatic composure, the pictures in those medical texts were making me sick.

Then somewhere along the line, I started to see again.

It didn't come easy; it took a concerted effort on my part, and on the part of the things that were trying to get me to pry apart my stubborn eyes and brain. I was twenty-one and visiting the National Gallery in London. Rounding a corner, I came upon a painting by van Gogh—a crude wooden chair with a rush seat: an object altogether ordinary, yet so extraordinary that the experience of seeing it was like walking face-first into a brick wall. It was as though van Gogh had stripped away all the dullness, all the complacency, had shaved and shivered all of life down to the heat and light and matter contained in a single trembling chair, and then had painted it as though his very soul depended on it. Perhaps it did. He was a somewhat unhinged individual. In A Natural History of the Senses, Diane Ackerman writes that van Gogh may have suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy, poisoning by the digitalis administered to treat the epilepsy, cerebral tumor, syphilis, magnesium deficiency, and severe depression; he also drank kerosene and ate paint—any or all of which could have afflicted his personality as well as vision, exaggerating yellows and causing him to see halos around lights.
But that chair! The wood glowed and glowered with light, the rushes in the seat burned with an inner fire—the same fire I saw inside those prairie grasses as a child. There lay absolute color, pure light, distilled emotion. There lay the painter's soul and there stood mine before it, fully present and fully lit in the twin beauties of light and color.

People see in color partly because we evolved as fruit-eaters, an evolution that enabled us to easily pick out fruit against a green background. Color vision also helped alert us to the dangers of poisonous plants and animals, which often wear bright warning colors like yellow, orange, and red. There are two types of photosensitive receptors found in the thin retina that lines the back of our eyeballs like a skin: rods and cones. We perceive color with the cones of our eyes, and only in moderate to bright light. Three types of cones—each containing different forms of visual pigments—respond differently to red, green, and blue wavelengths. About seven million of these cones are clustered on the central fovea, a small hollow in the middle of the retina. Outside of the fovea, one hundred and twenty-five million rods are distributed throughout the rest of the retina to detect luminosity—shades of white and black, but no color—useful for night vision, when there isn't enough light to make the cones fire their colored messages to the brain. At night we don't see in color. And since rods are located outside of the central fovea, to see objects well at night we must look slightly away from them.

Color itself comes from the bending of light. The white light from the sun is actually composed of an infinite number of wavelengths, or bundles of energy, that have varying amounts of pliability. Of this infinite number of wavelengths, we perceive about seven groups of colors: the seven colors of the spectrum. When light travels through a prism, such as a
water droplet suspended in air, the wavelengths each bend according to their individual abilities and separate into bands of reds, oranges, yellows, greens, blues, indigos, and violets. I know this and yet, in truth, I understand it no better. What trickery is this? I look at a rainbow—I have no idea why I see what I see. Or why I don’t see what I don’t see. At the age of eight, I asked my mother where God lived.

We were in the kitchen, baking a cake. For some reason, I was seized by the desire to see His Face, after all those church services that spoke so glibly of God and even had pictures of God, though for the life of me I had seen neither Hide nor Hair of Him. So I put the question to my mother.

“God is everywhere,” she answered, matter-of-factly. My mother was raised Catholic, with Latin masses and black veils over the head. My question didn’t strike her as particularly challenging.

“Everywhere?” I repeated. I glanced around. “Even in the oven?”

“Even in the oven,” she said.

Now whenever I use an oven, I take a good long look. But I could swear I’ve never seen God there. So which do I doubt? The existence of God or the reliability of my senses? Senses can be deceiving; one must take care not to rely too heavily upon them. Last July, I took a day and hiked up into the mountains near where I now live in Montana. I had climbed to the top of a hill and was wandering about in the grasses, exploring for wildflowers and keeping an eye out for a good spot to lie down in the sun and read. As I stepped over a patch of purple-eyed mariposas, there was a sudden explosion of crashing brush—stalks of dry grasses hurtled into the air as a giant beast lurched up out of the very earth and lunged—which way, it was impossible to tell. It was so sudden and ferocious—it was so massive—it smashed into the light. It was a violent beast, a
spotted beast, a speckled fawn, a tiny thing that I had scared up from its small, curled nest in the thick grasses, where it would have lain with its tiny hooves folded like buds against its white belly, holding perfectly still but for the flick of eyelashes, the faint pulse of breath on its sides, until I came along and nearly trampled it. After a few hops over the top of the hill, the fawn dropped back down into the grasses and was still. And I stood there, feeling ridiculous.

5. Predation

Up until about twenty million years ago, our prehuman ancestors lived in the woods. Over the five million years that followed, climatic changes and fire shrunk the forests and jungles, forcing us out onto the plains and grasslands. It was then that our vision really took off and left the other senses in the dust: while our eyes make up less than one percent of the weight of our heads, a full seventy percent of our body's sense receptors are located there. So, in the Book of Revelations, when the four horsemen of the Apocalypse coax the slain lamb to preview the horrors that signal the end of the world, they offer him the strangely quaint entreaty, "Come and see."

Our ancestors came to depend on their eyes in those wide open spaces of the early plains, using their vision both to locate prey and to keep an eye out for other predators. Predators like us have their eyes set on the front of flattened faces, creating a narrow, binocular, forward-directed field of view that's useful for sighting and tracking prey. The two overlapping images—one from each eye—that we get with our binocular vision are integrated in our brains to provide us with important information about distance, which we perceive as three dimensions, or depth. To maximize depth perception, you have to
maximize overlap from the two eyes, which means they both have to be pointed in the same direction (forward), leaving predators with little in the way of lateral view—a drawback that's compensated for with necks that swivel.

Prey, always vulnerable to being pounced on from any which way, have eyes set on the sides of their head. This gives prey animals little in the way of overlapping images, which leaves them with a rather flat picture of things.

The prey our early ancestors were after and the predators they were trying to avoid usually sported some combination of superior sense of smell or hearing, faster speed, larger size, and greater strength than they. Eyes and brains were our competitive edge. They appear to have worked, too. Mass extinctions of large mammals, especially large herd animals, occurred on a number of continents shortly after the arrival of humans thousands of years ago. This extraordinary coincidence has led scientists to formulate the Pleistocene overkill theory: in a nutshell, we killed them. Some 73% of the large mammals in North America went extinct soon after humans arrived over the ice bridge we call the Bering Strait around 12,000 years ago. South America lost 80% of its large mammals; in Australia, 86% disappeared. A little structure and a lot of function can get you into trouble.

Ours is a society of voyeurs. Where did curiosity go wrong and turn into something furtive and dangerous? Shopping for groceries with my mother at the age of four, sitting in the back of the cart with my legs dangling between the metal spokes, I would stare out at the hunched old ladies, at the sick, at the crippled, with a sort of fascination and horror. My mother told me it was hurtful to stare, so I stopped.
Or tried to. Sometimes I just became shamefully stealthy, peering at them through sidelong glances, or from behind the blind of my cupped hand or—when I was older and cleverer—a box of jello, a can of soup.

Later, in my tenth or eleventh year, I had a macabre desire to see an autopsy. I used to ask my father to tell me how it was done. He would describe for me how, if the pathologist wants to see the heart, he takes pruning shears to cut through the breastbone, then grabs hold of it and prises the ribs apart as though he were opening a wardrobe. He would describe for me how, if the pathologist wants to see the brain, he carves a circle around the boney head with a little shop saw and lifts off the skull like it was a beanie. I asked my father if I could go along and watch this sometime, and he said sure.

I never did get around to it. At the time, it seemed that a lack of planning, logistical snags, perhaps an accident of conflicting schedules—my father’s and mine—prevented me from taking part as an observer in these rites. Despite my early determination to adopt a cool, scientific demeanor when it came to split eyeballs, cloven skulls and gaping thoracic cavities, I was at heart an emotional kid.

