A Symposium on Rhyme and Repetition, with Commentary by Mark Morris, W. S. Di Piero, Ellen Pinsky, Nate Klug, Ethan Iverson, Rosanna Warren, and Mark Padmore

Brenda Wineapple on Diane Johnson

Javier Marías: Ridiculous Men

Poems by Louise Glück, Jim Powell, Charles Simic, Adam Zagajewski, and others

Ross Feld: Doing It Over

David Hollander Watches Television

Photographs by Arno Rafael Minkkinen
Table Talk

LAST JANUARY, I sent a stern email to my three adult children, all over thirty, informing them that if they didn’t claim their possessions by the end of the year I would throw them out. The pandemic scrambled my plans: one son landed home for months and my daughter, an ER doctor, was afraid to visit, for fear of infecting the old folk. Last week she finally drove up and managed to sort through a bookshelf. Many of the books in the discard pile were paperbacks she bought for courses, titles like Coffee Will Make You Black—though I wonder now if my children don’t feel that you personally need to hang on to these physical volumes. Everything’s online anyway. We don’t have to keep the written record in our home to protect it.” Still, in our family, where we don’t have houses or jewelry to pass down, we remember our relatives by their books. I have scattered titles by black authors, like the Hurston books, too well read to have rare-book value. I also have my grandfather’s 1938 edition of The Book of Common Prayer and a 1943 edition of Illuminations by Rimbaud, which belonged to my mother, the French major.

So I examine each book individually. I find photographs and a letter from my daughter’s college boyfriend stuck between pages. She might want those someday. And a 1965 copy of New Negro Poets edited by Langston Hughes, with my husband’s aunt’s name inside the cover. Aunt Peri was a jazz maven and constant reader, who marked the poems she liked with one penciled checkmark or two. That’s a keeper.

—Toni Martin

* * *

THE FIRST and only time I saw John Prine play live was on my thirtieth birthday. It was a present from an old friend, who showed up with his new girlfriend and took me and my new girlfriend to the Schubert Theatre in Philadelphia. The sound was concert class, no coffee-house brick walls to ping it back or drapery to damp it or

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crowd to interrupt with a cough or a request. John Prine in a concert hall was a bit like Charles Boyer’s seat covers on a Rolls-Royce, but of course this was precisely his appeal.

He did all the songs he’s remembered for that night—“Hello in There,” “Sam Stone”—but the one that lit me up was his masterpiece, “Angel from Montgomery.” These lines don’t sound or look like much—they don’t even rhyme—but their plainspoken beauty took my breath away. When Bonnie Raitt covered “Angel” on a live album a dozen years ago, she turned it into an aria, but it’s not quite that. It’s some approximation to and in the same dramatic mode as Shylock’s “Am I not a man?” or Lear’s repetition of the word never across a line of pentameter. It doesn’t look like much until one gives the ver- nacular context a ninety-degree turn and realizes the polarizing force of the question—that’s not quite just that. I remember dismissing out of hand, years ago, a book titled The Poetry of Rock. This isn’t rock, but it is poetry.

And it’s also what sets Prine (and Joni Mitchell, who deserves her own Nobel) apart from their contemporaries. Prine was more than just a folk singer, in part because his lyrics were as effrontery or insensitivity, coming from a white man born just outside Chicago, whose Southern accents are purely Southern-ish and as phony as Dylan’s or the dozens of Brits (Steve Winwood, Joe Cocker) whose blackish accents were pure fakeery. His charac- ter’s gender came with the voice he claims he heard. Prine was actually asked about that once: “I got a few years later lots of times I felt I could get away with writing a woman’s song first-person. And that never occurred to me, because I already con- sidered myself a writer. And writers are any gender you want.” Coming from an American folk singer, this suddenly much-more-contested claim (it’s not quite an argument), stripped of any and all the- retical regalia, sounds as simple as the song itself. It is true, as Louis Menand put it a while back, that unless you are born it, you cannot perform it! If you answer yes, it’s instantly impossible to know what to say to Pound when he pretends to be the river merchant’s wife—a woman around sixteen years old and Chinese—or the British poet Stevie Smith when she impersonates an older man married to a younger woman during the Blitz. But this is not news: our cultural moment is poisoned by politics. If the source seems obvious (our addiction to failed presidents, the antide more meme, more personal reportage, more born-to-the- masses accounts of what cannot be refuted or ignored?)

