

# MUSE

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## WORDS+IMAGES



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## ○ Other



A LONG TIME AGO, I WAS IN 3RD GRADE. Laddy pencil in hand, poised to take my first Iowa Test. Sister Brendan walked over to my desk, looked at my answer sheet, and smacked the back of my head. She pulled me from my seat, pushed my desk to the corner of the room, and told me that Syrians were dirty cheaters and liars. She erased the little circle that I had filled in next to White, took my hand and held it to color in the circle next to Other. The only remaining choice was Black. I am not Black. I am not White. I am not Syrian.

JUDITH



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SUNSET BEACH SC TIM LACHINA

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## 5 in the morning

BY KEN BINDAS

Morning.  
Crazy dreams.  
Fast. Slow.  
You.  
A lot of you.  
Sitting still.  
Felt like five days-  
scenes in branches  
fragile without coffee - in an hour  
and a half  
or five minutes.  
Is that you kissing on my lips?  
I hear you, willing to sing of restoration  
or daybreak.  
Thou art my song and vision.  
Flickering like a candle or a silent movie  
of a dance or a climber -  
small and flowing but not moving only  
six more miles.  
Being drug atop the hill where  
the anticipated quiet is stirring.  
I almost wasn't going to let you leave.  
The sun blazing cold on my window.  
Breath like smoke after a nice  
long  
drag.  
It never goes by without me thinking  
about you.  
Your smell— I will hold you every time  
your hands whisper to me  
“that’s the best way to love” when I  
barely saw you at all.

## Your Alien Bride

BY MARY A. TURZILLO

### *The Courtship*

Your eyes are so beautiful.  
Oh, I'm sorry, are those your kidneys?

### *The Proposal*

We can live on my planet  
or Earth  
or in between  
unless you need oxygen.

### *The Bridal Shower Toast*

May you have many young, and may they be tender  
and flavorful

### *The Wedding*

You may taste the groom

### *The Wedding Night*

Ah! Oh! My love! Ahhhhh!  
Excuse me, are you in pain?  
What is that crawling across the bed?  
What? Your gestation period is sixty seconds?

### *The Divorce*

Thank you. Delicious.

# The B&O, Crossroads of Time and Space

BY CHRISTOPHER BARZAK



WHEN THE WRITER HENRY MILLER STEPPED DOWN FROM THE TRAIN HE'D TAKEN TO Youngstown, Ohio in 1940, he saw two girls, heads wrapped in scarves, picking their way down the bluff of a hillside by the railroad, and thought of his days traveling through Greece, the heat and dust and flies, the Greek peasant women, baskets carried on their heads, slowly descending on bare feet. He remarked that this first vision of Youngstown was where the resemblance to Greece began and ended.

A line of factories and mills stretched from east to west along the railroad and the Mahoning River, sending torrents of flame and black clouds of smoke into the canopy of the valley sky above him. Not even Dante, said Miller to a friend, had imagined such an inferno. From Pittsburgh to Youngstown he had ridden, surrounded by fire and smoke, and nothing but cars, cars, cars sitting in the fenced-in parking lots of the mills, those shining chariots of independence, their owners breaking their backs inside the factories, in the most stultifying kind of work Miller could imagine in order to own one.

The railroad line Henry Miller came in on is no longer a passenger service. Instead the B&O Station sits atop the hillside where Miller stood watching two peasant girls as they made their way down to a neighborhood at the bottom of a smoke-filled hollow, and trains go by, squealing, horns blaring as they disappear into the distance of east or west. It is not a stop for anyone, it is a point of no departure. A person can stand on that platform waiting for someone to arrive, or waiting to leave, and never move again.

No flames lick the skies here any longer, no smoke fills the hollows of the valley where twenty different languages once choked the air. The factories have been demolished or have collapsed or sit rusting, waiting for someone to return to them. Those peasant girls? Their neighborhood no longer exists. It is a grassy bowl beneath blue skies and a crayon sun.

If you turn your eye to the side, though, and look through the perforation that Henry Miller made in time, you can see the beautiful wreckage of another city, one that sits side by side with the one that spreads out before you. It is like seeing ghosts, this work I favor. You must be willing to see one before it will reveal itself. You

must believe in its possibility before it can be real. Henry Miller saw it on an afternoon in 1940, and so I see it, a mote that floats in my eye beside whatever I'm looking at, wherever I turn my gaze.

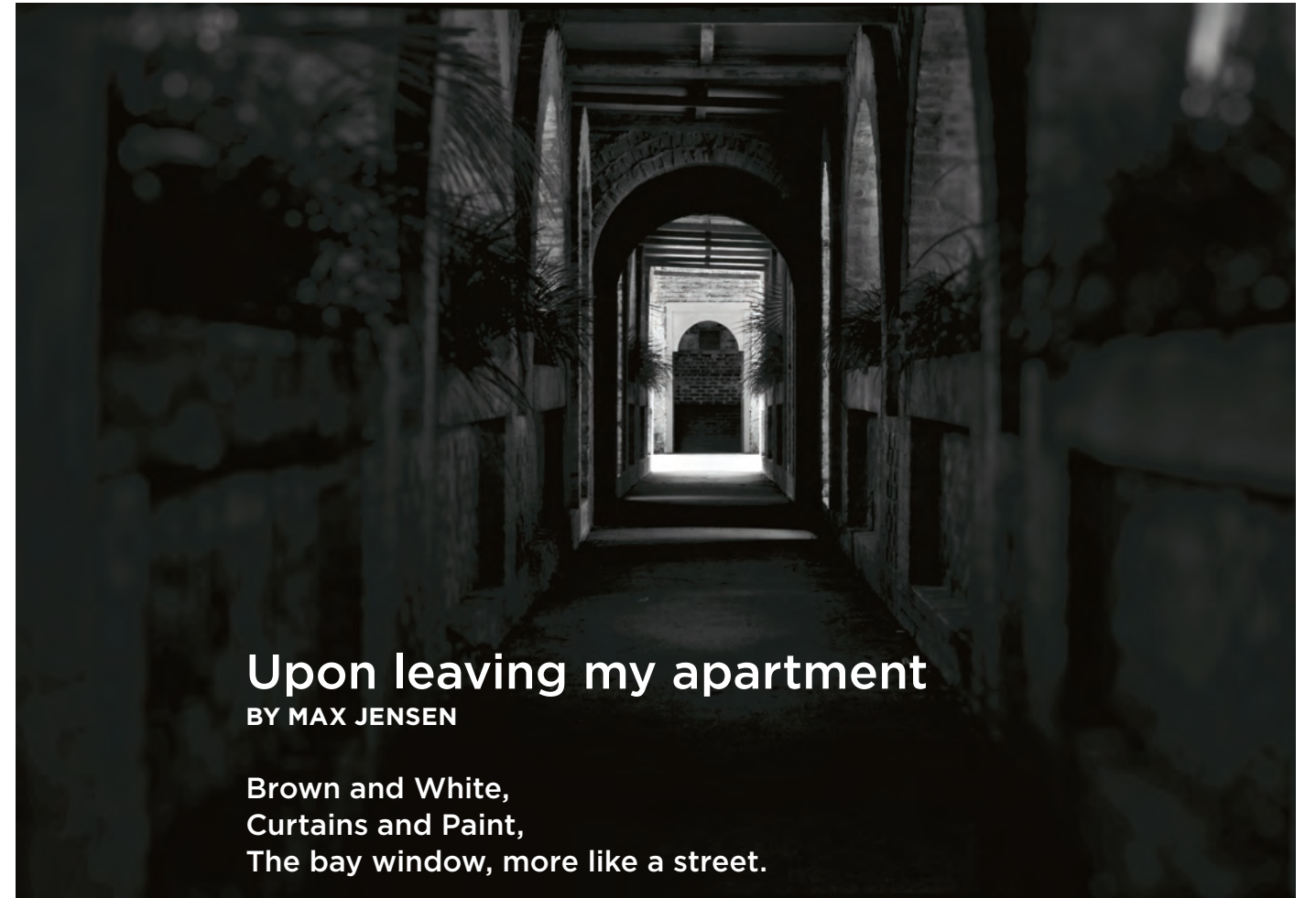
When I step down from the platform at the B&O Station, I see the defunct rails, the murk of the Mahoning River running alongside, but I also see two girls, heads wrapped in scarves, picking their way down the hill to their neighborhood. The houses down there sit in clouds of smoke and dusty resignation. Turkeys and chickens peck at the ground of back yards.

Their mothers stand on square front lawns, wringing their hands in their aprons, waving to the girls as they approach.

These girls, they are their mother's dreams, they are knots in a rope to the future, which the mothers climb across, hand over hand, like sturdy athletes, until they see a man from the future looking through Henry Miller's spy hole, and then the empty hillside behind him, the abandoned tracks of the B&O. It is then and there that the mothers pause in their crossing of time and space.

They hang, these mothers, suspended like grapes, wincing in the sunlight. Nothing they thought would be in their futures looks how they had imagined. As Henry Miller observed between Youngstown and the island of Crete, the similarities of the past and the future begin and end with these girls, their girls, those peasant girls descending a hillside in 1940, with scarves wrapped over their heads.

Myself? As Plato describes the human form moving through time, my back is to the future, the wind blowing my hair forward in waves toward the past. I dare not look over my shoulder.



## Upon leaving my apartment

BY MAX JENSEN

Brown and White,  
Curtains and Paint,  
The bay window, more like a street.

Riveted, I never jumped out of bed,  
I electronic snoozed and tried  
To recapture a touch,  
Some closeness that was just last year.

The late night computer is now my own.  
A sleeping laundromat, girls across the street.  
We've lived spring and what can we do  
With summer, she too came without warning.

Kicked into blue,  
Tender like birthing Aphrodite,  
I think back to days when I wasn't here.

ATALYA DOORWAY SC TIM LACHINA

# Going somewhere

BY SIMON PERCHIK

with you  
is all it holds on to  
—a single blanket

the kind the dead carry  
over them  
—you can't tell the difference

though you wish there were  
—to warm is all it knows  
and you are led under

till your mouth opens  
looking for her  
—to kiss, empty her throat

with your own—on faith  
you stretch out  
bring back to the room

her damp scent  
tied at one end  
and not the other

—with both eyes closed  
you show her her picture  
without thinking.

## It's Complicated

BY LORI WALD COMPTON



MY MOTHER'S BROTHER IS MY UNCLE; MY FATHER'S FIRST COUSIN'S SON IS MY SECOND COUSIN (or possibly my first cousin once-removed, who can remember?); my husband's mother was my mother-in-law, but my husband's ex-wife is my husband's ex-wife. Although two of her children are my stepchildren, two of her children are simply my husband's ex-wife's children and I reiterate: I will not clean their rooms or feed their guinea pigs. But what do I call HER?

I think about these things. I think about why there is no word to describe this relationship. Does this not occur to anyone else?

Last night, my husband and I were invited to join a few other couples to socialize at an upscale bar. I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to ask actual people their opinion as to the absence of an appellation for a relationship more common than a sideswiped passenger door on my teenage stepdaughter's car. After all, almost everyone I know has one of these relationships in their lives, if not in their own marriages, in the marriage of someone closely related.

I perched on a barstool next to Heather, the perfect embodiment of a person badly in need of the noun I'm searching for: she's in her mid-forties, she's divorced, and she's dating Steven, ex-husband of Kim. We chatted about the weather and the possibility that four pre-pubescent girls (two hers, two his) might have a bonding experience at a themed water park. The conversation was starting to lag, and I was determined to ask the question in order to assert my place in lexicographical history.

Heather: I'm throwing a party to celebrate my new breasts. Having them done at the end of the month. Want to come?

Me: Definitely. Hey, have you ever thought about the fact there's no word to describe your relationship to Steven's ex-wife.

Heather: Um...

Me: You know, there's not a word for it, like ex-wife-in-law.

Me: (in my head) Is Steven divorced yet?

Me: (now speaking to Heather's back as she has turned her back to me and is talking to a woman boasting about her all-natural double D's) So when's that party?

Lesson learned. The relationships with our spouses' exes are careful plodding dances where we've never learned the steps and where the bravest of us blame our faltering steps on our current spouse for not having the foresight to choose a more affable earlier version of us.

Still, as far as ex-spouses of a current spouse go, mine is one of the best. We have an enforced truce. She's not involved in our business, she's not interested in where we travel or what we do, she's perfectly pleasant to have a conversation with and she doesn't need to be overly involved. Okay, she once hung up on me. I don't remember why- I hurt her feelings, I guess. She gets upset with me, then just avoids me for several years.

We merely disagree on most everything about love, life, religion, and the character of my charming husband, her regardful first husband.

I suppose I could call her my hex (husband's ex) and a man could call his wife's ex his wex, and if I were a clever ex-husband's new wife, I'd come up with an amusing limerick.

(Okay, I really do remember why she hung up on me and it has something to do with the way she thinks of me as excessively cautious and overprotective – neuroses I wouldn't even consider if my hex noticed my fifteen year old stepson hasn't tied the laces on his sneakers for the past three years or hadn't, with blatant disregard for the drinking habits of the average college student, told my stepdaughter that when she goes off to college, it's best to stay away from the kids who drink. And my hex isn't being ironic, which is probably why she doesn't understand what I'm talking about... ever. Not that I'd snipe about it. At least not much.)

There's no blood relation between us; we just share a common husband. For the most part, he's mine, but for some really important parts, he belongs to her. It's complicated.

## Beirut, Redacted

BY WILLIAM MARLING



I AM SITTING ON THE CEMENT WALL IN FRONT OF MOUAWAD'S MANA'ISH STAND, corner of Adbul Azziz and Makdessi streets in Beirut, eating one of the cheesy man'ousheh he serves up with an angry face while glaring at the passersby. Traffic is gridlocked, so white-robed Saudis and girls in halter-tops are jay-walking together through the throbbing cars.

But I'm thinking about Madrid, 20 years ago, when that man came running downhill with the sledge hammer so fast the police had no chance to stop him. He jumped up on the hood of the parked car (it was his, after all) and bashed in the windshield, then pivoted and bashed in the grill. A circle of spectators gathered, but the police stood aside, because they were still going to tow his car, with its banderilla of tickets, when he finished – this is Madrid 20 years ago!

What's the connection? No Beiruti would ever beat up his car: this is the capital of patched-up, repainted, duck-taped and tenderly used Mercedes-Benzes. But there is that sub-surface violence, and spectatorship. One event is editing my perception of the other, an experience I have here more and more.