You could say that we are curious for reasons that have to do with exploring the world outside of ourselves. You could say that we are interested in how others experience life, how they cope with difficulties, or that we long to gain some insight into avoiding other’s misfortunes. You could say that our fascinations can be traced back to some ancient instinct to cast out the “unfit” or the “dangerous,” and in so doing, save ourselves. Horses tend to dislike those of their kind that are light-colored: pale grey, or worse, white. In a herd of domestic horses, the dark horses will tend to hang together and drive out the white, responding instinctively to a circumstance
that historically would have attracted predators from afar—a bright white horse stands out like a lighthouse on a grassy plain—although about the only predator those domestic horses have to worry about now is us. Of course, we don’t hunt down white horses and eat them, anymore. We put them in the circus.

At a dinner party several weeks ago, one of our guests told a story about her great-aunt who had been one of a pair of twins born five weeks premature back in the early part of this century. At birth, the great-aunt, who is now eighty-six and expresses herself by performing monologues as the character Mary Magdalene, weighed just two pounds—the size of two one-pound chunks of butter. She would have died (and sadly, her twin sister soon did) without an incubator. There were no incubators available in the town’s hospitals at that time, or perhaps they were too few or too expensive for her parents to afford. So her parents carried their two babies down to the circus, the only place in town where you could get free access to an incubator, where those babies lived—and one died—during the first few months of their lives. You see, people back then would pay to see preemies, the same way they would pay to see other unusually shaped people and animals whom they called freaks.

I, too, have paid to see freaks. I would like to say that it happened a long time ago, but four years ago my friends and I were at the Minnesota State Fair. The night sky reeled with the fantastic lights of the rides and rang with the shrieks of riders and the awkward clink of organ music. We were loafing, exhausted, on the packed dirt of the midway while gusts of unnaturally warm air smelling of hot grease wafted over us, wanting to leave for home but with six tickets left over from the day and a dull-witted determination to spend them. And as we were stand-
ing right next to the World's Fattest Man—880 Pounds, And Still Growing—we thought it would be hilarious to take a peek, and so two of us went for three tickets apiece.

I had seen Big Bertha at this same fair when I was a child of seven. I remember walking up onto a boardwalk that was built alongside a trailer home—one section of it plate glass to accommodate viewers—where Big Bertha lived and ate, and it was all very tastefully done: I was outside, she was inside, behind the window; I could gape in comfort and relative unobtrusiveness, and she could watch T.V. and eat hamburgers in the air-conditioned comfort of her own home and workplace.

Not so with the World's Fattest Man. I was lured into a trailer, where I expected to view the World's Fattest Man lounging in some sort of makeshift living quarters (an identifiable object doing a recognizable thing), but what I found was quite the opposite. Once inside, the World's Fattest Man was not a finger's breadth away on my left, clad in shabby, foul-smelling clothes and seated in what can only be described as a tiny, whitewashed penalty box—the kind found in hockey arenas—only large enough to enclose his sad bulk and a minute, black and white T.V. set on a shelf, to which his eyes were dully transfixed. The walkway was not the spacious, tidy boardwalk I was expecting but a thin, peeling corridor bordered on the outside by plywood walls that followed exactly the perimeter of the penalty box, so that during my entire viewing time I was not more than seven or eight inches from the World's Fattest Man.

Embarrassed, I refrained from examining the World's Fattest Man's belly button. I averted my attention from the folds of his breasts, the magnitude of his thighs. I kept my eyes bolt forward, my breath shallow, and my expression polite, with a hint of
lightheartedness, as though it were all just a lark that I was there at all—as though I only bumbled in by accident and was not the least bit interested in the World's Fattest Anything—as though I had no intention of actually staring at him, of fastening my greedy little eyes on his ample carcass.

One day I was galloping my horse through the woods with my head thrown back, watching the branches sway and swerve like dark tentacles against a blue sea of sky, and the next I was laying down money to see a fat man watch T.V. in a box.

6. Glory

One night last summer, I sat with a friend on the granite edge of a pond in the Bitterroot mountains, cloaked in the light of a full moon. The moon shone down like a siren, its noisy light splashing in white patches on the black water. The patches of light fell over the pond like javelins of light. There was a puff of wind, and we watched the patches break apart and dance towards us. My friend observed that the light was pointing to us over the water.

"I think that no matter where we sat the light would point to us," I said.

"That's impossible," Christian said.

So we conducted an experiment. While I remained in our spot, she rose and trotted up the granite beach. Eighty feet away, she stopped to report that I was right. Amazed, she began walking back and forth, watching the light slide over the water, following her as she moved across the rock.

I remember knowing this about the moon, but I don't remember learning that it was so. What I recall is being a child in the cold nights of a northern summer, crossing Whitetail Lake from the mainland to our island. I remember sitting crouched against the cold on the plank seat of the ten-horse, peering...
over the rough orange canvas of the life preserver that bulged around my neck to watch the tail of the moon race over the water with me—a glittering icicle of light that pierced the boat exactly at my body.

Above, the blue-black sky was strewn with a riot of stars—more stars than I imagined possible. When I stared round-eyed into that northern night sky, I felt the stars pull me towards them with spidery threads of something clear and mysterious. It was almost grace—or mercy. I couldn’t name it then, and I still can’t, except to say that it reminds me of some words I once heard spoken by a physicist trying to explain concepts about how the universe works. What he said was, “Eternity is now.”

Eternity was back then, too. Making snow angels at night with my little brother, I glimpsed it. Bound up in snowsuits, we had run out into the front yard late after a heavy snow. The sky had cleared; a warmer wind had started to blow. We jumped to a spot deep in the drifts, lay down, flapped our arms and legs vigorously, and then carefully rose and leapt back out of the depression, so as not to leave any footprints that might connect our angels to this world. We did this over and over, until there was a whole choir of angels in the yard. The light of the moon bent through the vapor that curled up from the snow angels, splintering into colors that glittered darkly on the snow. Standing there looking at the angels, something inside of me rose, leapt from the dry grasses of daily existence, crashed upwards into the light of my round, moonlit eyes. The angels on the snow quivered and sang, while the live thing inside of me hovered there for a few moments in the light of my eyes, then took a few short hops and lay back down again. A snowplow lumbered up the
street, neighbors began straggling out of their houses pulling shovels, and my brother trampled the choir.

But in my soul, I can still see those smoldering colors. I can hear those angels sing.
David Garrison

Guidelines

And on and on. Perhaps this is the most measurable day, this life. The waiter is bringing drinks, gin & tonic on a round tray. Beside each glass he sets a book about trees. You can look at sketches of leaves and decide. Or you can move your way through the words and the little maps with their blue bands for winter, pink for summer, waves of migration up, more or less, and down.
You can imagine it. Also, some clear advice about which constellations are approachable after ten, and how you might orient yourself, relative to this river. There's very little here about the smells of things, though of course these matter—remember her hair, remember the boy's head, and bending beside him to kiss once more, though he's already asleep. And there's some confusion about noise, which is sad, because what a world there is in the night, even here, parking the old car near the sycamore, near the moonlight. Even bones are a quiet music, even bones.
Adelle Graham

Gold-Vermillion Fruits

A season. Dogs and pigs trained to differentiate between chanterelles, princes and God's death cap. But,

it is the truffle the men from Corsica want for their mistresses. I know women with throaty, swelling laughs. Lying,

overlapping like organs gutted from a deer, the truffle steams. They are so close, beside the blue spruce

where the horse grazes. Look on the side of the tree moss grows on. Alee. Subterranean. As a child I found

a padded bra near the stone circle where Indians danced. I visited it every day. Garlic, virgin oil, Mouton Cadet, a cast iron skillet, la viande de veau, la truffe. Some will leave the room when the smell gets overwhelming.

Nut, musk, ozone. I find some old photos. That is me at the picnic table. My hair is short. I remember now.