Which brings me back to John Prine. When you listen to “Angel,” pay atten- tion to the way he reflects the third and fourth lines of the quatrain I began this with—

Come home in the evening
And have nothing to say

—and note how he runs the syntax of line three into line four. Singers, per- formers of speech, whether singing or reciting it, reproduce live speech and lift the lines off the page. Performers invented enjambment. Here it identi- fies the moment—a climactic one, when the old woman being imperson- ated is either raising or lowering her voice—in rage or frustration, it’s hard to say. My ears hear a woman too worn down to yell at a husband who won’t have a ready reply anyway. Whether moral or not, this is art because it does what art does. It allows whoever is listening to migrate for a moment into an alien, alienated con- sciousness, and maybe rise to that level of “compassion” generally unavailable (we’re all pretty busy) and yet con- stantly advertised as the very condition of cultural health and national sanity.

—J. T. Barbarese

* T H E S U G G E S T E D p r e - r e q u i r e m e n t s f o r e n r o l l i n g i n a n y n o n - d i g i t a l a r t w o r k w e r e B a s i c C l a s s D r a w i n g a n d C l a s s D r a w i n g Theory. I skipped Color Theory because the ink may have scaled obediently signed up for an introducto- ry drawing class that met twice a week at the Fort Mason campus of City College of San Francisco. The teacher had graduated from RISD and had two sleeves of dazzling tattoos that climbed her forearms. (The ink may have scaled higher, but the area above her elbows was usually covered.) One arm show-
O n January 27, 2020, the reported daily number of confirmed new disease in Wuhan grew to 106, stock markets shuddered around the world, and the Swedish public was startled to see a fifty-five-inch OLED video monitor. It was time to hunker down.

When I moved to Oakland a few years ago, I enlisted in a summer-long art class. So much of learning to paint from the windows of the Francisco Bay. In the distance you could see where it gets you.” I took the unexpected feedback for what it was expected feedback for what it was worth—as an invitation to keep experimenting and working out new ways to convey what I see.—Salena Ramos

Second Wind

I think this is my second wind, my sister said. I put on my second wind. I think this is my second wind, my mother said. When I did watch television, it invariably meant I was stuck at home with time to watch. Police procedurals, of course—Unforgotten (Nicola Walker solves cold cases), The Crown (Buffy and Money Heist (Madrid mint robbers), Endeavor (Oxford), Deadwood (grim-looking Helsinki, sexy detectives), the new Perry Mason (Maison de la mythique). But also the wonderful Borgen (Danish parliament), the saucy Love & Anarchy (Los Angeles), and the eye-poppingly lovely Rita (Danish school), the Paper (Crown newspaper, plus crime), The Crown (German eulogist), The House of Bников (Mexico City flying nurse), The Night Manager (arms trafficking), Bodyguard (with its high-level tension and swoon-worthy Richard Madden), In Treatment (crotchety Gabriel Byrne and astringent Dianne Wiest as shrink), Big Little Lies (all kinds of crazy in San Francisco). Not to mention the most Zeitgeist show of all, Russell T Davies’ brilliant Years and Years. One of the joys of rampant television watching is spotting favorite actors in unexpected places. There’s future Queen’s Gambit deca Anya Taylor Joy and the child in her boarding school film, Endeavor! There’s Andrew Buchan, the sad father of the murdered boy in Broadchurch, looking dapper at a party with Prince Charles in The Crown! There’s a very young Olivia Colman in the BBC’s The Office from 2002! And wait until that uncut cop in Occupied looks familiar. Yet In a few years Oddgeir Thune will portray Stone Age man Næv in Beforelittens, naked as an infant on a raw rabbit in twenty-first-century Oslo. I try to preserve a vestige of my status as a snob. Most days I watch an actual motion picture in addition to television. This year it’s been fun “going” to film festivals, which used to be inaccessible except to industry types and critics, who would gush about things mortals couldn’t see for months. But now that it’s virtual, I too can be at the opening night of the New York Film Festival.

