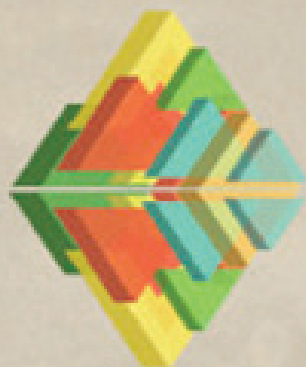


HER ROYAL MAJESTY



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

“You will never love art well, till you love what she mirrors better.” – John Ruskin

I was the kind of child who hid even when no one was seeking. I would jump out at my parents even when they knew, and I knew that they knew, that I was behind the tree. When I was nine years old I became relatively obsessed with making quarters vanish. There was a magician at the fair in Ramsbury, my grandparents’ village in England, and after I guessed how many jars of jam were on the shelf and rode the pony around the pole, I spent the rest of the afternoon watching Matt the Marvel make things appear and disappear. He held a little gold cylinder in the plush palm of his hand which made stacks of coins – ten pence, the same size as Canadian quarters – vanish and return. The cylinder was for sale, and I begged until it was bought for me. I was also the kind of child who would read during dinner, on the bus to school, all night long. Two obsessions, perhaps related.

Two winters ago, I saw Michael Chabon, American novelist, read from his work at the Village Voice in Paris. Chabon said that he was attracted to literature – both the enjoyment and production of – for its ability to imagine places into existence. He wanted to vanish and reappear in a fictional world. The books he loved the most as a child were the ones which had maps in the frontispiece; invented cartographies established the fantastic world which followed as a tangible, navigable space. What made the imaginary worlds credible was the art which supported them. Art can also give credibility to our own (less fantastic, equally extraordinary?) lives. Art can hold a spyglass up to the world, can provide a legend which at once decodes and mystifies, conceals, disguises, enchants. The artist has the power to influence events, to produce marvels, both realistic and fantastic.

An exposition I saw in Berlin a few years ago focused on the representations of circles throughout history. Circles and spheres are used for sports and games, crystal globes, medicine wheels, astrology charts, wheels, planets, moons... Circles represent the never-ending cycle of life and perfect unity. Though circles are one of the most naturally occurring shapes, they are one of the most difficult forms to draw freehand – I am reminded of this by the pair of young boys with whom I spend Wednesdays as their personal English teacher/snack-supplier/art-teacher. The boys frustrate themselves trying to draw perfect suns, squinting their eyes at their smudged and lumpy ovals.

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The compass is employed to make coarse hands deft: it was depicted in medieval manuscripts as a symbol of God’s act of creation. Circles have been used throughout history to represent both power and divinity; those with a circle, whether in the form of a sceptre or a halo, have the power to influence and produce worldly or otherworldly events. A circle is both zero and infinity, and this has mathematical, philosophical, and religious consequences. The exposition made me realize that a circle is at once fantastic and, well, a bit banal. The rolling or spinning of a circle is at once perfectly predictable and yet, in some ways, entirely random. To control that motion, to make something either serviceable or beautiful, shows the “artful” influence of the human hand. Artists’ use of the circle involves transforming nature into artifice.

In the last issue, I wrote about the power of language to create. Now I would like to think about the power of the “speaker,” the artist, the creator. The work in this issue is at turns fantastic and realistic, or both at once; it is artifice – making the reader and viewer aware of the role of the artists whose work is featured here.

Harriet Alida Lye
Editor



J.F.H. with her portrait
Alex Kanevsky

New Haven Spring

Yale Psychiatric Institute, 1967

by Jeffrey Greene

If I could touch
my tongue to the moon,
I bet it would taste
like crystal meth,
and seeing you just now
brings it all up again
like daffodils.
It would taste like the first
bitterness of love,
in the creases of the dark,
yet it is filled
with all the feeling of spring,
the air just warm enough
to breeze the staleness
of Winstons and human salt
that you seemed to live on.
Sometimes I tried
to be someone else
so that I could watch us
in a whole different way
of seeing in the dark,
or I'd come to check you out
of the hospital for an hour
to walk around
our windy streets
then find a couch to hold you in.

Sometimes we just
sat in your room,
a single window with bars,
the low beat of someone upstairs
punching a bag as relentlessly
as injustice finds its way
into the human heart.
I hardly knew
from day to day
whom I was in love with,
but from your window
I could see the daffodils,
and a little snow
where footprints appeared
wholly on their own,
going somewhere
in half circles.