I'd been cooking earlier. We ate together. My hands still smell like sweet basil leaf. Spreading my fingers
out, I wipe dirt and moisture from the curve of the truffle. I let him sleep.
We were dying and we were invalid, the moths coming up off the water and all that blue dust and the dusty beeches swimming away from the holes like falling rivers of noise flickering under the shafts of the moon. Boy was something else doing the dance of the living right there on the embankment, his belt of spoons singing. His burned hands hissed in the rain that stirred the leaves poking inch-deep holes in the nearby Blueberry River, or so Hawkins described it to me, imagining it, drifting near dead on his back, an old sassafras root in one hand, the bird of his God in the other. Meanwhile, I'd passed from flesh but was still alive underwater. I remembered my first walk near the quarry as a dream I had in which my parents rode away on white horses. Then here, with Boy dancing, I could see the fleck in his eyes that was like a window and his nerves were on fire. Of the ways to be born this was called drowning in sin, the slick uterine roots twisting tight, the sunlight bleeding away so that all I could hear was Boy
pretending to cry, his voice like a knife
cutting leather, and I felt the sight leave my eyes
and I moved my arms in the warm shirt.
Seamus Heaney

Diptych

I

And then there was Saint Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the
  tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

II

And since the whole thing’s imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he:
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting
forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love’s deep river,
“To labour and not to seek reward,” he prays,
A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.
"Telephone Tryptich" is an altar-like construction that explores a telephone pole in a figurative and literal way. Telephone poles are interesting to me in many ways. Beyond their similarity to the Christian Cross, with its inherent reference to sacrifice and resurrection, I am interested in the fact that poles, like people, are ever present. Like us, a telephone pole is rooted and earth bound and also like us, its energy flows above the ground, closer to the sky. I find it curious that the telephone pole needs a designated amount of space to function, as in a stretch of telephone line. Alone, they become dysfunctional. This piece is contained by a metal frame that is over-built and is intended to monumentalize this small truism. I like to think of it in relation to the absolutist architecture and presence of Versaille."

About the cover: "On a recent trip to Butte I found an old Start-O-Pac battery box. It had been abandoned in the mine trailings and was used as a target. I like to think of it jumping with each bullet blast. Hope and revival are suggested in this piece and be understood best if the history of the box is considered. At one time, it was used to spark dead batteries. When it went dead it was thrown out and later used as a target. Now it is reused as art. Along with the painted image it pays homage to the unstoppable American sense of progress."

Pat Kikut recently received his MFA in painting from the University of Montana. He spends summers working in Alaska and plans on traveling before getting back to the studio.
For the last five years, I've been working on a series of sculptures I refer to as 'Music Boxes'. The figures represented are life size. Each box contains audio tape and lighting systems that play an intrinsic part in the viewers' experience. Flashing lights are a vehicle used to assimilate movement. The lights also accentuate the transparent properties of the figures and other objects depicted. The audio tapes (mixed sounds, voices, and music), together with the lights, set a mood creating lifelike qualities and affecting a sense of drama.

"It takes seven months to a year to complete each box. The figures and objects have welded steel skeletons covered with skin that is cast of paper and cloth in an acrylic
Music Box Series, Mixed media

polymer emulsion. The interiors of these boxes are intended to have a ghost-like appearance. The contents portray memory and feeling frozen in a single frame. The exteriors of the pieces provide clues to the content. This series is based on phantom memories, some about my own family. The scenes depict people caught in life at various times, unable to wish away their circumstances. The 'Music Boxes' are meant to trigger everyone's phantom memories."

Colleen McNutt lives on a farm in Moscow, Idaho, with her husband Jim Loney.
"My sculptures are made entirely of wood; I carve each object and paint it so that it appears to be something other than what it is. The work falls into the 'trompe l'œil' category and is always statement oriented. The ideas for my works are based on personal experiences and observations (as well as feelings), and are usually social or political in nature. The objects I carve are often unique or outdated and always appear to be well used. These objects serve as symbols for fundamental needs and concerns in the high-tech, crazy, fast-moving, and often confusing world of today. My work is user-friendly, simple in nature, and easy to interpret (although the interpretations may vary)."
Wood sculpture

Born in San Jose, California, in 1949, Jim Loney claims to have walked ten miles—barefoot, in the snow, to school. More recently, Jim and his wife Colleen McNutt are in the process of building a summer studio/house on the Hope Peninsula in the Idaho Panhandle.
John W. Wylie, Female figurine vessel, 1994
Lowfire stoneware ceramic 25" x 41"

"The two main focuses of my work are the vessel and the female figure. The vessel for me is the ultimate form that denotes the ceramic tradition. This tradition is very important to me due to my strong background in functional ceramics, pottery. To me, the female figure is the ultimate form in the sculptural tradition. The figures, or figurines, that I draw from are fertility goddesses that date back c. 25,000 years. These figures are often characterized by exaggerated breasts and buttocks. My work as a whole is based on the respect and admiration of these traditions."

John W. Wylie received his MFA in ceramics from the University of Montana. He is a tattoo artist and does body piercings. Currently, he teaches ceramics in Wisconsin.
Jeffrey Funk, Black and white photograph, 1994

"These photographs are a simple exploration in nighttime lighting, ritual, and fire."

Jeffrey Funk is from Big Fork, Montana, and is currently a student at the University of Montana. Primarily working in forged metals and stone, his main field of concentration is in site-specific public works.
Stephanie J. Frostad, *Bright and Early*, 1994
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 42" x 60"
Collection of the University of Montana

Stephanie Frostad is a Northwest artist currently based in Missoula. Her paintings explore traditional metaphors and myths of rural life.
This Past Tuesday

It is a dream that has come to me quite often these past few weeks. I envision myself lying in bed, waking to the sound of my telephone ringing. In the dark, my hand fishes around for the receiver, accidentally knocking a number of things off of the small, rickety night table. Dirty dishes, an undershirt, socks, unfinished letters, a jar of coins — even in dreams, the apartment needs a great deal of reorganizing. Amidst the sound of more objects crashing against the unclean floor, I luckily navigate my hand to the ringing box.

"Hello," I say, still somewhat asleep.
No response.
"Hello," I say again, increasingly curious and a bit irritated. There is the sound of someone breathing slightly on the other end of the line. "Well?" I say, preparing to hang up.
"Come over. Please." I recognize Ana's voice immediately, though I have not heard it in many months. It has been even longer, I must admit, since I've heard that voice speak in such an inviting tone.
"Okay," I respond a little too quickly.
At this point, the dream progresses in a standard fashion. I jump out of bed, hurriedly pull on my trousers, wet my hair down in the bathroom mirror, and sprint clear across the capital without even considering a stop for rest. On the other side of the river, out front of her building—our old building—I pause to catch my breath and gain some composure, before traversing the three flights of stairs that lead up to the familiar dark brown door.
Once I arrive, sweating profusely, I knock lightly, trying not to wake Ana's sister or her sister's husband. The apartment is small, the walls are rather thin and, although it has never happened in my dream before, I know for certain that any undue commotion will lead to me being turned around and sent back to my dank, empty room on the other side of town.

If the dream reaches that stage, Ana will answer the door and, before I can say a word, will quickly move a finger to her mouth as a gesture for silence. At the same moment, she'll gently tug at my sleeve with her other hand, pulling me into the dark apartment. From there, the action will progress in either one of two directions. Possibly Ana will lead me to that small bedroom she has been sharing all these months with her infant niece—a room in the back decorated by small stars and pale moons intended to resemble the summer sky at night. After quietly undressing, Ana and I will proceed to the squeaky bed and make love in a way that is so unobtrusive that it is barely personal and hardly sexual. Instead, it is merely a reminder that we are still married—technically, at least.

When we're finished, I usually find myself relaxing and staring at the star-covered walls, trying to picture the previous tenants as they painted, preparing their perfect nursery. When Ana and I had originally moved in, we'd agreed not to change it, though at the time, I remember thinking such a setup held the potential for problems in the future.

"What are you thinking about?" she says.

"Nothing," I answer.

"Me, too," she says.

I suppose it is not strange, then, that it is the alternate resolution to the dream which I prefer. Instead of grabbing my shoulders and yanking me into the bedroom, Ana motions a stop gesture with
an outstretched arm, the open palm of her hand indicating that I should wait in the hallway. As I step back, she disappears into the darkness of the apartment only to return a few moments later, dressed in her old, plaid coat and carrying those two suitcases that we received many years before as a wedding present from my old boss, Hansa Splite. From there, we slowly return down the boulevard to my small apartment—I, carrying the suitcases heavy with Ana’s many possessions, she, smiling in a way that I have not seen in many years.