So for the duration of whatever this is we’re living through, I have a routine. A few hours of television, mostly comprised of TV on the ground, my sister said. Remember running around the park in Cedarhurst, on the ground, my sister said. Remember the sad father of the murdered boy in Endeavor! There’s Andrew Buchan, looking dapper at a party with Prince Charles in The Crown! There’s a very young Olivia Colman in the BBC’s The Office from 2002! And wait until that uncut cop in Occupied looks familiar. Yet In a few years Oddgeir Thune will portray Stone Age man Næv in Beforelittens, naked as an infant on a raw rabbit in twenty-first-century Oslo. I try to preserve a vestige of my status as a snob. Most days I watch an actual motion picture in addition to television. This year it’s been fun “going” to film festivals, which used to be inaccessible except to industry types and critics, who would gush about things mortals couldn’t see for months. But now that it’s virtual, I too can be at the opening night of the New York Film Festival.

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The Home of Two Cliffs

Clifford Thompson

M Y OLDER daughter and I were biking around Brook-lyn's Prospect Park to her last soccer game of the season, she in her pale green uniform. The spring of 2003, this was. I had turned forty a couple of months before. My daughter was nine. As I recall it, it was during this ride that she asked if I played sports as a kid, if my father was involved, what all of that was like.

“My father thought it was important for me to know how to play sports,” I said as we pedaled in the pleasant air around the park’s paved inner loop. “People in his generation thought there were some things boys should just know how to do. So he tried to teach me. We had a lot of time playing catch in our backyard. I wasn’t very good at it at first. And he wasn’t— he was a good dozen years older than I am now, which is to say his pain was in a fairly small amount of the time. He died within a couple of years of that. But he thought it was important for him to do this while he still could, because he knew he didn’t have a lot of time. When I messed up, he got impatient, and sometimes times a little nasty. He was in pain, like I said. I understand it all now, but at the time I hated it, and I resented it. So, that was my experience with sports as a kid.”

We came to what I called, in my head, Dead Man’s Hill—the steep decline we had to bike down before exiting the park at the Parade Grounds. This part of the ride always made me think of my father, his daughter, “I used to live here.” And we walked in, I looked around at the layout and the tin ceilings. In the same moment I thought this is the home of TWO Cliffs! We were lipid defined as someone who was nearby, “I used to live here.”

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“The coach, as always, asked for a team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should know. The team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should know. The team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should know. The team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should know. The team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should know. The team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should know. The team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should know. The team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should know.

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The unpredictability of life in those days, at work and outside it, had the occasional upside. I recall going out for the evening with a casual female friend, an occasion I didn’t think of as
A date until, as we were having coffee, our hands accidentally touched on the table, and neither one pulled away.

All of this is to say that I hadn’t yet built the machine, the one that ran my life with such regularity. That had its problems. If I didn’t know from day to day what was happening in my world externally, that was partly because I wasn’t sure what was going on inside, either. I had convictions—about the unimportance of race, the oneness of people—that I had not thought through very far. What would later be my interests in film and music were more impulses then, blind groping. To put it more succinctly, there was a lot I didn’t know about who I was, and knowing who you are makes difficulties every level easier to deal with.