But before I can figure out why, a girl crosses toward me wearing gold shoes, pink tights and a Madonna bustier. On her arm is her mother in a black burka. All us guys sitting on the wall eating pizza stare. Mouawad stops sliding pizzas in and out of the oven. It's okay to stare like a village hick. Half of these guys are virgins, but they won't admit it. They have their arms over each others' shoulders — habib, you have a problem with that?

We are staring at evidence of an ancient mammary cult, one that goes back to Phoenician fertility icons of 3,000 BCE. On my second day here I found them in a museum, cupping their breasts in porn-star style, and now I see them on the street everywhere. Impossible to tell which breasts are real, however, for this is the cosmetic surgery capital of the Middle East. We might be looking at saline sacks. Women fly in from Dubai for hymenoplasty and, incidentally, a new pair. Tell-tale white bandages replace fine Arab noses. More disturbing

are the breasts on Lebanese guys. I see unreal pecs at the gym, puffy nipples under muscle shirts. All this makes me nostalgic for all my flat-chested and sexy-is-natural ex-wives, wherever they are, but I don't think body culture unites these pieces.

I have \$5,000 cash in my pocket, so I ought to be moving along. I went to HSBC and withdrew the money to get the hell out of here, before the war starts up again. Everyone carries large amounts of cash — I don't feel threatened, not ever. My girlfriend, when she came to visit, felt scared on certain streets because of a palpable Hezbollah presence. I daresay the Madonna bustier girl doesn't walk them either 'cause those guys might spit on her, yell at her -- but they wouldn't rob me.

On the list of dangerous places I have lived, Detroit and Cleveland rank above Beirut. But that is, I realize, a ranking – not a redaction. In the real dangerous places, you don't realize you're in danger. Like when we were in Baalbek during Ashoura and I was trying to joke with the guys from Amal as they were patting me down. Later we saw them crawling down the main street and beating themselves with whips. Real blood, glistening in January sun. The next day a car bomb went off.

It's intimidating to find out, as my brain wanders from thought to thought, that I don't even know what to call this process. I didn't think this way when I lived in Spain. Or Detroit or Cleveland. Boobs, blood, religion, money, danger – I can see how you would might be tempted to study it. But that's not how they live here, baba. Beirut is the land of buried redaction, like a chunk of computer code that has been patched for 2,000 years. The program prints your receipt without you noticing, but the code has been edited 200 times and contains the lives of programmers who, constrained to COBOL



WILLIAM MARLING

and FORTRAN, did things that cannot be undone. It's the repressed connections that trump everything. I've been living here during a calm. Some travel writers have declared this a new tourist destination. Is this the "atrocious tourism" I've heard about?

I want to write that Lebanon is like a beautiful, old, crackle-glazed bowl: it looks like many small pieces are united in one glowing surface, but at the slightest shock it will shatter into pieces. Redaction is important: many texts are joined, after having been in major and minor ways edited to make them into a single work. The Bible is a heavily redacted work; the Koran is not. Sometimes the redactor adds a frame story, like the tale of Scheherazade in 1001 Nights. Sometimes the redactor can't police all the details, called "redaction fatigue," so older stories show through. Lebanon is the ultimate in redaction.



The first time I saw Beirut was on Google Earth. I hovered above it, surprised. Most large cities have a lattice-work of straight streets at least downtown—Beirut had none. Move a little north and twisting roads led up into mountain villages. Move a little south and the roads shrank to fingerprint lanes – the Palestinian camp of Bourj al-Barajneh. Add a boiling range of 9,000 foot mountains right down the center of a country seven-tenths the size of Connecticut. Pour on four million people adhering to 17 sects, speaking four recognized official languages (plus local Arabic dialects), and 300,000 unwelcome Palestinians. Sounds like a recipe. The landscape is visibly divided into enclaves, villages, mountain redoubts, and defensible points at bridges, springs, and junctions of valleys. At the mouth of the Nahr al-Kalb (Dog River) passing armies from Ramses II onward have left engraved plaques. This is a geography of possession and obstruction, given coherence only by the satellite.

I'd like to say those fertility icons lead somewhere, that the Egyptian, Persian, Assyrian, Greek, Turkish, Vichy French, and Phalangist plaques at the Dog River explain a "layering" in today's culture. We could go to the National Museum to see the centuries all laid out, to watch the groups of students and visitors. We would see – in this country 60% Moslem and 26% under fourteen—not a single a woman in hijab, no Muslim school-groups. But the toy machine-guns sold in the souks are probably more important.

Academics come though to lecture on the Maleluka this, French Mandate that, the Roman baths discovered under the site of new Beirut Souks (soon to feature a Mikimoto pearl shop), which happens to be almost on the Green Line. Now you could see the Green Line on Google Earth, so-called because of the grass and small trees growing back while bullets flew overhead. The vegetation shifted as the battles surged between East and West Beirut. Close to the sea, the green line was wide: it's still a half mile between the elephantine Virgin Records on the east and Bistro Paul on the northwest -- the space now filled with parking lots and the white-tented, flower-filled homage to assassinated Rafik Hariri. Farther east and south, buildings are still pimpled with bullet-holes, gape-mouthed with mortar-cavities. I heard an architecture professor deliver a lecture about the 'deep structure' beneath this shifting green zone : beneath it all , he said, is "the scene of the ritual murder, committed as the foundational act of the polis."

Which murder? There were two last week that I would call political. I could say there's a Green Line on the east side of Mt. Lebanon (counter narrative). In October we walked above tree-line where the Lebanese Armed Forces had built pill-boxes and machine gun emplacements to defend against a Syrian return. They had planted land mines, which allowed the slopes to re-grass. Now the sheep and shepherds find them, slowly, so this green line will soon be invisible, like the line demarcating the Hittite Empire.

There was a Green Line in every neighborhood, sometimes on every block. But war also makes things erode: water enters bullet holes, softens concrete, exposed rebar rusts red, and the creative destruction of money makes people forget. Later I find out that Christian Phalangists built the pillboxes against Amal, whose leader Nabih Berri had recently been living in Detroit, working for GM as a lawyer.



Katija returned from Paris four years ago. During the day she sits attentively at the Interlibrary Loan desk in a gray business suit, sometimes a flash of red Hermes scarf over her shoulder. With her spiky red-brown hair, sharp chin and nose, she looks like an anime heroine. She has a Matrise in Library Science from Paris IV.

On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights she is Monique, a diva of the local tango scene, which floats from Hamra to Gemmazieh to downtown. In her car she

carries tango dresses, two pair of \$200 heels from Buenos Aires, which she visits every fall. Monique has lovers on the tango floor: there are Stephan, the instructor, with whom she slept for 18 months (even though he is gay); George, the founder of the tango scene here , who is writing a book about the group; and Jorma, one of the Finns who flies in for a week to give lessons. Tonight Monique is mad because in his book George describes her as "nice" and "fun."

"What does that mean? I'd rather be ... you know, the saloupe."

Someone is making a film about Monique. "Yesterday they came to my apartment, you know, and I let them film me putting on my makeup and clothes – I couldn't believe I did that." Kind of Star Academy Lebanon. At the gym, where I met her, Katija favors black Danskins and push-up bras. The videographer has been in Beirut since the war ended, living on remittances from parents in Dearborn.

Monique, the best sort of cosmopolitan, wants star in her own Amelie Poulain. Katija was born in a Maronite Christian mountain town, with extended family stretching from Montreal to Cairo (three older brothers, two younger sisters, one still in the village). Monique relates to each dancer on the floor. Katija is careful and secretive, but wants to be the next Director of the library. For Monique it's all obvious: who dances with whom, how they dance, and how often. Excusing herself to meet Michael for the last milonga at midnight, she says, "We have this tradition. He's not my lover, just a very elegant dancer." The filmmaker picks up his tripod and follows.



Scratch a Lebanese politician, a political name, and you find something nasty. I found Geagea's name funny at first, pronounced like Zsa-Zsa Gabor's. His lean face and John Cazale-mustache scowled from posters on hillside buildings in Achraifieh. Once I entered a store where men watched him on television. "Isn't that Geagea?" I asked.



WILLIAM MARLING

Everyone turned to look at me but said nothing. I said a lot of stupid things at first.

Geagea killed so many of his rivals, and maybe a prime minister, that he should be dead. After eleven years in solitary confinement, he's now running for parliament. His clan is from Besharra, the home of Khalil Girbran, but he went to the university where I teach. He was probably like this kid H. I'm teaching. H. always sits at the end of a row, away from windows, with an obviously European guy between him and the rest of the class. I did the names, dates and addresses on-line. It could be that his father commanded the 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Could be that he worked for the Syrians, carrying out a dozen assassinations, until he was assassinated.



Usually I am the only Westerner at the gym, and by far the oldest person. I don't speak much Arabic, but I manage to fit in: guys shake my hand when I enter, and the Beirut beauties say hi. Then another American started to work out, and yesterday a Lebanese guy pulled me aside and asked, "Is your friend crazy? Does he have a marble loose? Maybe he is spy?"

"Well, he's not a spy," I said. Conversation paused a moment as he gave me the gym's collective opinion that I resemble a sinister F.B.I. agent on the television show 24. The Lebanese watch a lot of television. Sets play in every store and restaurant, satellite dishes pop like

mushrooms from roofs and walls. People see themselves as series characters, but you don't know their shows. The murder of pop star Suzanne Tamim by an Egyptian tycoon had them transfixed. I could redact Beirut by television, but I don't watch their shows.

"Why do you think he's crazy?" I ask

It seems my countryman addresses everyone familiarly. He looks at the person on the next machine and asks, "Ya 'bout done there buddy?" Or "Whatcha got left to do, lady?" He thinks he's House M.D. Even the Lebanese who speak English don't know what to make of his familiarity. They only watch conspiracy TV.



Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah (and same age as Katija), fought against his own brother Hussein, a life-long member of Amal, when the two groups were at war in the 1980s. This is regarded as proof of his faith and integrity. Nasrallah's son was killed by the Israelis, and people prefer to focus on this: that smoothes out the narrative. It fits with hadith, the oral interpretation of the text.

Politics in Lebanon are conditional. You meet pro-Syrian Christians and former-Communist Druze. In the 1980s the birthrate was nine children per Shi'a family, eight per Sunni, and only six per Christian. But young men left Lebanon at the rate of 100 to 200,000 a year, going to jobs in Dubai or Dearborn, so it was reasonable that some Christians thought they could prevail. Then the Shia would return every year at Ramadan—like a river that takes a completely new channel—and the Christians got nervous.

There may be as many Lebanese living outside Lebanon as inside, from cold places like Montreal and Helsinki to Capetown and Caracas. In the 1970s when

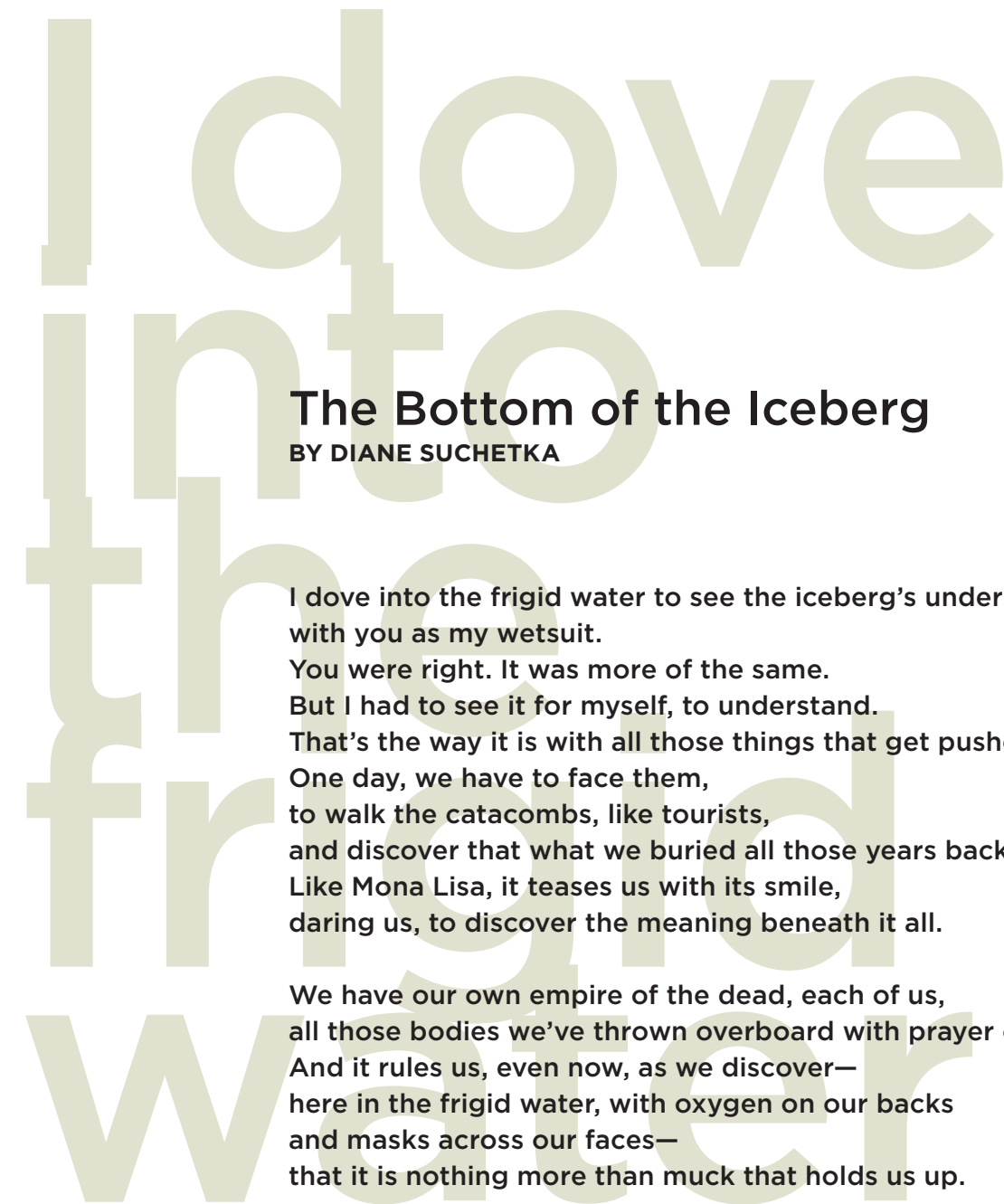
Shi'a in the Bequaa got pissed, they called on Nabih Berri. He was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, but grew up in Lebanon, and had been working in Detroit for General Motors as a lawyer. Detroit is where you go to get a divorce, avoiding the "confessional" nonsense in Lebanon. Dearborn has more Lebanese than Baalbek. Lebanese politicians go there to raise funds. At Metro Wayne Airport in 1998 the Feds pulled a Ford engineer off a flight: he was taking Boeing aviation GPS systems, night goggles, and thermal imaging units to Hezbollah.