Yet on this particular night, my recurring dream did not reach either of its appropriately dreamlike endings. Instead, the earlier segment where I am awakened by the sound of a telephone ringing was, surprisingly enough, interrupted by the sound of the telephone ringing.

“Hello,” I said, not nearly as sleepy as I always dreamt I might be.

“Come over. Please.” Ana’s voice said, without hesitation.

“But ...” I said, not following the usual script. It didn’t seem to matter though; Ana had already hung up. I considered calling her back, but then remembered that she did not have a phone, and probably had been talking from the neighbor, Privdi’s apartment. I pulled on my trousers and, like always, moved to the bathroom to wet my hair down before realizing that the water was off and that I had forgotten to fill my tank. I doled out a cup’s worth of seltzer water from the bottle I kept with the medicines, thinking it would suffice, but then noticed through the kitchen window that it was raining. My hair would be flattened immediately.

Outside, I ran at a speed paralleled only in my dreams, watching the road for muddy potholes and concentrating hard to maintain my balance. Soon however, I tired from this quick pace and slowed to a
brisk walk. Upon reaching the square, I realized that it was not nearly as late as I had thought. The coming winter and the early onset of darkness had again fooled me. Many people were still about, scampering around, looking for shelter from the downpour. I recognized my friend Leni sitting beneath the outstretched arms of the old Hoxha monument. He was with his co-worker, Kiti Lexhe, and from the tentative nature of his wave, I could tell that he did not want to be bothered.

Across the river, just past the unfinished pyramid, it finally occurred to me that Ana may have called for some other reason than those that I had previously imagined. Perhaps, I thought, she had come to miss having those long involved fights that we'd once performed on a nightly basis. We had devoted the final six months of our days together to perfecting a wonderful, cyclical, unsatisfactory argument that usually required no less than four or five hours to complete.

Or maybe, I thought, she was calling for some lesser reason, like a leaky pipe or a blown fuse. Of course, this was completely nonsensical in light of the fact that she, more than anyone else, knew of my inability to comprehend even the simplest of mechanical principles, but still I considered it.

Upon reaching her street, I attempted to clear my mind of all the negative possibilities. In their place, I tried only picturing my dream—Ana alone in the dark apartment, smiling, inviting me in—and the feeling that it gave me. It was an unusually peaceful feeling that I had not known in reality since those first days after our wedding. Still, even in the imagination, it left me strangely satisfied.

For some reason though, I was having trouble visualizing the familiar scenario. I could not see any part of the dream now, or feel anything like it. Instead, there was only the rain coming down on my
head. Small drops from the sky and larger, colder ones from the trees above. Most of them hit me directly, some even managing to find that small opening at the back of my shirt.

I did not pause out front of her building like the blueprint of my dream required. My anxiety and tension would not allow it. Instead, I quickly climbed the stairs, taking them two and sometimes three at a time. The entire way up, I tried to think positive things, blocking from my mind the fact that our many fights had indeed been my fault, all made worse, on top of it, by my stubbornness.

Right before reaching the top floor, I simply assured myself that it would end happily, if for no other reason than that was how it had been ending night after night. Even if Ana was feeling only a small portion of the dread that I always felt when considering the alternative, continued separation, she would certainly still come to the same conclusion.

The hallway light on the third floor was out, and it would have been completely dark if not for the small bulb leaking through the staircase from the flight below. I quickly moved toward Ana's apartment, hardly attempting to conceal the noise coming from my soggy shoes, and, when I got to the landing, reached my hand out in the darkness, feeling for the heavy oak of her front door. I had made a fist, knuckles forward, in an attempt to knock, but instead, found only air at the other end. I imagined myself standing there, rapping on an invisible wall like the mimes I'd seen in the park as a child. If a crowd of people had gathered around me to watch, there in the dark, they certainly would have been amused. I inched forward, thinking it was only a small distance away, my hand held out in front of me.

When at last I did bump into the door, my arm folding up, I almost fell—entirely surprised by the very thing I'd been expecting. Quickly, I regained
my footing, knocked lightly, and waited. Perhaps a minute went by, I wasn’t sure. I remembered something my Uncle Alqi had once told me. In the old days, he had said, when they wanted to see if someone had gone mad, they used to put the person in a room with a small group of people, all facing each other. Then, the doctor would have the first of the crowd yawn and soon the others would follow suit. If the subject did not yawn along with the rest, they put him through a second test. This involved a completely dark room, pitch black and a seated subject. The testers would explain that they would be back in a minute’s time, then disappear, leaving the subject alone in the dark. They would wait half an hour before returning, acting as if nothing had happened, that only a minute, maybe a couple seconds more, had gone by.

“We apologize for the short delay,” they might say, looking at their watches, “but a few extra seconds surely didn’t harm you.” If the subject didn’t play along, acting as if he really had been in there only one minute, or a minute and ten seconds, then the doctors recommended detainment for further experimentation.

“Fortunately, things are no longer like that around here,” Uncle Alqi used to say, ending the subject.

After knocking a second time, I reached into my jacket, searching for a packet of matches. I thought perhaps I still had that book from the Trefoil, but instead I could only find three or four of the large kitchen sticks I used to light my stove. I leaned over and struck one on the wood frame and saw immediately the explanation as to why no one had answered. At the foot of the door, next to the hinges, rested a large, oblong box, and above it was a note which had been tacked to the door frame itself.

“I have finally found the energy to collect all of
the remaining things you left behind,” it said, in the familiar handwriting. “Please understand that this was not as easy for me as you may think. In fact, I have been putting it off for quite some time. So when, at last, I was able to take the initiative, I wanted to be done with it at once. And the task will not be complete until you have removed these items for good. I wish you the very best.”

Ana had not signed the note, and I thought for a second that it was because doing so would have finalized the act. Granted, she was generally a forgetful person, but still it seemed more intentional than that. Perhaps she could not go through with it, after all, and this was why she had telephoned.

Underneath the entryway, I checked to see if a light had gone on behind the door, but it was still dark. I lifted the lid off of the box and lit another kitchen match against the wall. Inside, I found a number of random items that I had mostly forgotten about: an awl with a wooden handle, two pairs of suspenders, an old, tarnished money clip, the textbook *Principles of Engineering*, a small ledger with a cardboard case, a rusty straight razor, a tin of brown shoe polish, and, at the bottom, two small, handsewn pillows. Of course, I could find uses for all of these items, or, at the very least, trade them, and I was certain Ana would have done the same, so it was generous of her to return them. But I couldn’t help feeling that it was meant as some kind of message, especially the inclusion of the pillows that had comprised half of our original set. Clearly, it could be interpreted as Ana dividing up all of the remaining possessions, closing the books on us. But if that were the case, where was my half of the silverware, my share of the china, my portion of the dining room set?

I tried to remain optimistic, believing that perhaps, as in the dream, it would end as I hoped. Yes,
it would end all right. Before I proceeded to knock once more—this time a heavy pounding—I turned to set down the last of the box’s contents, and in an anxious state, lost my footing. My shoes, still soaked from the trek through town, gave way and I fell on top of the box with a loud crash. Immediately, a door opened behind me, and as I lifted myself up, I was soon face to face with Privdi, our old neighbor, and his wife, Kascha, both standing in their nightclothes. The light from the entryway seemed unnecessarily bright, my eyes having grown accustomed to the darkness.

“Isn’t it a bit late for this type of thing?” Privdi said, staring down at me. A large man with a short, practical haircut, he’d been in retirement for nearly a decade, but was still in excellent shape. It would’ve been unwise of me to do anything foolish.

In my many years of living next door to him, Privdi and I had spoken but a few times, and always regarding the most general of topics. He prided himself on being a very plain-speaking man, and accordingly, made only the most obvious of statements. Not once was I able to draw him into any sort of conjecture or even the most incidental of rumor-mongering. “I am a man of few opinions,” he would say, without even the faintest hint of sarcasm. Looking over at Privdi’s wife, I was also certain that the animosity my wife had held for me in recent times could only have transmitted across the hall, especially considering the confidence that she and Ana held.