Write Poems
Ben Stephenson

POEMS

BY ANDREW JAMES WEATHERHEAD

I Sweat When I Breathe

for David Foster Wallace (not really, just kidding)

I made a fake cough because I was nervous
but then I just kept coughing and couldn't stop

I could feel my throat disintegrating,
rain coming down in sheets,

freezing, and making everything into
a huge fucking ice rink.

At the hospital I saw a man
without a thumb, well,

he had a thumb,
but it wasn't where it was supposed to be.

I Heard the Tall Man Farting

the slam of a door

a quiet muttering
behind that
same door

my personal trainer on the phone
but to what end:

a chair under his legs,
his powerful legs



Afternoon Snack

Matt Allamon



Let Them Know the Burden of Your Blues
Shannon Webb-Campbell

TURNING

by Alex Sears

Blasting from the back door, I could not fill my hyper-saturated lungs, reaching, smouldering brain, solid panic where they saw sun. Had to memorize “The Second Coming” by Monday. A recitation, for a grade.

Turning and turning: the beginning, and easy enough, and following, *the widening gyre*: an unfamiliar but familiar-sounding word, an oceanic type of vortex.

In the backyard, shoulder to shoulder, Dad and John watched long, stippled koi politely writhe in the suspended root systems of water-lilies. Their scalps glistened beneath strands of vanishing hair: Dad’s peppercorn, John’s black.

The transplanted azaleas began to bloom at exam time. An attractive, shade-loving bush barricade. Some were fuchsia (pronounced “foo-SEE-uh” by Dad) and bright enough to blind.

Earlier in the year, Dad hired John to install alien wide-screened desktop computers. Also, to obliterate the playhouse and its appendages: swings, rings, the corrugated green slide. In favor of a peaceful mini-pond framed with imported, pre-tumbled rocks, an implanted hill, to facilitate water falling, trickling from an electric spigot. No one had seen Dad more explosively blissful: sprawled, cookie-covered, at the edge of his very own backyard pond, fingers cupped for holding, eyes red for seeking.

Mother became allergic to her ring, purchased a cheaper one: a large, lone zirconium she admired while walking purposefully, wheeling Grandma, or deconstructing spaghetti squash indoors.

Dad and John crouched in unison, formed a phalanx at my approach. They had difficulty removing their eyes from the pond, pointing, naming: *Peabody*, *Winifred*, *Samantha*, *Cyndy*, *Harriet*, *Suzanne*, for Suzanne Somers. *Grandma*, for Grandma. “The fattest, laziest fish,” said Dad, who blamed Grandma for thwarting his deep wooded ventures.

I have extraordinary difficulty speaking in front of people.

John extended a tiny, tan forefinger, breaching the unperturbed liquid surface.

Dad said, “They will bite you, gently.”

My limp shadow lurched, slouched down the slight slope.

“They will bite you gently, but they will never hurt.”

They looked at me, at each other, winking, deciding. John’s head a nodding upturned pear, his tiny fingers cuffing my tiny wrists, dragging me to his Brand New White Eclipse Convertible—a gift from Dad—index cards in pocket, *Norton Anthology* strapped into

the backseat beside me.

Mother's acerbic expression in the laundry room window, Grandma glowering behind her, luminous, levitated. John pumping the clutch, laughing, Dad head-tossing, arms outstretched as I ground fingernails into pale thighs, fluorescent hair distended in rapid transit.

Turning and turning, I said, repetition the best for remembering words, the tenuous relationships between words? *Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*, anarchy being mere, mere beginning the sentence, insignificantly, mere also meaning pond, rarely, but I needed an A to get an A.

In the basement bowels of The Hospital, they led me past the morgue, between obsolete electric wheelchair storage, displaced gurneys, rooms penetrable by keypad code, where the dense air heaved, the light fixtures populated by moths I'd never seen before, will never see again.

Oxygen machines—sucked dry—leaned haphazardly against salmon-painted cinderblock walls, and we were hand in hand, skipping, collecting momentum until we reached Dad's Secret Underground Office.

A fitful flicker of obsolete machinery, a slapping of books on a long, low table, I sat, and I think it was John's nose Dad loved, his bald hands flicking a pencil, easing a pencil toward his small mouth, the eraser side, while remarking on the ease of saxophone riffing.