That woman in the black burka came laughing down the steps of Miss Poem, a lingerie store on Hamra Street. She'd didn't care if the world looked into her bag. Down the street, sweeping up the sidewalk, was my vegetable man Osama: the customers call him "Hajj." The Rock Inn had just opened, and the Ukrainian hookers were standing outside to smoke. Snack Zbeeb was closing for the hot afternoon, but at the hair salon the Filipinas were still threading eyebrows. This is my Beirut, and I'm looking for more, heading down to the Corniche, where this one extremely graceful young man dives into the Mediterranean every day at 5 p.m. He's not there yet, so I watch this girl in peacock hijab, wearing silver heels and standing on one leg like a heron. As her mobile phone rings, she turns away from a slick-haired guy.

"You never laugh at my jokes," he continues.

"Mish hala," she said, "not now."



## The Bottom of the Iceberg

BY DIANE SUCHETKA

I dove into the frigid water to see the iceberg's underside with you as my wetsuit.  
You were right. It was more of the same.  
But I had to see it for myself, to understand.  
That's the way it is with all those things that get pushed below the surface.  
One day, we have to face them,  
to walk the catacombs, like tourists,  
and discover that what we buried all those years back—it's art.  
Like Mona Lisa, it teases us with its smile,  
daring us, to discover the meaning beneath it all.

We have our own empire of the dead, each of us,  
all those bodies we've thrown overboard with prayer or curse.  
And it rules us, even now, as we discover—  
here in the frigid water, with oxygen on our backs  
and masks across our faces—  
that it is nothing more than muck that holds us up.

You kept me warm inside that black suit.  
And when we surfaced, you whispered the iceberg's secret in my ear.  
"They don't crack," you said, so softly  
I thought your words were wind or waves.  
"One day, when everything is right, they calve."  
"Like you and me."  
Like you and me.

# The President is Japanese

BY CHARLOTTE MORGAN



WHEN I TRAVEL, I ENJOY WATCHING PEOPLE. I EASILY RECOGNIZE THE STEREOTYPES – the obese, the addict, the freak, and the homeless. When you fill a city bus terminal with travelers who can't afford to fly or don't have cars, and you place me on a hard bench, if given time, I will imagine the richness and hardness of the identities of my fellow travelers. I will consider their clothing, their smell, height, sadness, shoes, disappointment, teeth, race, and of course, their loneliness. Who am I to judge people? I answer that question in a soft inner whisper: "I'm one of the crowds; no one cares what I think."

How can you stand waiting in that nasty bus station? No one has ever asked. However, I know it's on their minds – their thoughts revealed through subtle changes in facial expressions – a curled lip or a raised eyebrow. I wouldn't have plucked myself down in this Petri dish situation if it weren't for the fact that I don't drive on the highway these days. Secretly, I enjoyed the spectacle of travel and traveling by bus was both beautiful and daunting. I loved the wide windshield and the open highway. Yet, nothing caused me more anxiety than waiting in a bus station with a bunch of strangers I feared I had far too much in common with.



The girl at the Cleveland Greyhound Customer Service counter was wide and chocolate-colored; her hair reminded me of Pocahontas. She printed my ticket and put a laminated tag on my luggage, and sent me on my way. I dragged my bag to the precipice of the terminal and the ceiling opened up over me, then the room filled with warm sunlight. This wasn't so bad I thought. It was early and there were only a few travelers. I walked over to Gate 8 which consisted of two doors and a rope. I placed my bag in the line. I wasn't the only person who arrived early for the Columbus bus. There was a stack of well worn plastic shopping bags up against the door.

I sat on the stairs which led to the upstairs offices. There was a sign which read: "Please don't sit on the stairs." My excuse: I wanted to be near my luggage. I looked around the room surveying for cameras to protect my bag. I found them high on the walls. And just below, were video games and vending machines with high-priced carbonated drinks. I saw a bank of public phones near the east end of the terminal where Gate 8 was located. I was conducting my reconnaissance, when

a wide bodied woman in uniform approached me. "Y'all can't sit on them stairs, that's why there's a sign." She waddled away. I hadn't noticed the rugged Hispanic man seated next to me. His skin was bronzed, and his mustache was thick and peppered with gray hairs. He smiled. "Guess we can't sit here." He had on thick soled brown shoes and faded blue jeans.

I got up and sat on a black bench near the west end of the terminal. I sat with my back to the flat screen television which hung on the wall above us. CNN coverage of President Obama's trip to Asia was the news of the morning. I sat across from three Asian travelers. The eldest, wore a black Stetson and black sunglasses. He appeared to be their leader. The other men in dark jackets and brown slacks followed the older man's lead. They stood where he stood; when he smiled, they smiled. He led them around the terminal. They weaved across the room, back and forth, in a line.

Just then, a slender figure of a woman in a white and blue head scarf, walked past me. She wore a red, brown and white plaid shirt and brown pants. I could see that she had on navy blue socks. On her feet, white cloth wedges that needed to be washed. She carried a large white and green plastic bag that was stuffed. She headed down to "refreshment world"—that part of the terminal which looked as if it were part of a nightmarish carnival what with its garish red and yellow lights and high-priced, fried food. I imagined there were colorful pictures of food to help the non-English speaking travelers.

I didn't want to go down there. Not after I found a container of recently purchased boiled eggs on the seat next to me – freaked me out. One of the Asian men politely picked up the package. He went back with his group, nodding and talking softly about me. Were they outraged that I looked at the eggs?

The woman with the shopping bag, headed back to Gate 8 now accompanied by an elderly woman who walked bent over. I watched the two women interact. There was no gentleness between the two; just sharp commands from the 'daughter' to the mother. The elderly woman was a burden. Little did the younger woman realize, one day she would be old and bent over and likely, all alone.

I turned around to watch President Obama in Asia, dancing with a crowd of colorfully dressed school children.

Time took pity on us all and moved along faster even though it had been set back an hour for Daylight Savings. I was beginning to feel tired. More people filed into the terminal with their tickets and luggage in hand. There was a tall cowboy in line at Gate 5; they were departing for parts south and then west.

Next, I spotted an older plump black woman carrying two sturdy brown shopping bags. She wore a gray athletic suit. There was a broad white and black stripe down the leg of the pants. Her shoulders were broad. She wore worn out sneakers. They were blue. She walked over to the gates on the north side of the terminal. She stood by the doors for a moment, looking out the window for something. And when it didn't appear, unaffected, she walked towards to south side of the terminal where the customer service desk was located along with the Chester Avenue exits. She stood near the counter for a moment and then walked over to the benches where I was seated. She sat behind me. I waited.

I turned sideways, looking down towards Gate 8 where my suitcase stood proud in line for me. What I really was doing was trying to catch a glimpse at the woman in the athletic suit. First, I noticed that there were holes in the left pant leg. It appeared that she had on black thermal underwear. Her dark brown hair appeared as if it had not been combed in weeks. A red rubber band struggled to keep some hair gathered, but it was minutes away from giving up. I looked down at those brown bags. But I was distracted by the three Asian men who stood near my luggage.

The eldest one, the one in the Stetson, had a silver camera in hand. He captured the moment in a flash. The subject of his photo, the two younger men, smiled at one another. They nodded with approval. As they were all laughing, a slender security guard came in through the Gate 8 doors. He saw the men and offered to take a photo of all three. He explained his offer with a few gestures. The men happily grouped together and the flash fired off once, then twice. They would be able to look back the image and remember this moment.

The woman next to me was watching as well. I heard her talking aloud. And she wasn't speaking to me. I

remembered that I wanted to check out her bags. They were cleaner than her clothing. I was surprised that the bags weren't frayed around the handles. The woman was still talking to no one in particular, but now she was talking about her bus ticket. I was surprised that she actually had one. I had determined that she was homeless. What did I know? She looked down the terminal at the three Asian travelers.

"I don't know 'bout them Japs! They put a Jap in the White House. Why did they put that muthafuckin' Jap in office. The goddamn president is a Jap. Been going on for years. About 40 damned years. Them goddamned Japanese! I don't trust 'em!"

I wish I had been surprised that she was a schizophrenic—her hair, her clothing, and the fact that she was all alone had alerted me. I was surprised that the three Asian men had set her off. Had she seen President Obama on the television screens over in Asia? I sat completely still on my side of the bench because I didn't want to set her off. But she kept her eyes fixed on the Asian men standing in line at Gate 7.

I watched the words come out of her barely parted lips. "Damn Japs! Muthafuckin' president is a Jap!" Only this time she was getting loud, her mouth was open wider and the words caused time to stand still for a moment. I got up because I felt her words and felt her life – she had become too real. I stood by my luggage. I dared not look back at her.

Behind me, other passengers going to Columbus formed a line. There was a solider, a student, and a mother with her baby. The happy blonde baby danced barefoot on what I knew to be a dirty floor. The little girl twirled and coughed. She coughed and her nose ran. Their luggage was new looking. The younger girl in a red Ohio State Buckeye jacket was actually the one traveling to Columbus. The mother and daughter were seeing her off.

A garbled announcement filled the air. Passengers began to board the bus at Gate 7, the line where the Asian men stood. The Hispanic man I sat on the steps with kicked his khaki duffel bag forward. And there was an elderly woman with a walker and oxygen tank. There was a tall young man in a navy hoodie. He had a red and black book bag. In one hand, he carried a bottle of water; in the other, his ticket and cell phone.

In the distance, the schizophrenic woman's mouth was moving. She was likely still complaining that the president was a Jap. Her head moved back and forth. Finally, she got up and walked down towards the food court with her bags.

After another garbled announcement, my line began to move. The two women gathered up all of their plastic bags and headed towards the bus. I handed the driver my ticket and stepped out in the warm sunshine.

# Conversation

NIN ANDREWS & AUTHOR CHRISTOPHER BARZAK



**NIN ANDREWS (NA)** You have written a few essays about Youngstown and I am very moved by them. In each one (and especially *The B&O, Crossroads of Time and Space*), you manage to touch the heart of the place. It's as if the city itself has become a character in your work. Can you talk about the influence of place on your writing?

**CHRISTOPHER BARZAK (CB)** Thanks, Nin. I'm glad you've found the Youngstown vignettes I've been writing moving. I moved to Youngstown from a small family farm in Northern Trumbull County when I was 19 and started attending college at Youngstown State University. While the city has a mostly negative reputation in the suburban and rural townships that surround it, it gave me a new experience, even though it was just forty-five minutes down the road from where I grew up surrounded by fields and cows. It was the first time I lived in a diverse place, and the history of the city began to become important to me over the years because it was the center from which all the towns that surrounded it grew from, and because it was so heartbreaking. Fallen cities are becoming more and more prevalent in the U.S. in recent years, and there seems to be a sort of interest

growing among Americans about the subject as the trend continues. In many ways, I see Youngstown's fall as a precursor to what we've seen occurring in recent years as corrupt governments are uncovered and corporate interests take precedence over community interests. It's a really rich history that this place has, and I've learned to appreciate it and to use it to understand where some of the ingrained cultural beliefs I was raised with in this region come from. And through that, I've learned how to question those beliefs, and to change them when I think it's necessary.

Youngstown hasn't been the only place to make an impression on me, of course. I've traveled around a lot, and lived in other places. My second novel is set in Japan, where I lived for two years. The process of writing that book, *The Love We Share Without Knowing*, was a way for me to understand the people and the place where I was living then. Bits of folklore like fox spirits mingle with modern Japanese phenomena like suicide clubs in that book. I suppose when I'm writing, at least most of the time, place is where I start. How else can I make characters if I don't know where they come from, and how that place has shaped their characters, the way mine was shaped growing up rural, then moving into a post-industrial American city in decline?

I've written stories set in southern California, Thailand, and New York, too. Places where I've been moved by something I've witnessed or experienced, where the soil, sand and water of the place got into me and nurtured me in some way, started to work on my imagination.

**(NA)** You start out in this essay by talking about Youngstown, its past, its present, with very concrete details, and then you use the city as a springboard for talking about your writing process. Is this how you often start writing? By focusing on a concrete subject and then moving into your imagination?

**(CB)** It depends, really, on the piece. I often do start by focusing on a concrete subject and then moving into my imagination, letting it move into territories that might not seem like they have anything to do with the subject at first, but eventually connections are made, and I tend to be teaching myself something I knew but hadn't realized as I write in this way. It's similar, I think, to what E.M. Forster said about his writing process, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" I remember reading that as an undergraduate and not quite understanding what he meant. The longer I've written, the more it makes sense.

I don't always start from a specifically concrete subject matter, though. In these pieces I've been writing about Youngstown recently, those do often start from a specific concrete image, or locale, and then move off into the ether of time. In my fiction, though, I've found that I start more from the voice of a story, be it a first person narrator's voice or one that I put on for the telling. And its by trusting the voice that I find everything I need for the story, the way Virginia Woolf once remarked that once she has the rhythm of the sentence for a piece of writing, all the others seem to come quite naturally. She might work on getting that rhythm in one sentence for a long time, but after she has it, it seems the voice she's established commands almost everything that comes after.

**(NA)** In this piece you seem to be describing how you see the past in the present, the imaginary in the real. Do you think of truth as inherently dialectical? Or do you think there are certain crossroads of time and space, certain moments or places like the B&O in this story that inspire a kind of dialectical experience?

**(CB)** I'd like to say yes to both of these questions. The truth does seem, at least to me, to come from a process of questioning and sorting through the connections and interconnections of whatever subject is at hand. But I also do feel that certain moments or places can inspire this kind of experience by virtue of having the right blend of characteristics. For me to write

this piece, it took several things to happen. I had twice in the past taken the train from Youngstown's B&O, once to New York City, and once across country to California. Several years later, I was reading Henry Miller's travel book, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, which was written in the 1940s as he traveled cross country to observe the industrialization of America, and came across a passage in which he travels by train from Pittsburgh to Youngstown and sees these two young women walking down a hillside in the city, which reminds him of girls he'd seen in Greece. The city he describes seeing in that book felt very different to me, not at all like the city I know, and by the time I read that, the B&O station had been closed, and I began to think about those girls Miller saw, and how this place was no longer their home. It would be a strange place to them, not very familiar at all. And as I thought about how the experience of seeing the future of their home in such decline would be a surprise and a shock to them, I began to look over my own shoulder at the future, and wondered what it might hold for the people living here now, what they and their children and so on might see. All of these factors had to come into a sort of alignment for me to write the piece, and writing it was in a way me making that alignment, becoming a part of it.