“What are you doing lurking about at this time of night, anyway?” Privdi said, moving onto the landing.

I motioned weakly to the box, the contents of which were now somewhat scattered across the floor, and held up Ana’s note. At the moment, Kascha stepped out in front of him and, appearing to understand what was happening, calmly helped me gather.
the objects. When we were finished, she took the note from Privdi's large, beaten hands and slid it on top of the items, then replaced the lid to the box.

"I suppose you should be going," Kascha said, trying to force a polite smile.

"Yes," I said, looking back over at Privdi. "I suppose I should."

I was about to make some excuse involving the unlit stairs and hallway, but realized it would be to my advantage to remain silent and leave quietly. As I headed down the stairs, guiding myself along the banister with my right hand, the box resting in my left, I recognized the old Persian carpet lining the floor below. In my haste to reach Ana's earlier, I hadn't even noticed it lying there. Certainly, it had always been my favorite part of the building, going back to the first day we moved in, and it reminded me of a better time, even though it was something I only saw in passing. Every year, I had been careful to renew my application with the building manager to relocate to an apartment on that floor, and every year I'd been told that there were still no vacancies, but that, if I liked, I was welcome to try again the following year.

As I continued downward, I could still hear Privdi and Kascha talking, and I looked back to find them staring at me from the top of the staircase. I suppose they thought I might try one last thing, like a thief who'd been caught prowling and mercifully sent on his way, looking to filch any small item while leaving the store as a means of getting in the last word. I found myself creating vague scenarios where I exacted my revenge on Privdi, sometimes as his wife watched, and other times, the two of them together. Ultimately, though, I wound up unsatisfied. Ana would arrive at the end of each scenario, and her stoic indifference would undercut any pleasure I had gained prior to that moment.
By the time I reached the lobby, I could see that most of the streetlamps outside had been dimmed or shut off entirely. It being December, electricity was especially scarce, and every night after a certain hour, a portion of the power across the city was shut off to keep expenses down and resources up.

I was in no hurry to return to my small apartment on the other side of the river, so I headed toward the Kafe Quristi, the only place usually open late in the evening. If I was lucky, I might arrive in time for the final round. Of course then, there was the possibility that I might recognize someone and have to explain the box, so perhaps it wasn't the best idea. But maybe, I thought, I could steer the conversation away from it, ignore the box altogether. Certainly, if Leni were there, he would recognize the pillows and know better than to bring up the subject, unless I did so first. I could count on him that way. Just like he could count on me to decipher a look, a facial expression, a small hand signal, as I had done earlier that evening.

Eventually getting tired, I switched the box to the other hand, and finally, up over my shoulder, balanced against my head. I was so preoccupied, it did not even occur to me how silly I must have looked. At a distance, the box probably resembled that old woven laundry basket my grandmother had carried when we were children. Each day, she would take the most direct route to the Drini, which in our case, unfortunately, led straight through the center of town. It was there that she washed our clothes in the river's icy water. Once, when I asked her why she needed to walk that specific route—why she couldn't take the path along the base of the mountain—she looked so perplexed that I did not have the heart to explain how it embarrassed my brother and me.

Still, I walked on, now oblivious to the box on
top of my head, and oblivious to the rain that continued falling. There were at least another ten or twelve blocks to go before I reached the center of town, and so as I approached the main road, I listened for the sound of someone I might know approaching in a cart or on a bicycle. Unfortunately though, the increasing darkness and the relentless rain had, of course, driven everyone off of the streets. All of this dawned on me rather slowly however, causing me to walk several blocks in a drenching downpour imagining that it wouldn't be long before someone ultimately appeared. Later, across the square, just past the Kafe Quristi, I allowed myself to give up hope. Strolling along quite slowly—surely I was already as wet as I could possibly get—my ears gave up listening for a sound that did not exist and my mind slipped off into another in a long series of daydreams.

Translated from the Albanian by Kevin Phelan and Bill U'Ren
Jorge Luis Borges

Street With Pink Store

Now the eyes turn longingly toward the night in each little street, and it's like a thirst catching the scent of rain. Now all the roads are close by, even the road of miracle. The wind carries forward the torpid dawn. The dawn is our fear of doing things clear as day and it comes down hard on us. I have walked all blessed night long and it fills me with restlessness in this street, whatever street it is. Here, once more, the reassurance of the plains on the horizon and the vacant lot a jumble of weed and wire and the store as bright as the new moon at dusk last night. It's as close as a memory, this intersection with its broad plazas and its promise of courtyards. How lovely to be your witness, eternal street, seeing that my days have looked at so few things! Now the air is rayed with light. My years have travelled the roads of land and sea and I know only you, quiet and rosy street. Indeed I think your walls conceived the sunrise, you glowing store at the end of night. I think, and my voice among these buildings seems to be the confession of my poverty: I have not really seen the rivers or oceans or mountains, but the light of Buenos Aires became my bosom companion.
and I forge the verses of my life and death
by the light of those streetlights.
Oh long, long-suffering street,
you are the only music that I know.

translated from the Spanish
by Robert Mezey
Who could ever forget his courtesy?
It was the unlooked for and the primary
Form of his natural kindliness, the very
Sign of a spirit as limpid as the day.

Neither must we forget the debonair
Serenity, the fine face and strong frame,
The glow of death to come, the glow of fame,
The hand interrogating a guitar.

As in the pure dream of a looking glass
(You are reality, I but its likenesses)
I see you holding us in sweet discourses

On Quintana. There you are, magical, dead.
All yours now, Ricardo, the fresh, outspread
Pastures of yesterday, and dawn with its horses.

translated from the Spanish
by Robert Mezey
In that bewildering night no one need fear
That I may lose my way among the dark
Flowerbeds that weave their system in the park
Propitious to nostalgic love affairs,

Or idle evenings when a bird entunes
In deep leaves its invariable song,
The summer arbor and the curving pond,
The hazy statuary and dubious ruins.

The coach house, hollow in the hollow shade,
Marks (I well know) the wavering boundary lines
Of this dim world of dust and jasmine vines,
So pleasing to Herrera and Verlaine.

The shade is redolent of eucalyptus—
Ancient and medicinal, its fragrance,
Piercing through time and vagaries of language,
Denotes for me the era of the *quintas*.

My step feels forward for and finds the expected
Threshold. The level roof defines its shadow,
And I can hear from the chessboard patio
The periodic dripping of a spigot.

On the other side of the closed doors lie sleeping
Those who by virtue of their dreaming work
Are masters in the visionary dark
Of boundless yesterday and all dead things.
In this old building each thing is familiar:
I recognize even the mica flakes
In the grey granite that reduplicates
Itself incessantly in the smudgy mirror;

Biting an iron ring, the lion's head;
And by the door, the colored lozenges
That offer treasures to a child's gaze,—
A world of green, another world of red.

Even beyond the range of death and chance
These things endure, each has its history,
But it all happens in a kind of trance,
A fourth dimension, which is memory.

The patios and gardens still live on,
But there alone, preserved there by time past
In that forbidden circle that has embraced
At the same moment the evening and the dawn.

How could I ever lose the plain, precise
Order of these beloved things of ours,
Today as irretrievable as the flowers
That the first Adam knew in Paradise?