Surely the beasts lack all convictions.

Rough beasts.

Best.

Surely, repetition of surely, certainty ascertained, or slouching. Beasts. I drew one, a beast, in the microscopic Norton margin, and my narrow-tipped fountain pen bled through twelve pages, at least.

Smoothing his hyper-pointed lapels, John unveiled a secret stash of ice cream sandwiches, one for him, one for Dad, to be consumed in rolling chairs, the foam exposed, oozing from unintentional apertures.

"The kind of guy you could only hope to land," Dad had said once, when I criticized John's taper-toed sleek shoes, his sloping jawline, his lack of impressive education.

The worst burst from the page, but he did have an attractive nose, a Founding Fathers nose, and he was the most outstanding tenor in his youth group a capella choir.

He whistled to himself as he produced from his ice cream sandwich a smaller piece, placed on a bathroom paper towel, set it beside me. I watched it run sticky.

Surely some revelation is at hand, but how could I reiterate every word, pausing, breaths, between.

The falcon cannot hear, cannot—

"This will help you," Dad repeated, cutting a striped straw in threes, pulverizing the brilliant blue tablets with an outdated *Merck Manual* to produce the finest powder, which effortlessly entered our brains.

Slow thighs, maneuvering, meandering, slouch. Actually, I want my thighs to beat quickly. Once we lived on a cul de sac where vultures nestled on the patio railings, their testicular waddles, raw meat eye creases haunting me as I watched television, stealing glances, but falcons are not vultures, and there are no vulcanears.



Legerdemain
Tings Chak

LEIF : PART ONE
by Harriet Alida Lye

The sun does not reach his room in the Hotel Corona. Most of rue Rodier is shrouded in shade: the tall stone apartments mushroom asymmetrically and create wind tunnels which scrape the leaves along the asphalt in the brisk solstice winds. The road shoots down from the Moulin Rouge in the 18th arrondissement and winds around to some gray church South-West of there, but Leif McAdams has not yet realized that rue Rodier, in the elegant 9th arrondissement, uses euphemisms to sell the same thing which is available explicitly just up the hill: in the brassy 18th, from Place Pigalle to Place Clichy, SEX! flashes in bold blue neon. Hence, the “boutiques du relaxation” that pollinate his residential, gloomy street remain inaccessible to him behind their gauzy curtains. Plus: sex, for Leif, does not equal “relaxation.”

It is morning, his fourth morning in Paris. He thinks the same thoughts that he thinks when he wakes up, no matter which city he wakes up in, and in the same order, too: Coffee. Shower. Food. Sylvia. Sylvia replaced Dolores Murman, the previous girl-of-the-fourth-thought.

He cannot yet be grateful, since he is as yet unable to tell, but today, unlike the past three days, it is not raining. Slugging over in his half-sleep, he shuffles down to the foot of the bed where he is able to press his head against the window pane and look up through the small opening in the courtyard to see a square of sky.

Blue!

He sits up, mildly elated, and takes a deep breath only to feel the ship-mast of his sadness stretch across his throat, taut to the wind.

Elvis Presley was a Capricorn, Bessie Smith was an Aries, Napoleon was a midget. Sylvia is a Gemini of medium height.

Leif gets dressed. He brushes his teeth. He doesn't know what to do next. He has been to the Champs-Élysées. The catacombs, he discovered upon arriving at their barred gates, are closed indefinitely for renovation. He has already perused the Louvre. In fact, as he wandered around the ground floor of the museum yesterday, he felt a little gummy-kneed when he saw the anonymous, androgynous, marble façade of the sculpture – Venus? –standing there, so aloof. They had the same hips, the same soft slope from ribs to waist. Escaping to the bathroom, Leif hid in a stall where he imagined Sylvia's dark brown hair onto the edge of a white porcelain urinal. When he focussed on the slope in the corner, it could suffice as a (half-decent) substitution for the slender hips of the marble goddess and, finally, fuzzy in the triple translation, for Sylvia's own milky haunches. Cold and uncompromising. Release, relax.

Now, in his hotel room, he pulls the covers over the bed – stained with his loneliness – and turns on the lights. Sylvia should have been sprawled there, rolling, soft and naked and sleepy. The tickets had been *booked*, dammit. The arrangements had been *made*.