Usually I dread looking at the past with all its ghosts and unfinished sentences and abandoned sorrows. I like the future because it's as wide open as a piece of unlined paper. But

in your essay you express a fear of the future, as if you dare not look into it.

**(NA)** Can you talk about that a little?

**(CB)** I like looking into the future, too, but there's something daring about doing that, I think, speculating. I think there's a bit of the same feeling in looking back into the past as well, a kind of dare. The present is really the only place in time that we can't help but see, it's all around us, so looking backward or forward is always a corner that has to be turned. The future feels full of possibility, but what I feel like I've learned from the past is that the future isn't always—is probably very rarely—what we imagined it being, that we have less control than we like to think. As I was writing this particular piece, I couldn't help but think of those girls Henry Miller saw, and their mothers, and how their mothers see the future in them, and how most likely they are all full of prospects for their futures, but they don't see that the future isn't completely in their hands, that there are outside forces that shape our lives just as much if not more than we do, that at least shape our options. When I think about their vanished neighborhood, I wonder about my own, if I looked forward and could actually see into the future, would it be there? Will the sentences I'm writing be unfinished or abandoned or forgotten, made invisible? Most likely they will. But then, I might be thinking in a somewhat fatalistic way that is indicative of a person from a region that has mainly see things decline instead of improve over the

course of his lifetime. It can make a person a bit of a pessimist.

And then I make myself think about what the nature of decline or progress is, and stand in a different corner of the room, and look at it from there. Maybe the decline in this area isn't a bad thing at all. The skies aren't choked with smoke, the land has a chance to green again as fewer people take up its resources. Ecologically, I think the decline of industry has provided this region with a better future, even as its ruined its economy. There are trade-offs, I suppose. Neighborhoods disappearing may seem despairing if looked at one way, may seem hopeful for the return of spring if looked at from another. Much of the fear of looking over my shoulder at the future in this particular piece hinges on how we view progress and decline in America, I think.

**(NA) I read your first two novels as soon as I could get my hands on them and now I can't wait to see the next one. I know this is asking about the future, but can you say a few words about what you are working on now? And selfishly, may I ask when I might expect to find it in the stores?**

**(CB)** I'm not sure when you can expect to find it in stores, as right now I'm in the process of doing some rewriting to the book. I finished a first draft of the new novel, which is called, *Wonders of the Invisible World*, this summer. And now, after it's cooled a bit, I'm going through it and deciding what I'd like to take

out of it, what I'd like to put in, what I'd like to tease out that's still latent in the story, what I'd like to push into the shadows of the story, things that may be crowding the stage, so to speak. So I'm in the midst of the revision process.

The story, though, is a family generational chronicle that covers a hundred years in the life of a family in Northeast Ohio. It starts at the beginning of the twentieth century and ends just over the edge of the twenty-first. It's a first person narrative, despite the fact that the novel is about three generations, some of whom the narrator wasn't alive to witness their stories. But, as in both of my first novels, there's an element of magic in the book. In this one, the magic shows up as a kind of ability to see the future in the narrator's mother's side of the family. In the narrator, though, the ability is a bit deformed. He can't see the future. He sees the past instead, and its through his visions of his family over the generations that he stitches together their story, which he is making in an attempt to hold off death--his, his family's, the death of the place he comes from--for a little longer. There are other aspects to the book, but this is the central thread.

**(NA) You have won a lot of recognition as a genre writer (or maybe a cross-genre writer) and an author of interstitial fiction. When I read your novels and short stories, I am confused by the labels. You don't seem like a genre writer to me, but then maybe I don't understand how publishers determine these**

**things. Or is it the authors? Why is *One for Sorrow* an example of genre fiction, when the *Lovely Bones* is not? Can you talk a little about being an author of genre fiction? Could you define interstitial fiction for those who have no clue what it is? How do you see yourself? I'd love as much explanation as you are willing to supply. (What cross-genre authors do you admire? What draws you to this kind of writing? Etc.**

**(CB)** I'm confused by the labels, too, so don't feel alone. It's difficult for me to place myself in any one category of writing. To some extent, that's marketing your work to whatever audience you feel would most enjoy it. But this is always difficult for me, as I don't tend to write anything that falls squarely into one category. I don't think that the best books do fall into just one category anyway. The book I'm working on now, for instance, feels like its several different kinds of books: coming of age, historical, mystery, fantasy. I draw on aspects of each of those genres and pull them into one story.

I grew up reading without boundaries, without classifying, just looking for a good story, and preferably a good story that was also written in a way where the language itself moved me somehow. So I have a broad palette of tastes in reading as well as writing. But I've always been attracted to the possibility of metaphor in fantasy literature, and attracted to the portraiture of human character in realism. So I tend,

more often than not, to write in a style that blends these two readerly and writerly loves together. Some people call it magical realism, others fabulism, some will just say they're fantasies, and others will stake out a claim that they're realism but filled with characters who see the world at a slant. I'm fine with however anyone wants to classify my writing, really.

I think publishers determine how a book is classified to some extent. The marketing departments try to guess at how to sell a book. My books have come out in the general fiction and literature shelves, but I've also had this career of writing short stories in the fantasy and science fiction field, as well as for young adult anthologies. My first book was a conundrum for the marketers. They didn't know if it was YA or adult (they decided adult, in the end, because the book ventures into a couple of territories that would keep it out of high school classrooms), and they didn't know if it was fantasy or something more of interest to readers of realism but with a flare for the supernatural. One of my favorite writers had a similar kind of classification problem years ago. Shirley Jackson, who wrote *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. And most famously, the short story called "The Lottery." I like writing that blurs boundaries, that questions how a story should be told, what is genre and what isn't?

I've found that genre magazines are often more open to this kind of fiction than literary magazines, or

at least for a long time that's the way things were. But I have to admit, even with genre magazines, I would sometimes be questioned. If I sent a story to a literary magazine, for example, I often received the loveliest personal rejection letters from the editors saying, "This is written so well, but I'm afraid we don't publish genre fiction." Okay. And then I'd send the story to a genre magazine, and the editor would write me an equally lovely personal letter saying, "You have such a wonderful voice, and I like this story quite a bit, but I think it would be better off in a literary review." Hmm.

So there is this kind of writing that exists between the expectations of both "literary" and "genre" writing. Some people call it slipstream writing; others, more recently, have begun to use the term "interstitial" to describe it. Writing that falls between categories or expectations. Sometimes authors of this type of work are called genre-benders. Some of the writers of this type of fiction who I admire include: Jonathan Lethem, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter, Ursula K. Le Guin, Kelly Link, Jonathan Carroll, Graham Joyce, A.S. Byatt, Steven Millhauser, Aimee Bender, Carol Emshwiller, Karen Joy Fowler, Alan Deniro, M. Rickert, Richard Bowes, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Michael Chabon. Lots more, actually, but that's a good start.

There's also a lot of information gathered about this kind of writing at The Interstitial Arts Foundation's website, which is [www.interstitialarts.org/wordpress](http://www.interstitialarts.org/wordpress).

I co-edited an anthology of this type of fiction, called *Interfictions 2*, with one of the founders of that group, Delia Sherman.

When I personally think about this kind of writing, though, I need to go back to our original discussion of place in writing, because I think of interstitial writing in place-based terms. I think of literature as a vastly ranging ecosphere, in which many different kinds of story grow and flourish or wither. My favorite places in the ecosphere of literature are the ecotones, an ecological term, where varying kinds of territories – mountain and forest, grassland and wetland – cross into one another, displaying features of multiple kinds of territories for that period of transition between the two or more of them. They are fabulously unique places. Between and betwixt. I write in a similar manner, within those transitory spaces in the literary landscape.

# Not Saving the World

BY ERIN L. GADD



KICK-KICK, KICK-KICK. THE TWINS, JIMMY AND JEREMIAH, SWING THEIR LEGS FROM THE CHILD'S SEAT OF THE GROCERY CART, little feet bruising into my thighs while I drift off into an imaginary conversation with my husband Scotty. See, I tell pretend-Scotty, this is why I live in my sweat pants. I can't believe this exactly makes me feel accomplished, but there it is. Life has changed.

It's already been fifteen minutes and we're still puttering around the produce section because James, the oldest of my four boys, wants to "Help mommy!" by reaching his little four-year-old arms to collect items that attract his fancy—perfectly palmable limes, football-wannabe star fruits, pea pods which he splits and plucks and flicks about the store—all of which I try to set back into order if the twins haven't already slipped them into their teething, eager mouths. At this rate baby Gino, sleeping dutifully in the baby carrier on my chest, is going to wake up in the middle of the store demanding some boob and so help me, that's just more than I can handle this morning. Gino's diaper hasn't been changed since his morning nursing, I haven't showered, and the twins are still in their fleece footy pj's. I close my mind to the unflattering image I have of this woman I have so swiftly, naturally, overnight, become.

Gino jerks slightly in his baby dreams. Some days I feel as if he is still a part of me, his dense chunk of a body so near my own I swear I can even feel his heartbeat quickening. But there's so little time to enjoy this. I hold before the twins a honeydew in one hand, a cantaloupe in the other, but instead of helping me choose they just smile with their watery, sweet curious stares.

"Mommy's crazy," I suggest to them, nodding with a mommy smile, trying to match words to their expressions. Jeremiah, the one with the sense of humor, chews on a finger and laughs a bit while off behind his wispy blonde head the movement of the store's automatic doors catches my eye and who should stroll in but my gynecologist. I feel a flare of something like fear or cold or heat or, hell, who knows, and I just pray James doesn't throw that orange in her direction.

I get it now that one shouldn't choose something important, like, say, a doctor by the sound of a name alone. But "Dr. Nina Klein"—doesn't that just sound like someone you want on your side when you're popping a baby out? From that first rush of pregnancy hormones her name called to me from the hospital's directory—the vowel "i" repeating in a way that sounded so capable, so sure. As a public relations executive the names of things meant so much to me then—sounds capturing all we hope for ourselves by buying that new product, having that new thing. Assurance, clarity, capability—that's what her name seemed to offer to me. Stunned to be pregnant at 36, with a busy career I adored, those were the very things I felt I needed right then.

I ease the boys nonchalantly in the opposite direction of Nina as she struggles with one of those awful carts designed to entertain kids. You know the ones. They're those injection-molded clunkers that are supposed to make shopping fun just because they're shaped like a truck, or a compact car. I don't see what's so fun about that when you can't even maneuver through a damn store. A moment of sisterly camaraderie makes me almost turn back and suggest that she rethink her strategy in order to save her shopping trip, but maybe she knows what's doing, so I let her decision play its course.

I move my boys on to the organic dairy section, ticking off the vegetables in my mind that I'll need to swing back around for. Lettuce, even though I know it will end up a slimy unused mess at the rear of the refrigerator. Celery, or James will freak out at snack time. Peppers for the fajitas, which everyone will spit out to drool like slugs from their chins. Squash for homemade baby food. Corn, the only vegetable every one

of them will eat. Each selection shines so clearly in my mind, sparkling with a promise of mealtime perfection. Anything to hold off a round of screams and tears at dinnertime—those moments of family madness when Scotty's eyes will connect with mine from across the room, asking, "Tell me why we had all these children again?" and mine pleading, "Just a couple more years, and things will calm down some," and his widening, "A couple more years? But will I ever see you naked again?" and me trying to do something special with eyes, a little glimmer here, the wink of a promise there, to suggest, "Tonight...you're all mine...we're almost there..." It sounds complicated but all moms get around to perfecting that look sooner or later. It's the only way to get everyone in bed by 9:00.

Gino has fallen still again, his breath warming my collarbone. The twins are busy shoving grapes in their mouths—a move I'll regret at diaper time but for now, their good behavior is worth it. James stands at the front of the cart pretending to be the look-out of a pirate ship, one hand cupped into a telescope. My heart swells with all sorts of love in moments like this. I make a decision about which yogurt we'll go with this week, while the twins chirp, "Mommy! Mommy!" like two baby birds, so I let them put the yogurt and some cheese in the cart and James arranges them just so. They can be such good boys.

And then I hear it. The bumping, guttural, rubbing sound of Nina's cart approaching us from behind. It's like some hell train bearing down on us, flames licking, sparks flying. The twins strain to look around me (hell trains are their sort of thing, no doubt about it) and James points and says in his most manipulative voice, "Hey, I know you. Can I have a sucker?" I have no choice but to turn to acknowledge Dr. Klein with a smile.

Which sucks. I hate her, I do. In that way we women hate the lost possibility of our alternate selves—and this one doesn't wear sweatpants to the grocery store. All sorts of protests and opinions start bubbling up in us, wanting release: I'd never choose so-and-such career because this. I'd never let my kids so-and-such because that. So many wars instantly break into combat when we face each other, it's exhausting. You would think motherhood would have the opposite effect, allow us all to be more supportive of one another, accepting of each other's choices. But no. Be nice, says pretend-Scotty, so I smile hello.

Tick, tick, tick goes my mental pen to the check list I tally about this woman and her impossibly high heels and her tan and her French manicure and her cool blonde hair and her little girl in a pink tutu and white tights and black shiny shoes and, ok, she's damn cute, her little girl, I'll give her that. So well behaved, so still and smiling. My boys are practically falling out of the cart to get a look at this sweet thing—they go absolutely gaga for little girls, always have—and even Gino begins to rustle against my chest, sensing the excitement. His eyes pop open and I feel a rush of milk to my breasts and in that moment, suddenly, all of me becomes so heavy. My sagging green sweatpants that Scotty has threatened to toss in the fireplace on more than one occasion. The wet wipes and sippy cups waiting at the ready in my purse. My unwashed hair yanked back in a pony tail. My glasses smeared at the edge of my vision with what I'm hoping is peanut butter. Ugh.

Nina pulls her cart next to mine and begins the appropriate cooing over the boys—Jimmy, the youngest twin, was just in to see our pediatrician with an ear infection so he pulls away from her and the white lab coat, afraid. Jeremiah reaches for a dangling gold orb that glitters from her delicate and probably cool-to-the-touch wrist. Something in me wants to sink my teeth into that wrist. But I continue to smile while Nina's daughter peeks shyly at Gino, who is now frantically mouthing my collarbone, hoping a nipple will magically appear.