The ancient wonder of the elegy
Overwhelms me when I think about that place
And I do not understand how time can pass,
I, who am time and blood and agony.

translated from the Spanish
by Robert Mezey and Richard Barnes
Jorge Luis Borges

The Causes

The generations and the setting suns.
The passing days, of which none was the first.
Freshness of water in the throat of Adam.
Paradise, with every leaf in place.
The eye interpreting the text of shadows.
The howls of coupling wolves in the dawn light.
The hexameter. The word. The looking glass.
The Tower of Babel and its vaunting pride.
The moon that gazes down on the Chaldees.
The Ganges and its multitudinous sands.
Chuang-tzu and the butterfly that dreams him.
The golden apples of the Hesperides.
The footpaths of the aimless labyrinth.
The endless fabric of Penelope.
The Stoics in their ever circular time.
The brass coin in the mouth of him who died.
The sword's weight as it presses down the scale.
Each drop of water in the waterclock.
The eagles, the magnificence, the legions,
And Caesar on the morning of Pharsalia.
The shadows of the crosses on the earth.
The Persian and his algebra and chessboard.
The tracks and traces of the great migrations.
The conquering of kingdoms by the sword.
The never-restding compass. The open sea.
The ticking of the clock in memory.
The king brought to the justice of the axe.
Incalculable dust that once was armies.
The pure voice of the nightingale in Denmark.
The precise line of the calligraphers.
The suicide's face reflected in the mirror.
The cardsharp's hidden ace. The greedy gold.
The strange shapes that the cloud takes in the desert.
Each arabesque of the kaleidoscope.
Every biting regret and every tear—
And all of these things had to come to pass
Before our hands could meet.

translated from the Spanish
by Robert Mezey
Victoria Rostovich

Folk Tales

I. A Love Story

He stood just outside the door, watching her equilibrium run low.

The moon is hanging and that’s a good omen. The stars have fallen on them hundreds of times. The hot shadow from the tea cup, grays and grazes the carpet which he hadn’t stood on for a while. How long had it been since he’d stooped while passing through her doorway? So long since he last heard the drum roll of her fingers on his backbone. The moment when he should press his hand over her mouth soon became evident to both. It’s rare that openings ever present themselves as anything but the first bees of April. Something must happen soon.

His hand must eventually detach itself and make a gesture. Run the index finger from her bottom lip to the center of her breastbone. Who can stay still? Who’s moving?
II. Resources

It has been hotter since we plastered the front yard, so hot the old ones on the stumps ask for more water than usual. The flower gardens are losing their lustrous red; the greens are fading to pastels. Three men and I sat on a bench, under a tree, during the storms. I only want the melody of their questions, weaving with the thunder, repeated daily in my head. They wanted to drink then and there. They asked permission to catch the downpour in their mouths. They were free to choose.

For our lives to go someplace wet, I have to drive a truck made from gold, at least gold-plated on the surfaces. The old ones who own the truck are in possession of custard powder, and, at times, concentrated fish sauce, to flavor their main staple—grains. I need to get some water to them soon, before they get bored with hunger, before they get angry and plant land mines in the riverbed. Spite is action but not solution. But, they are free to choose. I didn’t go down for it too well when I lost time carrying water with those who abandoned me, out of spite,
and left me wandering. I told them if I got lost one more time, and if I lost my occupation, I would become a pagan, a rebel, a guerrilla. I told them only the children deserve the water, and I could take away the water, the grain and flower seeds, and the children. I told them, of course, they were free to choose in this, and all matters. Resolution seems probable.
Victoria Rostovich

Wash Duty

I That boy from the gas station comes in

I had your welfare in mind. I designed it all for you. The machines run themselves. They stretch out their strings to each other. They want to help. Just follow the lights, in sequence. You'll get used to it. Even the noises will sound like drums. It's easy and I'm grateful. Believe me, I'm grateful. I want to help too. I can cut hair in a straight line. I will color inside the lines of your body and hide you in my crawl hole when cops knock. Only the machines will know.

II Our Secrets

The giraffe is eighteen inches tall. He's a nice pet. He always uses his box and he eats very little. He talks back, but not in a smart way. His name is Alesso. He needs me. I need you to drain my too-full breasts. I need to fatten you up when icicles hang by the wall.

I spent years in Switzerland. I kept alive a small cactus. I fed it with dried blood from ground marrow. I used ESPOMA
brand. The nitrogen allows the soil to breathe. The cells breathe so clearly. Most people don't understand the value of nitrogen. They think soap and water are enough. Safe under sheets, they let their hands tramp across skin full of waste. We will sweat forty minutes each day. At least.

I'm making you an offer. We'll be so clean, inside and out. My uniform stays fresh and so will yours. I'll wash them the right way. Chopchop, Daddy-O.

Men fold laundry with such quick hands. I've taken to wearing lipstick. Peach.
Leland looked out the kitchen window. The side yard was a jungle of unpruned fruit trees, oak-leaf hydrangeas, weeds, tall stalks of ground artichokes, and perennial herbs running wild. Anyone who didn't know Baker would assume that here was a piece of useless ground, left to go wildly to seed. Leland could imagine Baker shoving a careful hand down among the Johnson grass, coming up with a peerless stalk of rosemary or bunch of mint, the hydrangea for the umbrella stand, a peach, a plum, some particular kind of greenery for the table, perfect for a fill-in.

She reached for the faucet, then drew her hand quickly back, remembering Baker's parting instructions to not, for God's sake, turn the water on. Mell was upstairs resting. Baker and Toby had gone to pick up Roy from school. Leland was alone, waiting to have her interview. Baker and Mell wouldn't say too much about this Roxie Sidwell, but when Mell said "Wait till you meet Roxie," in the same unfathomable way she'd spoken about the rat, Leland had to wonder.

The kitchen was a wreck, stacks of plates and bowls on every surface, waiting for the sink to get fixed. Leland checked the clock on the microwave. Half an hour.

Hearing a light tapping sound, she brought her attention back to the window. She looked for a bird, but the sound wasn't at the window, exactly. She leaned over the sink to look out and heard a voice faintly calling, as if from the drain itself. And then
the birdlike tapping sound came again. Leland leaned her head down, ear first, toward the drain. Mell's hard work had done its job, and except for scraps of shrimp peel and bits of debris the sink was empty.

The voice came again, faint and ghostly, like a far-off cry for help. Leland straightened, looked around. There was nobody, nothing. Retrieving a small white espresso cup she thought had been hers at lunch, she refilled it with coffee from the French plunger pot. The coffee was inky with chicory and, because it had been sitting since lunch, barely warm.

She listened for the voice again, but all she heard was the squeak of a floorboard somewhere.

These Strange Park houses, full of ghostly creaks and whispers. Leland used to walk through this neighborhood on her way to class at Marlenetta's studio in the old Elks Lodge on the edge of downtown. The hulking brick houses looked to her like bank vaults, symbols of the safe life—the father with a steady job, the mother making cookies, the life of homeowners and good citizens. When her mother died, Leland discovered they hadn't had to live like gypsies all those years, moving in the middle of the night to yet another rented house. John Standard had insurance; the Air Force took care of its widows. Dolly might have bought a house, made their life better. Leland had no idea why she hadn't. Fear, perhaps, that the money might run out, and then she'd have to go back to Iowa. When Leland dreamed about Eunola, she was often standing on a street in the dark, looking into the window of a Strange Park home.

She took a sip of the thick black sludge Baker called coffee.

"Help." It came again, from the walls.

Leland gripped the cup. She did not know how Melanie and Baker managed to get up the morning after Lucy died, take the next breath, much less find
a way to make a life of any kind for themselves. Once again Leland looked out the kitchen window. Lost in thought, she was turned in profile to the door leading to the laundry room and the back door when the man came in.

For a moment he stood there, not knowing how to keep from frightening her. Gazing out the window as if transfixed, she lifted the cup halfway to her mouth and then clearly sensing his presence—hesitated.

He extended a hand in her direction, as if to calm her, and spoke in a low voice. "Don't let me startle you."

As she gasped, her hand came up and the cup hit a tooth, then dropped to the floor, spraying dark, heavy droplets across the linoleum.

"Ahh, that's exactly what I did not want to do." He came over, picked up the cup and lightly placed his hand on her arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I don't know why I—"

"I'm sorry. He took his hand away. "I was trying to prepare you..."

She fingered her tooth. "No harm done," she said. "Really." She took a step back. "No harm." She ran her tongue across her teeth.

"I was down there"—with a small crescent wrench he pointed toward the floor—"tapping the pipe." He set down the wrench, the cup. "I thought you were Mell."

"You're the plumber."

He held out his hand, looked at it, withdrew it. "I'm also filthy," he explained. "Jacky Nelms. And you're Leland."

"Yes."

"Not Mell at all."

"No."