Two weeks before their departure, Sylvia had announced that, as a result of a dream she'd had, she would not be joining him in Paris.

“No, no, but *you* should still go. I mean, the arrangements have been made!”

He was unable to quite see her point of view, focussing, as he was, on his inevitable fate of shame and celibacy.

“What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“In the dream? What could have possibly happened in the dream that brought you to this conclusion?”

“Oh, I can’t really remember now. There was just this bad *feeling* that I had about the whole thing,” she said, while putting away still-damp dishes in her dormitory kitchen.

When he’d left her dorm, stepping out into one of Toronto’s catastrophically damp October evenings, he wondered: *Does this mean we are breaking up?*

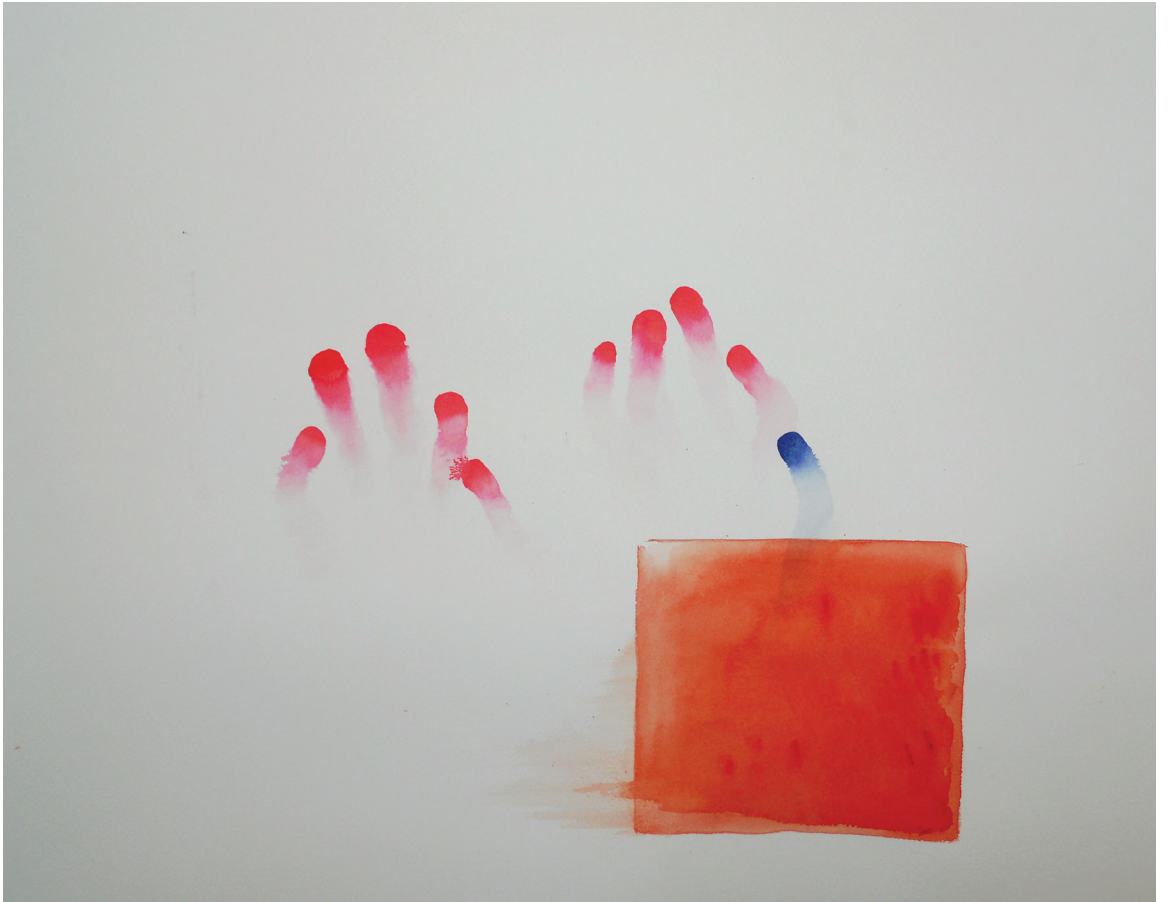
By now, Sylvia would have been in New York for three days. He had not heard from her; he assumed that the answer was *yes*. She had no visions of Armageddon based in New York. Nothing bad ever happened in New York. Even the bad things weren’t bad in New York: They were gritty and glamorous. Her ex-ex-boyfriend, now out of the closet but still owning a large piece of her feudally divided heart, lived in New York. The portion of Sylvia’s heart that Leif had been portioned was valueless; in medieval terms, his section did not border any river, had poor soil quality, and was on a slope, making it difficult to irrigate.