"Aww, time for someone's breakfast!" says Nina cheerfully, and she smooths her hand over Gino's head. I flinch, fearing she'll feel the flat spot he's developed on the back of his skull from sleeping in the same position all the time. And even though I know no amount of belly-time will make his sleeping habits change, that spot brings out a wicked guilt in me. I guess that's a feeling I'll always have now—worrying about one or the other (or the other, or the other) and in this particular moment I aim all this ugliness at Nina. Is she insinuating I'm a bad mother for not being at home to feed him? Is she speaking in some weird mother-code that says I'm crazy to bring my child to a public place when I know he's going to want to eat soon? I suppose it's possible she's just making chit-chat, but are women ever really capable of doing that?

"Why do you still go to her if she makes you feel this way?" Scotty asked me once, after a visit had left me so riled up and defensive, he found me angrily cleaning

the play room, throwing toys into their bins in such a way I'd caused the boys to run out of the room screaming and laughing at me.

Do I know the answer to this? I want there to be something I can put my finger on, like maybe Nina had trouble conceiving and ended up adopting her daughter and therefore I feel sorry for her or something. My vagina: her consolation prize. Or, maybe we had some bonding moment during the deliveries of the boys that made us understand one another in some deep soulful way, like a good drunken night can do. But, no.

I'm trying to think how I would tell pretend-Scotty that it's just easier to not go and find someone else when Nina asks, "So how is the nursing going?" in a tone which I hear as, Still trying to save the world with your boobs, are you?



What can I say? When I was first in labor with James all I knew was that I wanted him out of me, as fast as I could, because I was done with being pregnant, and eager for things to get back to normal. Even as I rode out the labor pains, my eye on the clock as one contraction chased the other just a minute apart, I was thinking about how soon I would be able to work out and get my body back so I could fit back into my sharp black suit, squeeze back on my snakeskin heels. I considered the end of pregnancy getting on with my life. My plan was to set up a home office near the nursery so that I could work from home and have virtual meetings through a web-cam while James napped. Nothing really had to change, I'd decided. But as I continued to rock in that chair over the next 22 hours, Nina's heels clicking in and out of that room, I felt a friendly delirium knocking at my brain, and I politely invited it in.

She kept offering me pain meds, and while I'd never before been a stranger to self-medication—this is one of the more useful things I learned in college—that part of me that never missed a deadline for a client and worked through the night to come up with a winning proposal, and returned media calls even when they came at 2:00 in the morning kicked in—and I was determined to work through that labor on my own.

When I'd shared this plan with Nina she had taken my hand in hers, said, "You don't have to be a hero here; there's no such thing as winning a birth." Which maybe she'd meant as supportive, but instead

it had closed me to her. I guess that was the first time I experienced another woman questioning my choices—my choices—as a mommy, and I made the decision to head down that tunnel of pain alone, each breath taking me further and further from her bright, blonde place.

From the moment I first heard James's voice calling out, there was this swimming shift in me and somehow I recognized that voice and it was as though I'd always known this little person and I brought his naked body to my own and the weight I'd felt there, as he quieted and lay breathing with me, softened me in ways that are undoable.

And so yes, I became the woman who quit her job for her kids, which my co-workers still can't believe. And yes, I buy organic food even though we can't afford it. And yes, I wear sweatpants almost every single day, because you know why? Because I can. Because I want to. And at the same time, I am embarrassed by the depth of my love, by my somewhat graceless fall into motherhood.



Gino's searching and subtle whimpering rises to a wail and suddenly I have no choice. If I'm going to be bringing home any damn food tonight I have to feed him now. And even though line of the deli counter is so close I can reach over and snatch the precious numbers that hold their places in line, I quickly rearrange my shirt and thank God I'm not wearing a bra and I urge that strong mouth to my nipple and I close my eyes a second and sigh in relief as my world becomes wonderfully quiet from the thrum of his suckling. My other boys seem calmed by this too, perhaps with memories of their own at my breast, but Nina's little girl has gone pale and eyes wide, unable to pull her gaze.

"Well I'm glad to see you have things under control," says Nina with a smile. "I look forward to seeing you again soon." Why? I wonder. Why would she say that? Because I pop out babies like it's my job or something? Surely she'll see me soon since I can't seem to keep my legs closed around my husband for two seconds? And off she goes, heels clicking, the 6-wheeled monster cart bumping noisily over the tiled floor as her little girl gapes back at us, like we're something her mom normally shields her eyes from during a visit to the zoo.

I steer our cart back to the vegetables, though the boys are starting to get restless now. I don't care. I'm not going home without the damn celery, or the peppers. I'm just not.



And, OK. So maybe I was overacting. It's possible I'm having issues with my hormones. That does happen, if I'm to be completely honest. And with the baby calmed and the blissed-out nursing hormones taking over, I'm able to feel a little more tender towards Nina and her little girl. So much so, that when I finally steer our way over to the cashiers, I panic a little when I see Nina struggling to push that stupid cart through the check-out lane. I should have warned her about that. If I was any kind of woman, I would have given her the heads-up that if not steered in at exactly the right angle, it won't fit.

Nina is using so much force you can see the scuff marks on the bottom of her pumps as she pushes and jerks that cart with all her might to force it through. When her daughter starts screaming, I'm willing to bet a million dollars her finger is caught between the cart and the register. That's the scream of a finger pinch.

"What is it, princess? What do you want?" The cashier is trying to point out the problem, but Nina's not paying attention. She thinks she's dealing with a tantrum.

"Candy? Do you want some candy?" Then she opens the soda cooler at the end of the cashier station,

"A drink? Are you thirsty?" Oh, man, I hate those moments. When you'd give anything to make your kid happy if you could only crack the code. I fear she's going to cry, and move in her direction to help, but someone gets in line behind her so I stop.

"What do you want, sweetheart? How can I make you happy?"

Her daughter continues to wail. And even with Gino at my breast, that animal thing in me kicks in, and suddenly my other breast gets caught up in a confused, sympathetic lactation, leaking in spite of itself. Poor boobs. They just don't know when to stop giving, and giving, do they? There's just no stopping them. They have a kindness uniquely their own.

I'm just thankful the baby carrier covers the milk stain spreading dark over my shirt, that the chatter and babble of my boys covers the sounds of the scene we leave behind. We head out to the parking lot and I'm standing there, trying to remember where I left our car, when I realize something. Something I would never tell Scotty, because I don't want him to ever understand, It's interesting, I never tell him, so interesting, how the warmth of my milk cools so swiftly with just the slightest breeze.

# Fluid Ground

BY SHANNON LEIGH THOMAS



SUMMER WANES. IN THE WEEKS LEADING UP TO THE BIRTH, HUGE AND AWKWARD, I keep moving, walk the woods. Green but fading, they celebrate with a last hurrah; the asters bloom purple and white, the fields blaze yellow with goldenrod.

Inside I am porous and raw with a fear bordering terror. As much as I want this baby, I don't want her to be born. I don't want to share her with her father, a man I barely know. Biologically she is his too and he claims her. I convince myself she is mine only, that other than one cell, he has no part in her coming to be. Every time he says "our baby" or "my daughter" I have to repress the physical urge to shudder. I don't trust him. How can I keep her safe in two homes? I can't, it's impossible. She could be taken from me, her body broken, her mind broken, her spirit broken. I want to keep her cocooned within me. Keep her safe and mine. But she grows inside. She grows so big that I can't draw a full breath or eat a full meal. I can feel her limbs, each differentiated as she moves and twists inside. I have to release her into the world. I have to let her go.



The fall equinox comes, a perfect 12-hour day. On this very last long day, my labor starts.

"I can't do this," I pant in the pauses. "I can't do this."

My midwife assures me, "But you are doing this."

I labor so hard I leave the world. It barrels through me like a thunderstorm and with no conscious thought my body takes over. I shake. I forget why I'm here. Then it's done and Pam flips the slippery little package, unwinds the cord, lays her in my arms and I am surprised. I forgot I was having a baby. "Oh!" I say, "This is what that was all about."

A steady, gentle rain falls; the first day of autumn dawns.



One-month-old-Autumn is a delight, a little truffle piglet, cherub chubby and happy. My body sings in a wash of hormones, I have never been so happy. She is here; she is mine. But, in the nighttime, I am revisited by my fears. They grip with an inverse intensity to match my joy. Her father, on the edge of our lives, flickers in and out of focus like an ominous shadow. He loves her, she loves him; they're connected, I can see it, but I am still afraid. My mom holds Autumn as I shower and ready for bed. Clean, tired, I take my daughter, little nuzzle bundle and lie down with

her. I settle her to nurse; she nurses easily. She falls asleep at my breast and I lay her to my side. I lie back in the dim light coming from the bathroom and sigh a deep, joy-to-be-lying-sigh. Beside me, little sleeping soul takes a deep breath and heaves a matching sigh, a sigh with the same length, pitch and tone.

My mom laughs. "You have a mimic," she says.

But I know it's more. This is the answer to my fear; we are connected beyond body and form. We connect on a level so deep I don't even need to think about it. She's not just mimicking me, my body is speaking for her, and hers, understanding the language, takes up the cue and speaks for itself.



The nights grow and the days shrink toward the Solstice; I birth-quest again. I know (technically) that I can't stay pregnant forever. I know (technically) that it's impossible. It feels possible. In fact it feels as if I am definitely going to be pregnant forever as I go a week past my due date and then some. Never in my life have I felt less in control of my own body. I am betrayed.

Eight days past my due date, I stand at the sink washing dishes. I am crying, not even trying to stop. I just let the tears stream silently down my face, drip onto my arms and run into the dishwasher. What is wrong with me? What is wrong with my body? I can't even give birth, I think. I pity myself. Suddenly I'm raging. I am so angry, I leap up and down as forcefully as possible, stomping my feet and screaming, "Come out you little shit! Just come out! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I stand startled and horrified. My feet and legs are sore all the way up to my knees from the force of the impact. I kneel on the floor and cry, now in earnest. What is wrong with me? I am screaming at my unborn baby, trying to rage him into being. I cradle my arms underneath the mountain of my belly and rock back and forth.

"Oh baby, I am so sorry... Sweet little baby... Mama loves you... I know that you know what you're doing. You just..." The words, stick in my throat and I gag on them. I force them out, "... just come when you are ready."

Solon is born on the light side of the longest night of the year. A blizzard blows wild. The snow falls so heavy I can see it grow on my bedroom window ledge as I labor. David lights the beeswax candle. The room glows golden and smells like honey. The wind shrieks around the corner of the house and I pant.

"Holy shit!" I say in the briefest pause between the second to last and last contractions. "Holy fuck!" I hang over the edge of the birth tub on my knees. This time I am not lost in some other dimension. I know where I am and I know what I'm doing. The final big contraction rises to meet me and my body pushes into it. I rise up and feel my hip joint crack; his head blooms. He is still in the caul. One more push and he breaks free. He's all here.

This time I'm expecting a baby. I hold him up out of the water, lean back into David. "Oh, sweet boy. I'm so glad you're here. Sweet little baby."



After his long holdout, I'm not surprised to find he isn't sure he likes the world. He's fussy, fitful. I wake at night to nurse him. He drinks and drinks until he is full, then he lets go. He frets and writhes in my arms and I sit up to burp him. I pat his back... pat, pat, pat - rub, rub, rub, in an ongoing rhythm of threes. He arches his back out against my hand and I pat a little harder. I bounce him. Then, out of the center of me, I feel an air bubble moving up my throat, a tiny silent burp. I pause in my patting, rubbing, bouncing. I don't know where it's coming from. It is the middle of the night and my digestion is fully at rest, yet here it is. It moves slowly, with little force and peters out in my windpipe. Before even a moment passes, I feel Solon's own gas release as if I've turned a valve. He burps a big burp and is asleep before I can even lie back down.

I lay there for a while, stalled awake and wondering. In the darkness, I know again that my body speaks with the body of my infant; our cells are synchronized. My body, with no conscious thought, teaches his body to burp, the art of release. His cells are complex divisions of my own cells, swollen to fruit. He is separate, but he is still me. And pressed against him, my body knows him as itself.



I was born in early July. My mom picked sour cherries in the back yard, pitted and baked them into a pie on the day before her labor started. Upside down, they cut me out of her. They put a curtain up and didn't tell her what they were doing. In shock, she shook too much to hold me, handed me back to the nurse.



One day into seventeen, I tell my mom I have a headache and lay in bed all morning pretending to be sick, but really just feeling the new feeling, heavy, swollen. The night before, my birthday, I snuck out of my window, ran down the street barefoot. For the first time I let my boyfriend pull off my star-spangled panties and make love to me.

I can't quite believe it; I had sex. All I wanted was to know, to not be left behind in some late-teen surge toward adulthood. All bones and awkward angles I embraced my first lover, a boy I had known since before I could remember, with nothing more than curiosity and the desire to keep up. It was my idea, but still I leveraged my legs inward against the pressure; I tried to keep him out, just a bit.

I lay in bed with my shades drawn, contemplating my ambivalence from half sleep. I have no idea what to think, so I give up thinking. I get up for lunch; tell my mom I'm feeling better. I'm leaving for England on a school trip in another day, so my mom takes me to the mall for a few last minute things: sunscreen, passport protector, travel hat.

It's hot, July 6; we walk into the relief of air conditioning after the asphalt heat of the parking lot. Out of nowhere, as we walk through the food court, my mom says to me, "I got pregnant really easily. I didn't even have to try." She pauses. "You should remember that."

I look at her. I know she doesn't know about my midnight tryst, but I realize that on a deep level she knows something. She knows it so clearly that it bubbles up out of her unconscious, unaware, but clearly there. Even one day into 17 it's clear to me; she knows me on a level too deep to name or qualify.

"Great mom. Thanks." I laugh. Awkward. She laughs too.

In an alternate universe, I might have confessed everything to her, sat down right there in an orange plastic booth, poured it out clean, to clear the spinning ambiguities inside of me, but not in this one. Instead I roll my eyes and laugh, embarrassed by the intimacy of her confession.

I don't tell her that she's standing on an edge. That she's standing on the border of some new frontier, some fluid common ground between one self and another, between a mother and a child. Maybe she doesn't know we're linked, but I do. I keep it to myself and remember it clearly. When my own children are born, I look for that link and find it easy in the struggle to bubble up a little burp; I find the depth of our connection in the heaving of a tiny sigh.

# What Aunt Lizzie Saw

BY SUSAN PETRONE



THE FIRST TIME I SAW THE FUTURE WAS AT MY COUSIN BOBBY'S WEDDING IN 1972.