I wonder, now, that if accounts for the inordinate fright I felt late one night in my room, when summer had become fall, when I was on the edge of sleep and suddenly heard a rustling I thought was a rat under the floor or in the wall. I went to get the other Cliff. My old roommate had called the top floor of the brownstone “the home of two Cliff’s”; my body was, is, the home of more than two Cliffs, probably many more, and who knew how many other people; Somewhere in me was my father, a man I never really got to know, and he was only the beginning. Occasionally I think of the people I will never know about. Was there, centuries ago in Africa, an ancestor who watched his daughter climb higher and higher in a tree, who felt afraid for her but did not want to make her afraid by saying so? How much of the machine is generic? From time to time I look in the mirror and wonder what other people are looking back at me.

But we can deal only with what we know. At forty I began to think of my father as not as one who had made my life miserable for misguided reasons, but as one who thought he had a job to do and he was doing it as best he could. As I looked more kindly on him, I began to father myself. I’m not sure I ever told my daughter that part of the story. I will have to, of these days..."
The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives
by Diane Johnson.
NYRB Classics, 2020, $17.95 paper.

INITIALLY PUBLISHED in 1972 and nominated for a National Book Award in 1973, Diane Johnson's *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives* is a gem: tart, canny, and unaccountably out of print for many years, but as fresh and wry and vital today as when it first appeared. Partly it's the story of Mary Ellen Peacock Nicolls Meredith, the first wife of the novelist George Meredith. Though she was largely ignored in the Victorian biographies of her eminent husband, Mary Ellen had a hold on Meredith's imagination. (For one thing, he habitually took her letters with him when he went to boarding school.)

When returning to her desired biographical approach, Diane Johnson sidles with Virginia Woolf, who felt that life consists in personality as much as in actions, words, or derring-do, and that biography would enlarge its scope, or, more to the point, deepen it, by hanging lanterns in odd corners to suss out cant or pretension. “The biographer,” Johnson notes, “must be a historian, but also a novelist and a snooper.”

We might suppose that beneath all that bustling, the Victorians were really like us. But they weren't. Johnson remarks in one of her many pungent essays: not the stuff of biography, to be sure, and certainly not enough for the conscientious Victorian biographer, should he have been inclined to care. As a result, one of the pure pleasures of Johnson's book is its firm but gentle sendup of this.

Her purpose, then, is aesthetic (hence the novelist) and ethical (hence the empathetic imagination that the novelist deploys). Every life has intrinsic value, and therefore biography is rightly concerned, or should be, with the lives of the obscure—the “lesser life,” which, as Johnson mordantly observes, “does not feel lesser to the person who never happened to have been informed or even willfully benighted.” (While the Biographer may have been impartial, the Victorian attitudes, Johnson observes, these notions also seem to plague modern biographers.)

But though he seemed unafraid of intelligent women, he married a provincial Welshwoman, Jane Gryffydh, who seemed not “the sort of thing” he was interested in. Such were the paradoxes of Victorian culture.

Within six years of the Peacock marriage, Jane Peacock would go mad, in the parlance of the day, or at least become debilitatingly depressed that followed the death of her second child. Her firstborn, Mary Ellen, was doted on by her father, and at Mary Ellen's birth her one no one imagined that she wasn’t a boy. Quite the reverse, it seems; her father kept her supplied with French novels and clever house guests. One such visitor was Lieutenant Edward Nicolls, dashing son of the ferocious “Fighting Nicolls” of the Royal Marines. Mary Ellen married Nicolls in early 1844, but just two months later the lieutenant drowned in a storm while trying to rescue a Meredith smoked, and he liked Tennyson’s poetry. He was also a finicky eater with a nervous stomach. A friend of the Peacock family dubbed him “The Dyspeptic.”

Mary Ellen, a gourmet cook, catered to George's unhappy digestion, retaining for a time her sense of humor while she prepared his special diet. Johnson remarks, though, if perhaps not cruelly, that Mary Ellen was alluding to domestic difficulties when she reviewed a recently published cookbook. Mary Ellen wrote, “many a child’s dyspepsia is concocted in a soda-cake; and many a lover’s quarrel lies in ambush at the bottom of a tureen of soup, where it nestles with matrimonial squabbles, morbid creeds, and poetic misprisions.”