He checks the weather forecast for New York every morning, on the back page of the International Herald Tribune. He is happy to know that it is raining in Manhattan.

Leif McAdams has no Scandinavian heritage. His first name gives false impressions but his surname does not deceive: Mr. McAdams has the ruddy neck and misdirected wildness of a Scotsman. He changed his name from ‘Leaf,’ ashamed of living as a relic of his parents’ hippie days, but did not want to step out too far: Leaf slid seamlessly into Leif, and his New-Age past became absorbed by his invented-Nordic present.

Leif had studied economics. He did not especially have the mind for economics, nor did he especially enjoy economics. He received his Bachelor of Science from the University of Western Ontario, and, to his surprise, had been accepted to study for his Masters at the University of Toronto. He thus delayed his entrance to the “real world” and worked concurrently as a part-time teaching assistant in the only available class in the science department: first year astronomy.

Sylvia had fallen upon astronomy in a similar manner, in the same way that a fish and a bird are equally opposite. Mistaking astronomy for astrology – Saturn and Supernovas for Tarot and Taurus – she registered for what she assumed would be the easiest mandatory science credit available. (When she was twelve, thirteen, she used to play Tarot with the girls in her neighbourhood. She would cheat.) She was not wrong, though, with regards to the difficulty of astronomy: as Leif acknowledged with the superiority of a practiced disappointment, it was *not* as hard as *economics*. Leif and Sylvia had fallen upon each other somewhat unromantically: in one of their late-evening private study sessions, Leif, perpetually unable to make the first move, tripped as he was leaving the common room, grabbing Sylvia’s breast as he was going for his jacket. In any case, it was what they’d both been waiting for.



Diminuendo in Fingers and Square
Lindsie Canton

Alchemy

by Bethany Hindmarsh

This was the winter
Degas' dancers taught me
how photography
doesn't give motion away:
without sighing
under the weight of our hands,
our most careful strokes.

This winter gave me to you,
too, and though you rarely paint,
you still give me motion
every morning.

We found God in January.
He was poised among the lamp-lit bodies
and dancing so quietly
that we could almost mistake
the season's gifts
for loss.



hands
Rebecca Roher

WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

by Eduardo J. Corredera

My green eyes told me the day was a grey one. I often spoke with them, with my tired eyes. It's actually very amusing, even though they can't hear me; they are almost my lovers, or used to be, before they realised that what they showed me was not what I saw. Silver clouds have lost their soul. I remember when I told my friend Tim, also known as Jappi, about pathetic fallacies, he went on to say that life was a rolling pathetic fallacy. I wouldn't go so far myself. Life is a cup of tea. To feel life's magic you need your dose of white to add to the wild forest that's been watered down by the passing of time but that still remains firmly within you. Or something. In any case, life could be seen as the constant execution of pathetic fallacies. Perhaps this is because being alive has been reduced to al'i ve, the simplified version of all I have.

If you're a realist, as those who enjoy contradicting optimists for the sake of it call themselves, then we're all just carrying out pathetic fallacies. We're all attributing feelings to people and things that perhaps don't feel at all. And yet who knows that the birds, the clouds and the stars don't feel? Nah, I am just talking to my eyes.

It makes sense to talk to your eyes. Your eyes are the Adam and Eve of many thoughts. They are the first pirates on our minds that call out to the brain to tell her what we're surrounded by, they are the creators of those balloons that are blown and eventually fly away, they are the door to the circus, the magicians that play with the cards of the night sky to show us the stars. You've got two of those adventurous children, and I'm trying to show them the way to the treasure, so don't spoil it for them.

I'm sorry, I don't want to make you feel as though life is a book or a poem, so let's get back to my eyes. I knew, by their description, that this was my day. My life had always been clouded by thick people and shallow issues. All dead humans have a day dedicated to them. The day would usually be bright if the person had lived a prosperous life and had been able to spit his clouds away, having used their wallet as a mouth to both speak and spit for them. Of course people who disliked the deceased would be somewhere in the world where the sun didn't shine as much, perhaps in a land where rain gave as much conversation as it gave water.