I sat with great Aunt Lizzie, and she told me that she could always see things—sometimes sounds, but also things that were happening in another place or things that might happen in the future. I've always been able to see sounds. In first grade, I told another kid that my favorite song had green and purple swirls. When he hit me on the arm and called me a weirdo was when I learned that most people can't see sounds, just like they can't see the future. Aunt Lizzie told me that she and I see more than most people. My grandmother's word for her sister Lizzie is loopy. Loopy Lizzie. When my family thinks I can't hear them, they call me The Genius, but I know they aren't saying it as a compliment.

Aunt Lizzie is my great-aunt. My grandmother and Aunt Lizzie and their nine brothers and sisters grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, on a street called Briar Hill. My grandparents got married in 1929; two months later the stock market crashed so they moved in with her family because there was no work. Then after they got work and had my dad, they just stayed. Out of eleven kids, one, Genevieve, died when she was twenty-four. Another one, John, died before he was two. They named my father after him. They did it out of respect, my grandmother says. Everybody in the family knows that story. Our family has a lot of stories.

Everybody at the wedding was older than me. My sisters and brother kept talking to all our relatives, but I didn't remember anybody's name because I hadn't seen them since I was a baby. I stuck close to my mom. After a while, she told me that I should go and sit with Aunt Lizzie and talk to her because she was sitting all alone. Then my mom went and danced with my dad and forgot all about me.

All the tables at the wedding were round and had either purple or pink tablecloths on them. The dance floor was in the middle so no matter where you were sitting, you could watch the people dancing. Aunt Lizzie was sitting by herself at a table that was as far away from everybody else as you could get and still be in the same room. The tablecloth where she was sitting was purple. I like purple better than pink. It's more thoughtful.

I walked over to the table, and Aunt Lizzie smiled at me. She had lipstick on her teeth, but it was still a nice smile.

"Can I sit here?" I asked.

"Of course, Emily" she said. I sat down next to Aunt Lizzie and didn't say anything else. Every time the band finished playing a song, everybody would clap whether they liked the song or not. The band started a new song and it was red starbursts. I hadn't told anyone about seeing sounds since the first day of school, so I don't know why I told Aunt Lizzie the music was red. I just did, and she didn't make fun of me. She just said, "Yes, it is."

I closed my eyes for a minute to listen to the red music and when I opened my eyes, for a second I saw everyone at the wedding standing in a circle and some people crying and other people standing there, looking around like they were waiting for something to come and help them. And then I blinked and it was just the wedding again. "The wedding is going to end sad," I said. I didn't know how else to describe what I had seen.

"I know," Aunt Lizzie said, taking a sip of her drink. "But it'll all turn out right in the end."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes," She put her drink down and looked at me. "Didn't you see that far?"

"No," I said. I wasn't sure what to call what I had just seen. It seemed like maybe I had just seen the future. I told her it was the first time that had ever happened to me.

"You're younger than I was," she said. "I didn't see anything until I was eighteen. It was during the strike of '37."

My dad had told me about the strike. It happened when my grandpa and Uncle Jimmy and Uncle Jake worked at the steel mill. Uncle Jake used to work the crucible there. He could make the exact same noise that the crucible made when the steel was being fired; it was a dark gray noise, cloudy and big. The noise always made me sweaty and scared.

"Tell me about what you saw during the strike," I asked.

"Your grandpa and Jake and Jimmy were all at the mill when the strike started," Aunt Lizzie said. "Your grandfather was a foreman—we always knew Mary had done well when she married him. But your Uncle Jake and your Uncle Jimmy were on the labor side—do you know what that means?" she asked, taking a bite of rigatoni.

"They went on strike," I said.

She nodded and swallowed. "Your grandfather was management—he wasn't in the union. He was one of the people the union was striking against."

I looked out at the dance floor and saw my grandparents dancing together to the blue starburst music. I thought everybody in grandma's family liked my grandfather. He took me fishing and to play miniature golf. He was the nicest grandpa in the world.

"What did grandpa do?" I asked. "Why didn't they like him?"

"Everybody loves your grandpa. Being a foreman was just his job. During the strike, he was holed up in the mill with the other management, trying to keep the machinery running. And did you know that almost every night your great uncles would go with your grandmother to the far fence at the mill and throw clean clothes and food over the fence to your grandfather?"

"Even though they were on different sides?"

"Family was family and work was work. They were two separate things," Aunt Lizzie said.

The band finished the red song and everybody clapped. I looked from the dance floor to Aunt Lizzie and swallowed hard. I could feel myself starting to sweat a little.

"Does what you saw happen now?" Aunt Lizzie asked.

"I think so."

"I saw it too," Aunt Lizzie said. "Just remember that he's going to be fine. Don't be scared."

"Okay." The band had started another song, but already the bride's father was clutching at his chest and had stopped dancing and some people had turned to look at him. When he dropped to his knees, the band stopped playing and everybody gathered around him in a big circle and people started yelling to call an ambulance. It was chaos and noise everywhere except where Aunt Lizzie and I were sitting. We were in quiet.

"Is this what you saw?" Aunt Lizzie asked.

"I didn't see the part where he fell down. Just all the people standing around," I replied. We sat there quietly for a moment, watching everybody run around, as Aunt Lizzie said, "like chickens with their heads cut off." I didn't like that I had seen all this in my head and now I was seeing it for real. I didn't want to be able to do this. But Aunt Lizzie had said she saw it coming too, which made it less scary. "Tell me about the first time you saw what was going to happen," I asked.

"I saw your father being kidnapped by some men on the labor side of the strike who wanted to hurt your grandfather," she said. I felt a little pain in my stomach when she said that. "It was spring, and my father—your great-grandfather—had just planted the tomato and pepper plants. I couldn't sleep that night and went down to the kitchen for a glass of milk. I don't see what's coming when I'm sleeping—only when I'm awake. I was standing there in my nightgown by the back door, drinking my milk and looking at the new plants in the garden when I saw three men in dark clothes grabbing little Jackie as he was walking home from school, shoving him into the back of a car, and driving away. It scared me so much I dropped the glass."

"What did you do then?" I asked.

"It was nowhere near the time for your father to go to school, so for the time being he was safe. I cleaned up the broken glass and the milk, then went upstairs to Mary's room—your grandmother's room."

Everyone in the family knew that the house on Briar Hill had four bedrooms. My great-grandparents were in one room, my grandparents were in another, and my great aunts and great uncles (and my father) were in the other two rooms. Nobody had their own room like we do now.

Aunt Lizzie kept talking, and I kept listening. "Since your grandfather was stuck in the mill, Rosie had taken to sleeping in Mary's room because it was too noisy in the girls' bedroom with the other girls. Bunny snored."

I giggled. Aunt Rosie and Aunt Bunny argue all the time, but they're best friends. They ended up sharing a house even after Rosie got married. Some people can do that.

"I went into your grandmother's room," Aunt Lizzie said. "The instant I said your father's name, Mary was wide awake. She sat up so quickly, she almost knocked Rosie out of bed."

Aunt Lizzie told me that she tried to explain what she had seen, that she knew someone was planning to kidnap my father and that he had to be protected.

She told all this to my grandmother, but grandma didn't believe it. They got into a big argument about whether or not Lizzie could actually see something terrible that might happen while she was staring out the back door looking at the tomato and pepper plants. Aunt Lizzie said that what she had seen was something that could or would happen unless they did something to change it. Grandma accused her of making up stories and said it was unfair of Lizzie to do something like that, what with her husband holed up in the mill and two of their brothers on strike. Rosie thought they should both be quiet and let her sleep.

"How come she didn't believe you?" I asked.

"Because I had never seen what was coming before. They didn't know what to make of it. I had to be work at the dress shop early the next morning, but before I left the house, I reminded Mary about what I had seen."

"What happened then?" I asked.

"Well, she didn't do anything in the morning. She sent Jack off to school with cousin Vince Bernard and I went to work and everybody left the house."

"You let my dad walk to school all by himself? Even though you had seen the bad men trying to kidnap him?"

"If you see something and it's going to come true, it'll be true all the way. I wasn't worried about him walking to school—the vision happened when he was coming home from school."

Aunt Lizzie pointed out cousin Vince Bernard to me. He was standing by the bar with my father. They both were leaning on the bar with one hand and holding a drink in the other. They ties were untied. My father

always told me that they were best friends when they were growing up. He said he walked to school part of the way by himself, part of the way with Vince, and part of the way with the kids at the end of the block. He said that they had to stick together because they were all Italian and they had to go through an Irish neighborhood and a Slovak neighborhood to get to school, and there had to be enough kids to fight all those other kids and still make it to school on time.

"What happened then?" I asked.

"What I saw came true," Aunt Lizzie said.

"But they were prepared,

since I had told Mary about it. And for the rest of the strike, your great uncles followed behind your father with a shotgun so that he'd be safe."

"All because of what you saw?"

"Yes. So don't worry that you can see what's coming. It's a good thing," Aunt Lizzie said. "Always remember that. You can do something most people can't do. It's a gift."

By this time, the ambulance had arrived and two men in uniforms were taking out the bride's father on a stretcher. Cousin Bobby was holding his new wife while



she cried all over his powder-blue tuxedo. I saw my dad wander away from the bar and then he and my mother and my two sisters and my brother were standing on the edge of the dance floor, looking around.

I yelled "I'm over here!" but I didn't move out of my seat. It was the first time I can remember that I didn't want to be with the rest of my family.

My mom and dad came over and said hi to Aunt Lizzie and said things like "thanks for keeping an eye on Emily" and "I hope she wasn't too much of a bother," and Aunt Lizzie said things like "No, she was wonderful company." Then my parents loaded us all into the car and we drove to my grandparents' house so we wouldn't have to drive all the way home from Youngstown after the wedding.

Whenever we sleep over at my grandparents' house, my grandpa always makes everyone a banana split. My grandmother said I couldn't have my banana split until I had a bath. Afterwards, we sat on the bed in her room while she combed the tangles out of my hair. My dad brought my banana split into the room and said I could eat it in there if I was really, really careful. My dad stayed in the room with us. "Did you have a nice time at the wedding?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. Aunt Lizzie and I sat and looked at everybody while they danced." I wanted to ask about the bride's father, to see if he was really okay, but I couldn't remember the name of the girl that cousin Bobby had married, so I just asked if "that man" was okay. Grandma and my dad laughed when I said "that man."

"Carole's father is fine," my dad said to me. Then he said, "Her brother called while you were with Emily. He's going to be okay." But he said this looking at my grandma, not me.

"Thank God," Grandma said, and she stopped combing my hair for a second. I think she made the sign of the cross.

Neither of them was saying anything, so I told them that Aunt Lizzie and I knew all along that he was going to be okay.

"And how did you know this?" my dad said, and leaned back against my grandmother's dresser, which is a very, very dark brown and has all sorts of flowers and leaves carved along the legs. I love that dresser.

"We saw it before it happened," I said, and took another bite of my banana split.

Grandma stopped combing out my hair again.

"What do you mean, 'you saw it before it happened?'" she said. "Lizzie hasn't been putting crazy thoughts into your head, has she?"

I turned around to look at Grandma, but she turned my head front. "No," I said. "I closed my eyes and when I opened them I saw everybody running around and being scared, and Aunt Lizzie saw it too. I mean, we both just saw it for a second, and Aunt Lizzie said that he'd be okay and he is. So that's good, right?"

My grandma started on another tangle. It kind of hurt, but I didn't say anything because people had been calling me the baby of the family all day and I didn't want to give anyone the chance to call me that again.

"I wouldn't go listening to everything Lizzie says like it was the gospel truth," my grandmother said.

"I'm not," I said. "But she saw the same thing I saw."

My dad sighed and slid down along the edge of the dresser until he was sitting on the floor opposite the bed. "Sweetie, sometimes your Aunt Lizzie says she can see things that nobody can really see."

"You mean she can see what's coming," I said.

"Well, she says she can predict the future..."

"It isn't predicting," I said. "It's just sometimes we can see things that are going to happen before they happen. Today was the first time it ever happened to me, but Aunt Lizzie said it had happened to her before."

"She's been saying that for years..." my grandmother said, giving the tangle she was working on another good pull. I yelped, and she apologized.

"She told me about the first time she ever saw what was coming—during the strike of '37. And how she saw some men trying to kidnap you and that she told Grandma and then everything was okay." My grandmother was sitting behind me so I couldn't see the look she gave to my father, but I could see the look he gave her. I figured maybe I had said too much and started eating my banana split again.

"Lizzie always says that, but it's not true," my grandmother said. "Butch saved your father."

"The bulldog?"

My father just nodded, and grandma kept talking. She said that she was home one day about two weeks after the strike had started. She was baking bread when Butch started barking. Butch didn't usually bark. Everybody says that the only thing he was good at was eating and pooping. But on this day he started barking, so grandma let him outside. Instead of going out behind

the shack where the family kept all their garden tools and where my great-grandfather used to smoke sausage, Butch trotted around the side of the house, nudged open the gate, and started walking down the street. My grandmother watched all of this, then decided to follow him. Butch walked down to the corner, waited for a couple cars to pass, then crossed the street. Grandma followed him for two blocks until she realized that Butch was going to the elementary school. “And that’s when I knew that something was wrong,” my grandmother said.

“That’s when you knew that what Aunt Lizzie had seen was true,” I said. “She told you the night before.”

“That’s how she knew something was wrong,” my dad said. “Butch was my dog. When he came to school to get me, your grandmother knew something was wrong.”

“How come you believed the dog and not Aunt Lizzie?” I asked.

Grandma didn’t answer my question. She just said that she knew Butch would be okay. “He wasn’t stupid enough to go out into traffic and he smelled so bad that nobody would want to steal him,” she said. “I left him to wait for your father in the schoolyard and ran home to get the shotgun and your Uncle Louie.”

My great-grandfather had a shotgun that he used to shoot the chipmunks and rabbits that got into the garden. Grandma grabbed it and yelled down the street for Louie, who was pretending to help a neighbor fix a car but was really hanging around drinking Coca-Cola and listening to the baseball game on the radio. Uncle Louie was the youngest boy in the family and mainly hung around doing odd jobs for the neighbors during the day. “Louie didn’t have a whole lot of ambition then,” grandma said. “But your father was his special little pal.”

“I was the only one in the family he could still beat up,” my father said.

Grandma ignored him. “When we got to the school,” she said, “Butch was already waiting by of the front door.”