He was wearing a faded blue work shirt with pearl buttons, blue jeans, no belt, worn leather lace-
up boots, the shirt open one button too many to be an accident. He had a faintly Mediterranean look, his naturally tan skin stretched taut and smooth across his skull, so that the high cheekbones and broad forehead beneath seemed on the verge of breaking through. His eyes were an intense dark brown, his convict-cropped hair altogether gray. He was slim but not skinny, and there was a sense of athleticism about him, of wired, insistent focus. He looked sculpted, a madman, fabulous.

Realizing she was staring, Leland came to, enough to realize he was staring back. "I'm sorry I didn't answer," she said. "I heard. You were under the house?"

"Flat on my back."
"I thought you were..."
"A ghost?"
"I started to say."
"I thought so."
"You were calling Mell."
"Yes."
"'Mell' sounded like..."
"'Help'?"
"How did you know?"

He shrugged. "Figures." He turned his back, went to the sink, opened the tap, watched the water disappear.

"This ought to hold," he said. "At least through tonight and dinner."

A frozen moment. Leland studied his back.

He turned around, hooked his thumbs through the loops of his jeans and frowned. For a second Leland felt him back off into the safe reality of the situation—his friends' kitchen, a clogged drain, a job—and pull away from her. For a second, in self-protection she did the same thing. It was crazy. He was as obsessive, as single-minded and as rapt as she. She didn't know who he was or how far this would
take her, but she knew what he was up for. She
wanted to leave the room, the house, just go. She
wasn’t even, for God’s sake, over Simon yet.
Jacky Nelms made a slight adjustment within
himself and came back, eyes hard on her. “Well?” It
was a challenge.
“Yes. All right.” She met him halfway, holding
her ground, doing her bluff tough-guy dancer pose.
He smiled and gave a little laugh. Briefly, her
brusque matter-of-factness, so unsouthern, had
thrown him, the way she stood there, shoulders
squared, head thrown back.
When she spoke her voice was low. “Listen...

umm…”
He waited. He had learned. If you waited, women
declared themselves much more straightforwardly
than men. But you had to shut up first. Let them talk.
“Do you have plans?”
He cocked his head. “Plans?”
“We have an extra place at the table tonight. A
last-minute cancellation.”
The front door opened, the dog’s nails clicked and
Baker came into the kitchen. Standing in the door,
he heard Leland, saw the whole thing. “Ahem.” He
said the word. “Yes, Jacky…ah…would you like to come
for supper tonight?”
Before Jacky could answer, Baker tacked on a
requirement. “Only if you’ve fixed the pipe. Other-
wise…”
Jacky reached behind himself, turned the water
on full force.
“Jesus,” Baker said. “God. Oh well, fine.”
Leland felt a flutter of panic. She was moving too
fast—again—hurling herself forward without think-
ing. “Baker…” She looked for help.
He waved her doubts away. “Don’t be silly,” he
said. “Anybody’s better than Hank.” He pointed at
Jacky and grinned. “Even you. But, oh God, you do
know who's—oh..." He threw up his hands. "I don't want to think about it."

Arms flailing, Baker left the room. Light quick steps pattered down the stairs, and the front door slammed.

Leland tilted her head. "I have something to tell you."

"Oh my God, serious. Are you sure I want to know?"

She laughed lightly. "I'm positive you don't."

"Then don't. We haven't even shaken hands."

"No." She held out her hand.

"Let it wait."

Toby had told her over and over again, wait, go slow, she was always jumping the gun, declaring herself too soon and without much warning, or need.

"All right." She let it go. "But—"

"Let it wait. Now..." He picked up his wrench. "I have another job, then I'll freshen up for dinner. What time?"

"Seven-thirty, I think Mell said."

"You think?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Seven-thirty. Tough guy."

"Look who's talking. I'll be back."

"My son is with me."

"And?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. I... Why don't I know you?"

"I moved here in the tenth grade—you were gone by then."

"So you're younger."

"Than?"

She circled her arm. "Me. Us."

"Not significantly. A year or so. I remember stories about you. It was a huge deal, you know. Leland Standard quit school. She went to Memphis to be a dancer."
“I didn’t go to be a dancer.”
“Whatever.”
“But I did go to Memphis.”
He was quiet.
Her face was a little crooked, a joke kind of face. When she dropped her macho stance, the soft side of her emerged. She was arrogant and at the same time vulnerable, innocent and clever, knew what she wanted but not always how to ask for it.
“At any rate, I remember.”
“Your parents did what?”
“Ran a store, over by Moe’s. A Greek, a Jew. She was the Greek. We ran an Italian grocery store and deli.” He shrugged. “You tell me.”
She laughed. “About what?”
“You know. Their only child—I was supposed to be a rocket scientist, educated from money made by their long labors and hard work, but—”
“You liked plumbing?”
“Hardly. Took a long time to figure out. The words dancing on the page when I tried to read was no letter ballet. They danced because my mind was making them.” He touched his broad forehead.
“Wires crossed.”
“Dyslexia?”
“By the time we knew, I was fed up with failure and school—and besides, I was good with my hands. Also, I have this strange, continuing belief in a full life as the point of living, not a job, maybe because I gave up rocket science early on and lost the feeling of being called to a profession and found other ways to occupy myself. I do my job very well, but it’s the smallest part of what I am.”
“An aristocratic notion.”
“Go on.”
“Work as a sideline, the life well lived as the goal, the point, the satisfaction. I’d call that leisure-class thinking.”
"From a plumber."
"Don't be coy."
"It's what I do."
"Be coy?"
"Plumb, woman. Plumb." He lowered his voice half an octave. A trick, but she liked it.
"Aren't you the one who brings Baker the New York and London papers?"
"I didn't say illiterate. But I am a plumber. I stick my hand down toilets and grease-clogged disposals, live my life in people's dark and dirty nether worlds."
"You are a phony, Jacky Nelms."
He came to her, placed his hand on the tips of her spiky hair to feel the points, slid it to her neck, cupping her jawbone. He was not tall; she only had to stand a little on tiptoes to reach him. She pressed her mouth to his. Her tongue darted between his lips.
"I knew that," he said.
There was a noise from the other room, Baker screaming something about soup.
Leland pulled back. "Yes." She touched his cheek with her fingers. "You're warm."
"Genes." He brushed away a bit of dirt he had left on her blouse. "Until later, Leland Standard," he said. And he drew his top lip inside his mouth as if to taste her tongue once again. His lips were thin. A deep scar cut the bottom one in two and ran toward his chin. Leland wondered what kind of trouble he'd been in. He turned and was gone.
"Well." Baker waltzed in, having poured himself a gin and tonic. He shook the glass, rattling the ice. "You like a drink, Lela?"
"No thank you. Jesus, why did I do that?"
"It's fine. Jacky's my best friend."
"Can we make another pot of coffee?"
"Sweetie, of course. There's only one thing."
"Oh God, what?"
"Jacky and Dog Boyette."
"What?"
"Like oil and water."
"Oh God, well." She shrugged. "Is Toby back?"
She looked around as if he might be there in the room.
"He and Roy are walking the goddamn dog and Freddy Krueger."
"Freddy who?"
"The rat."
"They took the rat for a walk?"
And then someone was knocking at the door and Baker was gone and Leland was running upstairs to get a packet of vitamins, wondering as she went what in the world had possessed Toby to take a walk with a dog in love, a twelve-year-old boy and a rat.
REVIEW

The Eponymous Duck

The Mexican Tree Duck, James Crumley


Reviewed by Dennis Held

Recipe for disaster (or one hell of a good novel): Take one jukebox, loaded with the moronic wailings of Boy George. Nestle it firmly atop a set of railroad tracks. Add a destitute private investigator and his one-legged, meth-snorting lawyer—go ahead, name him Solly Rainbolt, while you’re at it—and stir in a hard-running freight train hightailing it for Spokane. “The collision filled the snowy night with an explosive rainbow shower of plastic and pot-metal, worthless quarters and inflated dollar bills that covered the pale parking lot like a hard post-apocalyptic rain falling.”