I personally would have preferred a different kind of day, one in which the sun shines in the clear sky until it goes to sleep in the night's blue-black crib. I am aware that sometimes I might sound rather pink but that is only because my overly white mind was a little bit stained. In any case, whether this was my day or not, whether my life had or hadn't been fair, the sole fact of being imprisoned gave me the chance to feel I could live the life of the overly wealthy while dressed as the poorest. Being able to accept self-criticism was one result of the imprisonment. Nevertheless I don't blame the prison for my current state of mind: such a melodic state was obtained when I became tired of the humiliating drum of reality.

From the moment I started to think, which obviously was my first mistake, I believed in human goodness. As a boy, all the tales of benevolence I heard were only reaffirmed by strangers and the way their eyes smiled. At the time that soul searching made me grow cold. Poor soul-searching beasts, I thought. Let me not look them in the eyes.



Gigi
Matthew Allamon

The Orthography of Loss

by Natasha Hay

Spell: 1. Write or name the letters that form a word in correct sequence; 2. A form of words used as a magical charm or incantation; 3. A short period of activity or rest; from a Germanic root that means narration.

Material conditional: If language and love are coöriinary such that each is the condition of possibility of the other, then lovelessness is wordlessness.

Medium: She is having relationship issues with Microsoft Word. Problems include: its inability to write real sentences; how it can only have one default language at a time; the fact that they have not read the same poets, novelists, and thinkers.

Style: Her wardrobe has become monochromatic. However, it is neither black nor white.

Interlocution: She never brews herself black coffee because that would be an argument with him. She takes tiny sips from tall glasses of cold water.

Phoneme: She bought the score to 4'33" with the money that she got when she sold his CDs.

Metonymy: She fondles the flesh of the exotic fruit in the grocery store.

Glyph: Joseph Cornell preferred the postcard to the place, and she prefers the letter to the man.

Vocabulary: Her verbosity conceals the lack of certain words, eg. cheekbone.

Hermeneutic: The heart is an unreliable narrator. Passion happens prior to any narrativization – one day she says she loves him – but we begin to tell a story in the moment that we open our mouths.

Lacuna: She is haunted by his spectral presence, he is absent from her world. I spell your name, but you do not return.



week 33 (curl up)
Rebecca Roher

UNTITLED

by Alex Sears

Edward Farley's heart exploded in front of the nearest Fire Station, and not even the huskiest Dalmatian could lick him alive. His wife Helen had her own yellow-flowered sewing room, but Ed's Pub was red carpeted, floor to ceiling, ornamented with bottled airplanes, schooners, clipper ships, battleships, tufts of plaid, limp uniforms with pinprick lapel stains. Helen opened the door. Magnifying glass in hand, she decided to crack the largest battleship like a coconut when she was distracted by an unattended spider web between the rungs of a barstool. On her knees, she searched for the spider among the carpet fibres, in the stool shadows, desperate to catch one gleam of his infinite eyes, to settle on a pincer, a leg hair, to watch his fastidious spin.



Technicolour Storm Trooper
Stewart Innes

Who do WE have in common?

by Christine Herzer

Lying is incredibly healthy
It is a child's way of spraying bubbles
It's how you perfume your own private parts

private parts

*wrist, mother, madness, no, okay, sky, mirror, king, car, pen, rage, raped, room, rooms,
house, moon, friend, boyfriend, girlfriend, flight-attendant, basement, eyes, neighbor,
sun, servant, receptionist, grotesque*

words i hired *knees, one-way, surcease, today, ask, now, absurd, kudzu*

words i imported *wehmut, ekel, ekelig, voila, merde sterne, leidland,*

words i emptied *bedroom, right, wrong, gender, sorry*

words i perfumed

shit, power, giving, god, beauty, nationality, sexuality, yes, roses, stolen

words i suggested he might want to google

gay, context, anima, animus, meat, furniture

words i googled

flotsam, jetsam, vamoose, , disobedience, spider,

recall, sublimation, insect

words that long for each other

fear, love, twix, reversal

strawberries, dental floss

words i pronounce with a german accent *war, word, world, powerless, will, arrival*



searching
Sydney Smith

Hitching on the Coromandel

by Andy Verboom

I wear in that humidity the trees
pressed flush against the road, a full fur collar.
You don't even slow your van
just stretch out your kerchief as it hurtles, catch me up
so that the air streaming through the windows
is new and disrobes.