“There were so many kids swarming around, if somebody had really tried to kidnap me, they would have had a good chance of picking up the wrong kid,” my dad said. “I remember Vince and I were going to play stickball and grandma told me we were going straight home. I was mad, but we all know it’s not a good idea to argue with your grandmother.” He smiled at grandma when he said this. Grandma likes being the person everybody in the family is a little bit afraid of.

“I promised your father and Vince cookies if they behaved, so Butch walked in front, your father and cousin Vince walked in the middle, Louie and I walked in back with the shotgun, and that’s how we walked home. I was just starting to think I was overreacting about the whole thing when we turned the corner to Dearborn Street, which ran into Briar Hill. And that’s when we saw the car.”

“I remember this,” my dad said. “It was a big black Packard, parked on the opposite side of the street. Now here was the problem, Emily. Dearborn Street dead-ended where Briar Hill began. So if we turned right and crossed the street, we’d have to go right by the car. If we went left, there was just an alley with an old warehouse. If we went straight, there was no street, just a big empty field.”

“There were three men in the car,” Grandma said. Two of them got out and leaned against the car like they were waiting for somebody. One of them lit a cigarette. I was starting to worry. I had the shotgun, but I wasn’t even sure if it was loaded. And I didn’t know if the guy in the car had a gun.”

“You know, all the times we’ve told this story, I don’t think I ever thought about that before,” my dad said. “It could have turned out...” he looked at me as he said this and mumbled something about how it could have turned out really bad. Then he said that by this time, he and Vince had figured out something was up.

“I think I told you that the men in the car were bad men who stole children from America and brought them to Germany to make shoelaces and buttons for the rest of their lives. I was so scared, it was the only thing I could think of,” Grandma said.

I took another bite of my banana split and thought about shoelaces and buttons. “Did you run away then?” I asked.

“We did run away, but not right then,” my dad said. “Louie was smart enough to make me and Vince think it was a game so we wouldn’t be scared. He told us that when he said go, we should run home and the first one there would get a nickel.”

“That was Louie’s only good idea,” grandma said. “Because then he turned to me and said that when you and Vince ran away, I should level the shotgun at the guys in the car and he’d reach into his jacket and pretend he had a gun and we’d tell the guys to get lost. He thought he was Al Capone or something.”

“My mother the gangster,” dad said and laughed

again. My father’s laugh is yellow, unless he’s laughing really hard, and then it’s orange.

My grandmother was used to ignoring my dad’s little jokes. She said that she told Louie to shut his mouth and keep walking like nothing was wrong. “When we started to cross the street, the two men outside of the car wandered over to the front of the car. They weren’t quite in our way, but another step or two and they would have been.”

“What happened then?” I asked.

“A miracle,” my father said. “Butch saved us all.”

“Did he bite the guys?”

“Better.” He looked at grandma and asked if he could tell this part. “Butch had been walking along in front of me and Vince, but when the two guys walked in front of us, Butch ran up to them and started barking and growling. Butch was this fat old bulldog and couldn’t scare a fly. So the two guys looked down at him and started laughing. And then Butch turned around and dropped the biggest, stinkiest pile of crap I’ve ever seen.”

I started to laugh and so did Grandma. “The smell alone was enough to curdle milk,” my dad said, “It distracted the guys just for a second. They looked down at Butch and took a couple steps away from us because it was so disgusting. That’s when Louie yelled “Go!” and me and Vince took off down Briar Hill, racing to see who would win the nickel.” By this time all three of us were laughing and my father’s laughter was bright orange. “And then your grandmother... Oh God, Ma, what did you say to those guys?”

“We took a couple steps beyond the car and then turned around and I raised the shotgun to my shoulder. Just like in the movies,” Grandma said. “And the two guys stood there looking at us, and then one of them said, “What do you feed that dog?” And I said “Spaghetti and soup bones.””

My dad had another burst of orange laughter.

“You fed the dog spaghetti?” I asked.

“We were too poor to buy dog food,” dad said.

“The dog ate what we ate.”

“Then I told those guys that they’d better leave,” grandma said. “My heart was pounding so hard I could barely hold that shotgun. But the one guy stamped out his cigarette and he and the other guy got back in the car and all three of them drove away.”

“Wow,” I said. “You were brave.”

“I didn’t think about being brave. I just wanted to protect your father.”

“After that, I didn’t go anywhere without two of my uncles and the shotgun,” my dad said. “Not until the strike was over.”

“I hadn’t thought about the strike of ’37 for a long time,” grandma said, and started combing my hair again, even though she didn’t need to. It was just something for her to do while she was thinking.

“So Butch saved you from the kidnappers,” I said, “but you wouldn’t have known to follow Butch and grab the shotgun and everything if Aunt Lizzie hadn’t told you what she saw.”

My dad sighed, stood up, and took the empty banana split bowl out of my hands. “Sweetie, do you really think Aunt Lizzie saw everything that happened before it happened?”

I started to say, “But I saw...” And then I didn’t say anything else. My dad patted me on the head and my grandma told me I could watch TV with my brother and sisters before we went to bed.

Aunt Lizzie had a stroke three years later. The family doesn’t talk too much about Lizzie anymore, and when they do, they don’t call her loopy. Now they just say it’s a shame that she’s in nursing home in Pittsburgh and is mostly paralyzed and can’t talk. If I ask my dad if we can drive to Pittsburgh and visit her, he always says it’s a three-hour drive and we’d have to plan it and then it never happens. I know that Aunt Lizzie can still see what’s coming, even if she can’t tell anyone about it.

For now, it’s not so bad. My family still calls me The Genius when they think I can’t hear them, but I don’t mind. I’m like Aunt Lizzie, and we see things other people don’t. That’s all. There’s two of us. I saw my brother break his arm playing football the day before it happened. I saw two kids at school kiss each other in the bushes before they even decided they liked each other. I’ve already seen the day when my father gets a phone call from Pittsburgh and someone tells him that Aunt Lizzie has died. I’ve seen it, but I don’t know when it will happen. I try not to think about it, because then I’ll be the only one who knows what’s coming.

# On Carly Sachs and Other

BY MARINA VLADOVA



*I FOUND THERE WAS NO SAFETY IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE* — FAMILIAR LINES FROM LUCILLE CLIFTON, lines read by Carly Sachs I heard on the radio while driving home yesterday from the bank. I was checking to make sure that two checks, one from 2007 and the other from 2008, had cleared, because somebody very tall who I once met is claiming that he never got these checks. And he's making uncomfortable noise about it. Sachs was reading from her new anthology, *The Why and Later*. Poems about rape? Women who were raped? Men raping? All of that. Fragmented, which is the only way to dole it out, I think. I don't know, I'm not one of the every four.

So I attended a Carly Sachs reading in a muggy bookstore basement. After being introduced to Sachs I walked to the empty folding chair within an oblong of chairs surrounded by yellowing books and their smells. Moments later a stony faced androgynous woman accompanying a squat curled muttering man sat to my right. Strange sounds were coming from him—tonal shifts percolated from ulterior cracks and crevices. I've never heard anything like it, and I wanted to run. To at least make my way to the one empty chair across the room. But of course I could not, it would have been rude, uncivil, insulting. The man with Tourette's was also deaf, and his short-haired companion was signing the rape poems to him. In a room full of conscientious objectors and gladiolas how could I have possibly run? It would have been a flippant act of dissent. I'm not one of every four.

So I leaned myself toward the empty chair to my left and watched the women say their poems at the podium. *red, oozing, slides, nipple, squeeze, suck*—fragmented rage. And could it have gotten any worse? A man in the backed-up doorway who would resemble a hairy, werewolf-like Bruce, and probably just as well-connected, but with a gut, made his way to the empty chair on my left. I began scanning the books behind the readers at the podium. The red books or books with red font were most distinct—*Red Grooms gladiolus*, [no], *Ruckus Rodeo*. What? And what other than on the shelf below but *Papa, Play for Me? pluck, blossom, fingers, faucet, mouth*. Unbarring. Haven't they learned that *success in circuit lies*? I now saw how mouth and trap can be synonymous. But I'm not one of every four.

I began scanning the post-menopausal faces around me, inflated pores red and sweating in the stiff basement air.

Becoming fixated on one woman's feet, that she wore pantyhose—pantyhose—underneath thick slacks in mid-July, I grew peeved at her gall to sweat. But my hostility toward her incessant seepage was disrupted by the deaf man with Tourette's embarking on a deep cavernous yawn. Shit, I thought. Now it will all come out. I waited.

Nothing. .

Silent baby's breath.

Lover of chalk.

Weightless meander.

Probably his single most graceful bodily act. *eyes, nails, spread, turn, stomach*. Stop. I get it. Bruce Dern leaned in. Slack-jawed, he began to breathe hard. He breathed out heavily. I wanted to run. Is that just how he breathes? Or what? I wanted to run. But the one empty chair across the room was now occupied. And as the convoy of ready-made rape poems followed one after another, I became occupied by their relentless matronly attendants.

The woman with the pantyhose walked to the podium poems in hand. She stopped sweating when she started saying. She made me sweat, made me squirm. Stoically she talked of *gritting teeth* and *when pain was thunder*. I have two daughters. We three are not one of every four. I listened. She sat down again when she finished. She crossed her hands over her poems pressing them to her abdomen. And I looked at her feet again. Silently saluting the tough, elastic nylons that harbored her well-worn feet, I solemnly pledged. I'm not one of every four. We three are not one of every four.

# From Liturgy

TRANSLATIONS BY STEVE REESE

**ESTE ES EL TIEMPO QUE ME HAN DADO Y  
LA ISLA QUE ME TOCA.**

Aquí no cruje el hielo ni se espanta la risa. Soy uno más de tantos —guerrero en estos surcos— y seré otra partícula de la espuela o el diente entre el tiempo y la nada.

This is the time that I have and the island I'm given. Here, the ice doesn't crack, nor is the laughter frightened. I am one more of many— a warrior in these furrows— and I will be another particle of spur or tooth between time and nothing.

**AHORA VAN A INVENTAR OTRA COSA: LA ILUSIÓN DE  
antipatria. Van a cambiar la estrella por otra menos blanca en la bandera. Todo empieza el buen día en que sin fe deciden caminar sobre el agua por llegar a otra orilla y se hunden o se les atraviesan las palabras en la garganta.**

Es que tampoco cantan, ni bailan, ni beben ron a pico de botella, ni fornican en las escaleras, ni caminan bajo el sol por la carretera hasta el infinito, hasta el cansancio, hasta siempre. Perdieron en el intento las respuestas, las butacas, el chofer, el carné, las entrevistas, las queridas, los viajes. Perdieron tanto que ya no se encuentran ni ellos mismos.

Now they are going to invent something else: the anti-homeland. They are going to change out the star on the flag for one not so white. The fine day begins, in which they decide, faithlessly, to walk across the water to the other shore, and they sink or their words get stuck in their throats.

They neither sing, nor dance, nor drink rum from the bottle, nor screw on the stairs, nor walk under the sun to infinity, till they're worn out, walking forever.

In the attempt they lost the answers, the easy chairs, the chauffeur, the membership card, interviews, lovers, travels. They lost so much that they can't find themselves anymore.

## Selections from LOCALS

BY CLAIRE BATEMAN



WHENEVER A TEAM of traveling evangelists enters this realm to inquire of passers-by whether or not each has “a personal relationship with God,” the response is always a shrug of bemusement since here, a citizen’s communications with Deity are perusable by all in a porous, translucent cloud that shimmers just above his or her head but does not show up in mirrors or film; ironically, if you were a native, your only access to your particular cloud would be through the people around you who are, upon your request, obligated to read out to you these sacred interactions.

Legibility is frequently an issue, however, not to mention reading comprehension, as each individual’s cloud hosts a continually shifting multi-dimensional montage of highly personal symbols, images, alphabets, formulas, maps, etc., all in color combinations as subtle as they are significant. Thus, by the time someone has described to you the contents of your cloud, the information has been filtered once through your reader’s consciousness and again through your interpretation of his or her depiction, rendering the results more than a little suspect. Some people seek increased accuracy by garnering as many readings as possible in the brief period of time before the cloud contents have altogether changed, whereas others adhere to a theology of single-reader-fidelity—each method possesses its disadvantages, such as the likelihood of superficial readings if there are many readers involved, and on the other hand, the trauma of starting over if your lone reader dies, moves away, or, worst of all, has a falling-out with you, thereby contaminating previous readings in a reversely causal withdrawal of trust.

Of course, citizens regularly and matter-of-factly delve into one another’s clouds to extricate fragments they find particularly appealing, which then appear, re-contextualized, in their own—every cloud is deemed to be in the public domain, which is why the evangelists tend to return to their own realms bewildered and incoherent—that is, if they return at all.

SUPPOSE YOU’RE A CITIZEN of this realm where there are never any missing persons, but instead, plenty of extras popping up quite inexplicably, each certain he or she “belongs.” Because you want to consider yourself a responsible individual, you escort them (sometimes in groups, sometimes one at a time) to be registered by the weary, kindly folk at the Bureau who arrange for their faces to appear on milk cartons and on post office bulletin boards, but perhaps because the indifferent quality of the photographs makes them look like drowning victims gazing up at the viewer from beneath a floor made of water—a floor possibly disguised as a ceiling, or vice versa—no one ever steps forward to claim them, so what is there to do but take them in as though they had never been anything other than your own.

IN THE REALM where happiness is contagious, you can infallibly determine the level of a citizen’s emotional maturity by observing whether that individual chooses to approach or avoid the unremittingly cheerful, who, sad to say, comprise an ever-greater proportion of the populace.

## Hall of Mirrors

BY ANN HOWELLS

Twenty-three years, Mama,  
and no right time to tell me?

of a cell cleaved at first division  
second placenta, second cord?  
chord? some wondrous unfinished  
symphony?

her blood, once more, your blood  
her bone, your bone and me separate  
a lusty infant

medical curiosity on CNN  
vanishing twin they say dispassionately  
feel no longing, no guilt  
(did I kick, turn, press uterine walls  
crush a turgid umbilicus, pinch off life,  
was I murderer before I was born?)

Can this be anecdote to you, Mama,  
a twin yourself?

my world shuddered  
spun in crazy new directions  
no longer snowflake on earth’s soft skin:  
perfect and unique  
strands of my double helix are a tangled  
web

I carry the bloodline for two  
kindergarten artwork  
lopsided stars carved in potato with  
plastic knife  
printed—one vibrant red, second faded  
as though the first usurped all vital  
color—

and in my box of childhood treasure  
a dog-eared photograph—double  
exposure  
I sit beside myself in birthday  
celebration  
Your Freudian slip, Mama?