Mary Ellen was also pregnant “more or less continuously,” as Johnson notes, speculating that the multiple pregnancies she had lived with her grandfather Thomas Peacock until his death and had then moved back. One such visitor was a minor celebrity when he and Mary Ellen began their affair. His recent painting *The Death of Chatterton* had been shown in the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1856 and praised by John Ruskin. (Today the painting hangs in the Tate.) In later life Wallis was also known as an authority on Far Eastern ceramics and all-round decent fellow, but he too was relegated to a footnote, if that. Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father and a friend of George Meredith, excluded Wallis from his *Dictionary of National Biography* as if to make his unhappiness known, or less continuously, “as Johnson remarks, though, if perhaps not cruelly, that Mary Ellen was alluding to domestic difficulties when she reviewed a recently published cookbook. Mary Ellen wrote, “many a child’s dyspepsia is concocted in a soda-cake; and many a lover’s quarrel lies in ambush at the bottom of a tureen of soup, where it nestles with matrimonial squabbles, morbid creeds, and poetic misprisions.”

The model for that painted Chatterton happened to have been George Meredith, which likely made Mary Ellen’s affair with Wallis even more galling. But Thomas Peacock seems to have been unruffled by George’s behavior, and when Mary Ellen and Henry Wallis had a child, whom they called Felix, he seemed nonplussed. George was not quite so sanguine. He grabbed Arthur and refused to give him back.

By then Mary Ellen was desperately ill, and when she died in 1861, Arthur was eight. The next year, Johnson tells us, when the boy was nine, George Meredith packed him off to boarding school and soon to Germany. As Arthur grew older, his father was little to do with George, who surmised that his son did not like him much. (And apparently he didn’t, Johnson dutifully tells us.) Mary Ellen’s death may have been the child of her first marriage to Edward Nicolls, was very kind to her half-brother Arthur when he became stricken with tuberculosis, and she took care of him during the last months of his life. Edith had lived with her grandfather Thomas Peacock until his death and had then begun to write his biography. Another
“lesser” life, she later became principal of the National Training School of Cookery, having learned quite a bit from her mother and grandfather, and she remained head of the school until she was seventy-five. She married, published notable cookbooks, earned a gold medal from the Royal Society of the Arts, and was made a Member of the British Empire; she was something of a chip off her mother’s block, but luckier.

Felix was only three when his mother died. But his father, Henry Wallis, was devoted to him and raised him in full view of his acquaintances, even though Felix was “illegitimate.” He took Felix on his travels and was careful about his education, keeping him in England rather than dispatching him to the Continent. Felix became a businessman, married, and had children.

As for George Meredith, he seems to have portrayed Mary Ellen as “fretful” in novels like *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, while accusing her, in his self-exonerating *Modern Love*, of “faithlessness of heart.” Presumably, though, he was more just in his proto-feminist novel *Diana of the Crossways*, written more than twenty-five years after their marriage ended. Though Meredith was nominated for a Nobel Prize several times, he never won, and remarkably few people read him now, despite his acknowledged virtues as a novelist.

Henry Wallis would outlive Meredith by seven years. After he died, museums began to squabble over his collection of rare pots and vases, some of which he had already donated to the Victoria and Albert. In “Brief Lives,” the appendix to her book, Johnson wittily identifies Wallis as “the villain—or hero—of this work.” As for Mary Ellen Meredith, Johnson describes her as unfortunate but courageous. To my mind, Mary Ellen has actually been quite lucky in a critical way: the brilliant Diane Johnson has freed her.

The Great Poet Basho Begins His Journey

After lengthy preparations the great poet Basho begins his journey. The very first day he happens to walk past a sobbing child abandoned by his parents. He leaves him there, by the roadside, because, he says, such is Heaven’s Will.