Your tires are wet with pattern,
geographic as a tongue, and they lick the longing neck,
the long, gravitied, drowsy neck
from the chest of the peninsula to its chin.
You chomp enormous carrots and shout and laugh
specks of orange into your moustache
while your platonic girl friend in the back seat
pretends to watch your knuckles on the wheel,
the sweat gleaming off her
with a diamond damp of snakeskin.
—Four years later, I will spend a summer learning German,
as if still trying to understand.

~

A day like this is a tall candle
lit and running down itself.
It begins guttering red,
flattening purple across a horizon,
off the farthest edge of the horizon
dripping onto the west's still undraped nude.
Your van performs the miracle droplet,
wicking up the black-backed river,
chasing the brake lights of the sun.
It ruts occasional smoke like a braggart.
I make my exit at the next beach. I crouch in the window
fling myself from it, ride your mad howl, relax my joints
and impact.
I'm not much of a swimmer, I limp over and lie down
where the beach breaks on the grass
a foam of smoothed bits of shells.
I have never seen such beautiful table-scrap.
Lilliputian insects carry me
down through fiercely solid earth.



Re-Envision
Tings Chak

.....

EXCERPTS OF A CONVERSATION
with Adam Zagajewski

DANIEL MEDIN: In one of his poems, Milosz talks about the poet as the “secretary to the invisible.” How do you feel about this in terms of the way you approach your vocation and the relationship between inspiration (ecstasy) and craftsmanship (the practice of this vocation)?

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI : I don’t know if I believe in the daimonion. I believe in inspiration, but I believe that I read Kafka too early. I was too overwhelmed by him. To be influenced by someone, you have to have something of your own first. I was lacking elements of my own substance. For me, writing is two forces that coincide. Inspiration - the irrational force - meets the river of reason. Inspiration is a feast, a rare moment, but we can always reason and think. There is nothing magical about it; it’s how the human mind works. This process of thinking takes years; you formulate slowly your point of view. The beginning of the maturity of a writer is when these two rivers meet. The fruit of reading and writing is that you gradually begin to know where you are.

.....

“I am a writer, and what I write is what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given to me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard right.

.....

Secretary of the invisible: not my phrase, I hasten to say. I borrow it from a secretary of a higher order, Czeslaw Milosz, a poet, perhaps known to you, to whom it was dictated years ago.

.....

She pauses. This is where she expects them, to interrupt. Dictated by whom? She expects them to ask. And she has her answer ready: By powers beyond us. But there is no interruption, no question.

.....

-J.M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello

Coetzee is critical of this. He takes it seriously but then quotes it in a way that shows how you can use this idea to make yourself innocent. As a writer, I find Coetzee sarcastic, sceptical, and atheistic. Milosz was a writer with a quest. Eliot said that at 25, a poet should know his milieu. This is very optimistic. I would say maybe that a poet finds his milieu at 45, maybe even later. When you are young, you still experience these moments of happiness when you write, but you write crap!

re. Quest: It doesn’t have to be for god, maybe just for some kind of fraternity, daimonion, or for inspiration. Inspiration is mysterious; we don’t know entirely what happens.

Jeffrey Greene: Is there another river or stream? That of experience?

AZ: That goes without saying. But the way we look at a landscape is shaped by our ideas.

.....Adam Zagajewski was born in 1945 in Lviv, Ukraine. He is a novelist, essayist, translator, and poet. His most recent collection of poetry is *Eternal Enemies: Poems* (2008). He has been awarded the Bronze Cross of Merit, the Neustadt, and the Officer’s Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta. Zagajewski spoke at the American University of Paris on April 12th, 2010 to students in a class about Kafka and contemporary writing taught by Daniel Medin, an assistant professor of comparative literature. Zagajewski read from a selection of poetry from his upcoming collection, *Unseen Hand*. The extracts below are non-verbatim: the conversation is transcribed from my notes and filled in with the help of Medin and Zagajewski.

Harriet Iye

AZ: Yes, mountains didn’t even exist until the 18th century. They used to be seen as unnecessary monsters. The ocean was okay, they thought, but who needs the mountains? Landscape is always subject to cultural verification. Petrarch, for example climbed le Mont Ventoux in Provence in 1336 which was a very unusual thing to do, a thing considered dangerous and meaningless... He was warned against it. And now his feat is seen as a premonition of Renaissance; it was a very un-medieval gesture.