I am that blurred image  
printed once, then shifted, given an aura—  
like a moon that promises rain

I dream, each night, a hall of mirrors  
peer into each silvered cage  
seek some fragile likeness—  
reach for my sister’s hand  
pull her through shattering glass

## Ads

BY DENISE DUHAMEL

A bubblehead bimbo, a chubby  
dippy dopey ebullient fabulous girly-  
girl hellcat, incognito in her joie  
de vivre (kitten-heeled, a low rent  
Lucille Ball) looking for a macho  
non-smoking origami-minded palm  
reader, a quixotic rogue, somebody to  
understand her vixen ways. No Xbox.  
Yes Zumba.

Zorba-esque Yankee Doodle  
xenophobic warrior, ventriloquist  
underdog, ticklish shamanistic Romeo  
(quite possibility the only nice man  
left) looking for a karaoke jailbird in  
hiding, a garter-flashing exhibitionist  
to double cross, to boss about.



he  
was  
just  
like  
a  
little  
kid

King Dealer

BY NANCY NIXON

any kids

well

i guess

it'd be just like

when you get mad

at your cat

you yell

at him and then

he'll rub against your legs

and you'll say

aw cmon

and pat him

he was

just like that

my brother

was a lot like him

he

could abuse anyone

and

you'd be

lying

there

with blood coming

out of your mouth

then

he'd just say

aw

i didn't mean that

and

you'd forgive him



## Traveler, Lou Suarez

BY RAY MCNIECE

**THE JOURNEY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE DESTINATION.** That adage aptly describes Lou Suarez’s new collection *Traveler*. Yes, there are poems of actual travel, particularly in the third and final section of the book, but the real travel here involves the transit from memories of people and places conjured present by incantation. After all, a traveler always carries those places once visited everywhere else. In this sense time is not linear but circular, as in Henri Bergson’s concept where it is possible to coexist in multiple locales separated in space by way of a single instantaneous perception. This collection is full of such instances. The journey is made of moments revisited in the here of hearing their poetry.

It is that movement from past to present that transforms the traveler, most notably in the coming of age poems “Boxing Lesson”, “Bendix”, “There are Nights” and Nostalgia”:

*The sewer I sailed Jimmy  
Little’s cap into  
So long ago, the faces of six  
boys crouched  
And studying the floating  
brim made mystic  
By the failing light, their  
clouds of breath.*

Those breaths lingering have, of course, no scent of the nostalgic, not in the cliched sense. It is not just that we miss the persons, places and times—the remembrance of things past—that would be sentiment. The poignancy of the passing, the very longing, connects us to all times, where past, present and future overlap. A concept Native

Americans called ceremonial time. Suarez renders those moments with a quotidian language, a pliant plainsong, as in Habitual, where what we overlook daily becomes mystical when time seems out of joint as he sees the neighborhood bully near his mailbox on a holiday:

*we two,  
look lost in the neighborhood  
we scarcely recognize.*

There is also a quietude at the heart of this book prescient in the last stanza of the first poem, “Conversation”, where the memory of overhearing a backyard conversation becomes anticipation:

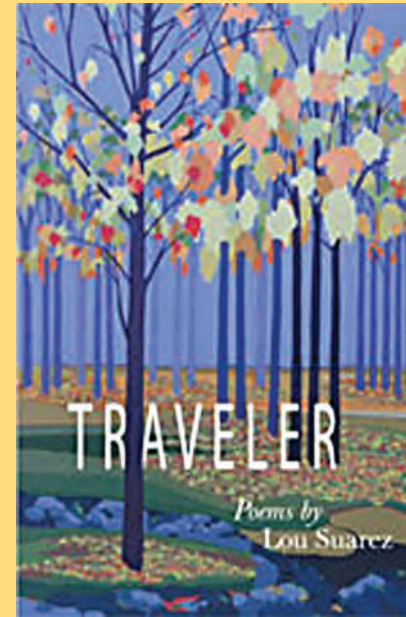
*waiting to hear the one last thing  
someone wants to say  
before it’s too late.*

Many of these poems also carry an elegiac tinge for lost friends, family, and love but not morbidly so. They bestow the sense of Basho’s saying that every poem is a death poem, evoked by “In Savannah”, one of several postcards in *Traveler*:

*Here the dead are never dead.  
They are like the Spanish Moss  
breathing the air, living rootless.*

The third section comes closest to a travelogue. In “On US 6 to Providence”, the poet’s panoramic vision focuses on lonely details along the road which allow him to hear the rhythm of a forlorn feeling so close to love:

*I hear it in the signs  
hawking indian corn and firwood,  
barn  
cats, signs saying vote or issue 3...*



Later in the same poem that loneliness is euphoniously expressed in a litany of family businesses:

*in Pop’s Palate Place, the Ceramic  
Emporium,  
Yoder’s Harness Shop, Don’t Gotta  
Do Garage...*

An incantation that brings to life the small simple lives lived everywhere. In *Crossing the Hudson* the journey similarly gives way to a meditation on god as a homely old man in a house along the river watching reruns of *Highway to Heaven*. “Detroit Money” widens the scope of travel to imagine the Mexican immigrant experience:

*They went from San Ignacio  
Cerro Gordo to GM and Chrysler.  
La vida es aqui, Old Pedro says  
mournfully. But it is the elements,  
the sun and the stars, that marry  
the here and now to the home they  
come from:*

*...at dawn, the sun  
breaks like a fresh egg  
over everything, and then  
at night the old stars rise  
from dust and memory  
to hang miraculously  
over the places we have left  
marking them as home.*

We do indeed find a home in these poems where the traveler takes us, a place we seem to know intimately, that welcomes us in. The title poem, *Traveler*, describes one such crucial moment—a pause to observe and in so doing become the snow on a clothesline stretched between ash trees as evening lengthens and cold wind blows. It is a moment reminiscent of James Wright’s “The Branch Will Not Break”, both fragile and eternal:

*If dogged snow can hang for days...  
then I can stay a moment longer,  
too,  
grateful for the bafflement  
that is my life,  
though ready too to be welcomed  
back  
onto the way—much longer than  
the longest day of any age—  
I traveled here,  
the way on which I will go again  
one beautiful and human season of  
demise, release.*

# The Emperor of Light

BY ROBERT MILTNER



THE RENT WAS ALREADY DUE WHEN THE ELECTRIC COMPANY SENT A LETTER informing me they were about to cut off my power for late payments. I could stand being broke in the daylight but not in the dark. Ever since the economy collapsed and crushed my job, I had been out of work. I couldn't sit still in my apartment another minute waiting for the landlord to knock on the door, so I went out looking for work on a Friday afternoon, the time slot where jobs go to die.

The industrial park was gray warehouses and assembly plants that looked like packing crates or shipping boxes. The buildings were set close to the street and had thin strips of grass and trimmed shrubs that looked artificial. Along the paved sidewalks were cigarette butts, candy wrappers, plastic bags, Styro-foam cups. A scrap of paper caught my eye. A bright red half-page with gold letters, it read Give Jesus a High Five and Look Up to the Lord for Help. So I looked up and no bull, right in front of me, at eye-level like I was about to walk into it, was a sign that read Help Wanted. "Well holy hell," I said.

I examined the flat-roofed, metal-sided building that looked exactly like all the others in the industrial park, wondering what kind of company this was and what they made. There was a large black and white sign that said *Yes: An International Corporation*. Ok, I said, let's find out what this is all about. So I opened the heavy metal door and stepped in.

It was dark until my eyes adjusted to the dim light. I walked up a long flight of stairs to the door at the top of the landing. I could smell metal, oil, cardboard, rubber. The door, oak planks with aged metal clasps and knobs, didn't belong here; it belonged on the front of a house in a rich neighborhood, or on one of the old churches downtown. I knocked, but the wood was so heavy it absorbed the sound my knuckles made, so I had to pound the door with my fist.

I waited. Nothing. I pounded again.

Just as I was starting to turn to walk back down the staircase and leave, the door opened, slowly, and I was face to face with a tiny woman with gray hair pulled into a bun, horn-rimmed glasses, a blue polyester suit, sensible shoes, and one of those old fashioned watches pinned to her jacket. She was surely somebody's grandmother. She must have come with the door, I thought.

"Go right on in," she said, smiling and pointing to the open door on the other side of what was obviously her office. "He's expecting you".

"Who's he?" I wondered as I crossed to the door.

When I went in, the light was so bright I winced, flinched, turned my head away. I squinted as I looked up. What seemed like half a dozen desk lamps were on, as well as the fluorescent ceiling lights. The furniture was glossy white and chrome, from the huge desk in front of the sunlit window to the chairs and bookshelves. The room was as bright as a TV set, as a photo shoot, stuff I'd seen in movies.

"Bill," a calm voice said, "Welcome. Come in and have a seat. We've been waiting for you."

I turned toward the man who said this, the man who knew my name without his asking or my telling. He was over six feet tall, clean-shaven, with cropped silver hair. He wore a cream-colored double breasted suit with a light gray tie. The light glinted off his glasses like they were mirrors. But they were not, I could see that. And I could see that no matter which way he turned his head, the light glinted—no, it came out of his eye-glasses—to meet my gaze. It was like I was in one of those old black and white movies where some hard ass detective shines a powerful beam of light into a poor guy's face, asking him where he was on the night of the twenty-third at nine o'clock or something.

The man put out his hand. His handshake was hot, but his body gave off a coolness like when the refrigerator door is open. He pointed to a chair in front of his desk, and as I sat down he sat on the desk.

"Bill," he asked, "what's your take on the contemporary split between the public and the private life?"

My mouth moved for a few seconds like I was chewing up my answer into small pieces so I could spit it out. Then I said, in private, "we're all equal, rich or poor. But only the rich have public lives."

He tossed his head back and laughed so that his mouth was open and even though I could see the light being squeezed from the corners of his eyes, I imagined I could see light emanating from the silver fillings in his teeth.

"That's rich," he said. I thought he meant it was funny, but I wasn't certain he didn't mean he disagreed.

"Let me ask you this, Bill," he asked, "to whom should a man be loyal?"

I wasn't sure how to answer. So many people had been disloyal to me: my mother who went to the store for milk when I was thirteen and never came back; my old man who kicked me out when I was fifteen because I didn't want to be the baseball player he never was; the woman I loved when I was twenty-two and who loved me so much that she left me for my best friend Eddie who had run off with me when I got kicked out. The pool of possible answers was shrinking like a splash of water on a summer sidewalk.

"A dog," I said, thinking of the hound mix I found on the side of the road when I was fifteen and hitchhiking and that I had until I was twenty-two when the woman I had loved and my ex-best friend traded the dog for a bottle of tequila.

"You can tell a dog anything," I said, "and it will keep your secrets."

"Ah," the man said quizzically, "but isn't that because the dog can't talk?"

"That's the beauty of the thing," I replied, swinging my right arm over the back of the chair and crossing my left leg over my right.

The man with the illuminated glasses clapped his hands, not like in applause for what I said, but the way little kids do when something pleases them.

"Ok," he said, "just one more, ok?"

"Third's the charm, my grandmother used to say," I said.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"Sure can," I said, looking him in the eyes.

"Good, very good," the man said, and returned to a chair behind the desk and started to look at some papers that were spread on the desktop.

I waited about a minute.

"You going to tell me the secret I'm supposed to keep?"

I asked.

"No need," he said, looking up. "I just wanted to know that I could give you a secret if I want to. I probably won't, but if

I have to, better to know now."

I nodded my head like I knew what he meant but I was nodding to myself that yes, this was weird and I didn't really get it.

"Well, that's it then," he said, standing. "You're our man. You've got the job. We'd like you to start first thing on Monday morning."

He put out his hand to me again. I stood too, put my hand out and we shook. His hand was as soft as a kid glove, as firm as a bank counter.

"Great," I replied, "great." Only, I asked with a small laugh, "Just what exactly is this position you've just hired me for?"

He lifted his face toward the ceiling lights and laughed loudly, his mouth open, his even white teeth catching the fluorescent glint. Then he brought his eyes level to mine so that I could see the red rims of his blue eyes through the silver frames of his glasses. His right hand reached out and he patted me twice on the shoulder, then left the hand there.

"Bill," he said, "a company like ours needs a sense of humor like yours, really. Laughter in the face of adversity—that's the key, he said, with a wink, that's the key!"

"Now," he told me, steering me toward the door, "I have to let you go. My next appointment is due any minute. My secretary will show you out. But we'll see you Monday morning, bright and early, ready to start work, right?"

"Right you are, Sir," I replied, "almost snapping to attention."

He guided me by the elbow to the door, opening it so I could pass through the outer office and go down the long staircase to the street.

"Monday then," he said, looking at me, his smile a radiance that ignited the room.

Outside again, it was growing cold. I should have felt good, being hired, having work again, but it didn't feel that way. The clean lines of the manufacturing plants were becoming obscured as the long shadows of late afternoon stretched into the growing evening. Night was coming. Though I couldn't see them yet, I bet there were stars in the sky.

I turned back for a moment to look at the building. The room where I'd been interviewed was still bright, light coming out of the two windows that looked like luminous eyes or illuminated screens waiting for a movie to begin. Then, as if a switch had been turned off or a candle snuffed, the window lights were suddenly extinguished and I was left in the dark.

# The people next door are pig people.

BY ERIC ANDERSON



I've seen them at their troughs, and when Mr Pig Person weeds the flower row along the front walk, his pants droop and his little corkscrew pops out.

They don't seem to care if anyone knows; that's part of what makes them pigs. Mrs Pig Person came over the other day reeking of mud. She has piglets every spring. Little oinkers. All summer they squall for her many teats.

When we invited them to dinner, Mr and Mrs Pig Person asked us to scrape our scraps onto their plates. It's hard for them to handle utensils, but sweet the way they try.

The Pig People are religious and talk of heaven all the time. In the living room, we heard the piglets telling our children

our whole family's going to hell. Or,  
that we might already be there. It seemed pointless to argue! For Pig People,  
hell is living somewhere you have to pretend you aren't a pig.

On winter nights, through the closed windows, we can hear the Pig People squealing as they make more Pig People. My wife and I sense

we should do our part, too,  
propagate our species, but we keep  
tilting our heads in the same direction until we give up on kissing, and out of frustration  
I dive towards her breasts, going back and forth, pretending there's more

—six, eight, twelve—

until I feel as if I'm climbing down an endless ladder,  
into a well, under the earth,  
where the many limbs of my greedy siblings kick and buck and knock me loose.

O, Mrs Person, I say. What else can we do? The neighborhood changes,  
and still we believe in peace.