And it’s a hard rain that falls throughout The Mexican Tree Duck, James Crumley’s latest detective novel. C.W. Sughrue, the detective in question, is not averse to the occasional toot himself, and the fuel comes in handy as he’s launched on a twisted search for Sarita Cisneros Pines, who, like everybody else Sughrue meets, is not who she seems to be. She is the mother of Abnormal Norman Hazelbrook, apparently, a psychopathic biker chum of C.W.’s, and she’s at the center of a tortuous plot that somehow involves the eponymous duck, a piece of ancient pottery that exerts power beyond C.W.’s comprehension.

Along the way, Sughrue hooks up with a couple of old Vietnam buddies: Franklin Ignacio Vega, Denver cop, born “in El Paso to a half-German half-black father and a half-Mexican half-Samoan mother . . . with no place to call home, no race, creed, heritage, picked upon by everybody on the street with the slightest trace of ethnic purity”; and Jimmy Gorman, a “tiny Irish guy from Philly” with a postal job and an attitude.

The ensuing journey is fraught with gunfire, road sex and other explosive stocks-in-trade of a Crumley novel. It’s also packed with astoundingly good prose, like his first three detective novels (The Wrong Case, The Last Good Kiss,
and Dancing Bear) and his searing proto-Vietnam book, One

to Count Cadence.

But Tree Duck is more than just a bathtubs-full-of-

blood shoot-em-up. It's got what good fiction's got:

characters we can care about, superb descriptions of action

and landscape, a plot that surprises, and that certain

something—a sureness of command of language and story.

The book is peopled by characters who are running on

cheap highs and desperation, outcasts who have nothing to

lose. But these aren't trailer-house freaks the author sets

up for us to laugh at. This is the knocked-about, heart-
stung soul of America. Sughrue on Sughrue: "I looked out

the window. On the interstate people were going places

I'd never been, people perhaps with a future, people whose

lives were lived without always looking backward."

Sughrue's peculiar vision, clouded as the nation's is by

unresolved (and, perhaps, unresolvable) feelings about the

Vietnam War, leaves him in a reckless search for redemp-
tion: "Above the small town, way the hell up among the

rocky heights of the Collegiate Peaks, winter raised tufts

of its cold, gray head. But down where we stopped to rest,

the sun still worked. Even the broken glass scattered

through the gravel sparkled like jewels, and the cafe

smelled like the place they invented cheeseburgers."

This is a wise book, a deeply-felt book that reaffirms

the value of friendship in an unstable world. It's also

darkly funny, and Crumley's not afraid of tossing off

occasional bon mots of cultural criticism—wait, Sughrue'd

skin me and feed me to the lizards if he read that. He says

some smart shit about how fucked-up America can be.

And there's a surprise for dedicated Crumley fans to

unravel at the end, one that makes me anxious for the

next novel.

By the time you reach the last pages, you'll be punch-
drunk and ready for more. The Mexican Tree Duck is a novel

of excess, and, as usual, too much is not quite enough.

Indebtedness


Reviewed by William W. Bevis

After Jorie Graham's megablurb of Debt—oh rare blurb,

astute, as well as generous—what tribute to be paid?
Let's begin with Levine's openings:

The caption of this photograph is "Man hit by falling ice."

In the chapters that follow, the theory of the cosmic second hand unfolds in layman's terms, with reference to the sand dollar and DNA.

Is dinner ready yet?

— "Seconds"

Time and again, in these poems, we are in the instant coming and going: "Friday night. / Dad's in for his valves/Advance notice reveals that/"Isadora Duncan Is Among Us"/is the name of tomorrow's poem. Today's name is "Bev." ("Requiem")

In these magic moments—Hi, I'll be your poem for today—things are not going as well as they did for, say, Emerson: "The soldiers torched the crops while retreating. It only seemed fair". ("Poem")

In speaking of this transdowndentalism, old terms are not much use (we have taken the "avant-garde" out back and shot it, and "surreal" now means MTV), and the new term, "postmodern," as polyglot as the others, also would mislead. There is an antilyric in Levine, yet in using language, he loves it; in using his mind he respects it; through caring for his audience, he plays with us, not against us. The Buddhist would call this compassion, and in Levine's poetry it coexists with the devices and mechanisms of postmodernism that often spell only distance. Levine comes close through voices that cross over from curs to killers to poet to audience (we are in this together) and through his technique, that includes us, as in the old lyric tradition, in sufficient meaning to make the fragments hurt.

Sometimes, as in "Poem" or "Capitalism," these poems shade towards a broken voice, sometimes towards many voices, sometimes towards language turning back on itself, tearing itself up—"ragged," as the old jazzmen said. Always we find in Levine's poems not antilyric, which suggests a toggle on/off relation of language to expression, but a difficulty in singing, a tightness in the throat between self and song, or between song and itself, that is our world. And that's important.
Contributors' Notes

Richard Barnes, Dole Professor of English and English department chair at Pomona College, is a graduate of Pomona and The Claremont Graduate School. He is currently collaborating with Robert Mezey on translations for a *Collected Poems* of Borges.

William W. Bevis has been a professor of American literature at the University of Montana since 1974. He has published books on Wallace Stevens' poetry and on Montana writers and the West. Forthcoming in January from the University of Washington Press is *Borneo Log*, a book on native resistance to the timber trade between Sarawak and Japan.

Ryan J. Benedetti was born and raised in Great Falls. He will receive his MFA in creative writing from the University of Montana in May 1994. He currently works as a technical editor and graphic designer for the Riparian Wetland Research Program. He lives with his wife, Kate, and his daughter, Josie, in Missoula, Montana.

David Garrison lives and works in Louisville, Kentucky. His poems have been published in a number of journals, including *Artful Dodge, The Great River Review,* and *Commonweal*.

Adelle Graham grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, and received her BA in art history from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She is currently working toward her MFA at the University of Montana.

Robert Hackett spends his days watching the garlic grow at his wife's organic garden along the banks of
Missoula's Clark Fork River, contemplating the cumulative weight of rocks and other dirty thoughts.

Seamus Heaney was born and raised in County Derry in Northern Ireland and is the author of numerous volumes of poetry, translations, and plays. A member of the Irish Academy of Arts and Letters, he has won many honors and awards for his work. He teaches at Harvard.

Dennis Held still takes a size twelve shoe, extra-wide, sometimes a thirteen in the boot. He teaches at Lewis-Clark State College.

Jiri Kajane was raised in Krujë, Albania, and trained in engineering at Tirane University. He is the author of a number of stories, including the collection Sa Kushtôn (What is the Cost?) and over a dozen one-act plays. His satirical drama Nesër Pérditë (Tomorrow, Everyday) received great acclaim for its single 1981 performance before being banned. "This Past Tuesday" has never been formally published in Albania. Kajane's only other work in English translation will appear in Glimmer Train this fall.

David Dodd Lee is a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University. His poems have recently appeared in The Quarterly, New York Quarterly, and Sou'Wester. He is Associate Poetry Editor at Passages North in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Beverly Lowry is the author of several novels, the most recent of which is The Track of Real Desires, (Knopf, 1994) and a memoir, Crossed Over. She lives in Montana.

Robert Mezey is poet-in-residence and professor of English at Pomona College. The author of nine books
of poetry and several works of translation, he has received a Guggenheim fellowship and a Lamont award among other grants and prizes. He is currently collaborating with Richard Barnes on translations for a *Collected Poems* of Borges.

**Molly Miller** lives and writes in Missoula. She is currently working on her Master's degree in environmental studies.

**Nadya Pittendrigh** recently graduated from the University of Montana and is currently enrolled in the MFA program at the University of Arizona.

**Matthew Rohrer** grew up in Oklahoma and attended the University of Michigan. He has recently graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

**Victoria Rostovich** "Chickens rock."

**Matt Yurdana** was awarded the Richard Hugo Memorial Scholarship from the University of Montana. His poems have appeared in *Kinesis, Plainsongs*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

**Kevin Phelan** and **Bill U'Ren** have had work appear in such journals as the *South Carolina Review, Washington Review, Georgetown Review*, and *Aethlon*. Phelan currently lives in San Francisco, while U'Ren resides in Baltimore.
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