DM: German writers during the nineteenth-century saw the view from such peaks differently – that is, as an evocation of the bottomless human soul.

AZ: Right. For the Romantics, mountains were just marvellous rocky metaphors.

Question: Did you write your poem “Line 4” while you were actually on the Paris Metro, or afterwards?

AZ: I jotted down a few words at the time, but I wrote it later. You make a photo, then you develop the film at home.

Question: Do you have a favourite philosopher, or someone you find inspiring?

AZ: I am not a philosopher. I have realized that. I am so much more interested in the concreteness of things and of human beings. I could never finish any philosophy books that I started; I was never really a good philosophy student. Many philosophy students speak of the illumination of reading someone like Kant, but I thought that Kant was a bad writer and a little boring.

Writers look at the world through concrete events; as a writer, you’re not interested in the general ideas of things. Philosophers and writers are two people digging tunnels in a mountain, but the tunnels never meet. This is why I’m a little afraid of Kafka now: His work is governed by ideas. He is a kind of philosopher. I am not dismissing Kafka, he is such a giant. There are some writers who are more innocent in the way they see the world. I am afraid of re-reading Kafka now, as he had such an influence on me then. I do not want to walk down those dark corridors again.

THINGS THAT MARK KAFKA FOR ADAM Z.

a landscape of doom
all the detailed hopelessness
of a medieval painting
the precision of scripture
religious longing

DM: Kafka can be dark, yes, but there’s also a feeling of anti-climax in his work. He has a sense of humour about the darkness, it has all-too-human weaknesses. I’m fond of the anecdote told by Brod in his biography. When Kafka asserted that we are nihilistic thoughts in God’s head, his friend responded by referring to the Gnostics and the notion of an evil demiurge. But no, Kafka corrected, it was nothing so radical: God just had a bad day.“

Question: You say that writers are interested in the concreteness of human beings, but what is concrete about the fluxus of human beings?

AZ: If you are a Heidegger, or a Sartre, or a Husserl, you try to pin down and describe a general state of humanity. I think writers are interested in the variety of what it means to be human. You see 200 ways of being human. In this way, you're more humble when you are a writer, and I like this feeling of humbleness, that we know so little about ourselves. These philosophers know such a tiny bit about what it means to be human, but can't know everything. Simone Weil is a fascinating philosopher, but she's so serious. It strikes me that she never sees the comedy of being human. Philosophers are not flexible - they have one huge skein, one window, for everything.

Question: In Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, the title character says that "as a writer, I can't have any beliefs." You say that writers need to have their own way of seeing the world, but at the same time you say that they shouldn't try to know anything general about the world.

AZ: You're absolutely right, there is a contradiction in what I said. My answer to your question would be that a good writer should have some ideas, but not know them well -- just know their direction. Of course writers have political and philosophical ideas, but the difference is that a writer forgets what he or she knows and then finds them again after a few weeks or months. The ideas are imperfect, underdeveloped, and are always forgotten -- this, for a writer, is freedom. You have something to say, but you will never know exactly what it is. Twenty years later, a critic might look at all of your work and tell you what it is about, but you will likely never really know.

DM: Language, history, and place were important for Kafka. These have also been significant factors for the many Polish writers who made Paris their home. With regards to this, can you talk about your experience in this city [the Paris you lived in for 20 years, leaving 8 years ago]?

AZ: Like so many other people, I was rejected by Paris. I saw it as this beautiful place, but it didn't want me. In Paris, you are nothing, you are just an observer. But it is a beautiful thing -- why do you need to own a city? I could walk, I could have lunch. I couldn't make a living though. I was sceptical of what was fashionable then, with the methodologists: Foucault, Barthes. I looked at Paris, and still do, as a city which has lost its soul. It used to be a city of artists but now it's a city of bureaucrats. It's like that banal metaphor of a dead star whose light you still see. Paris for me is a dead star in the gray sky. I was not unhappy though. I loved it for what it was.



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FIRST LOVE
WE KNOW THE WORLD WAS
ONCE **WHOLE**
BECAUSE NOW,
IT IS **BROKEN**



Hotel
Alex Kanevsky