He walks on, northwards, toward the snow and things unseen, unknown. Slowly the imperfect cities’ sounds grow still, only streams hold forth chaotically while white clouds play at nothingness.

He hears an oriole’s song, delicate, uncertain, like a prayer, like weeping.

—Adam Zagajewski
(translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh)

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The Abbreviation lac., in the laconic shorthand of a text or a hole in the received text. Like death’s heads, or stone lions flanking a locked door, the letters are posted or a hole in the received text. Like death’s heads, or stone lions flanking a locked door, the letters are posted before and behind nearly all of the shredded poetic corpus that bears the name of Sappho. Precious little sur- vival text is available to us, and even this is in a form that resembles a lacuna, a textual mutilation. For centuries after her death, Greeks and Romans recited Sappho’s poems, and those of her fellow islander, are the ancient lyrics called the barbitos or, as she called it, harmos. As to where she sang, whom, and whether these songs were accompanied by the burble of wine or barefoot dancers or respectful silence, we are free to speculate. Oddly, far fewer dedications can be made about this earlier Greek epic tradition that culminated in Homer, himself more myth than man, than about the world that gave rise to Sappho. And so, instead of a white chalk outline where her life and work should be, the field of “Sappho studies” looks like a crime scene cisscrossed by the footprints of scholars, poets, translators, philologists, Hellenophiles, feminists and misogynists, LGBTQ advocates and their naysayers, and, when “new fragments” turned up in 2014, by the mad stampede of the blogosphere.

One might well wonder whether our interest is no more than the allure of all the unsolved mystery. Like frayed spid- derwebs with no trace of their spinner, her poems give us so much to ponder because so much is missing, even the doorframe in which she spun them. Confronted by a snippet such as:

and gold chickpeas were growing on the banks

you, reader, are utterly free to read by your own lights. Without reference to work. To Horace, she was mascula, “manly, vigorous,” though whether that referred to the vigor of her expression or the fact of her expressing love for women is anyone’s guess. By the Middle Ages nearly all of her work was lost, and the world was free to make her a symbol for un-Christian vice—namely, frankness of eroticism—or, later, for the virtue of the same name. Conscientious scholars like Dimitrios Yatromanolakis, recounting some of these (mis-)appropriations, are forced to refer to her as “Sappho” or “[Sappho],” as though the very syllables have become too volatile to handle without gloves.

In acting as medium, the translator renders not only the words of the poet but the whole, the part admits of most every interpretation. The larger the number of such possible proposals, the better the urge to throw up one’s hands and dispense with any exegesis whatever. Where poems have been whittled to koans, as here, Sappho is only nominally poetics, “the maker.” Time, in the role of the uncurious translator, has written the Sappho we imagine we know name.

Whoever gets the credit, the collabo- ration continues to be successful. Over a dozen English translations remain in print, differentiated by titles ranging from the romance shelf (Stung with Love—Poohchigan) to the unwittingly instructive (You Make Me—Edmonds) to the oxymoronic (Complete Poems and Fragments—Lombardo). Many collections have been revamped and re-issued to include “new poems” uncover- ed by scholars in 2004 and 2014. One of these is Jim Powell’s The Poetry of Sappho, whose notes give as capable and thorough an introduction to poet, poems, and critical reception as might
what makes the fragmentation so ghastly; over and over, accident seems to enact the very separation Sappho is describing and lamenting.

Like a bricchitos in the mountains that men shepherding tread underfoot, and on the ground its purple flower.

The way these poems are damaged may be arbitrary, but the effects are often chillingly beautiful, as though damage had a consciousness of its own. (This is especially true, ironically, in translation, which tends to sharpen the text's ragged edges.) Often, uncannily often, it excises with a censor's precision the personal details we long for. What is left, skeletal bare, is a single poetic gesture that might have been written by anyone, anywhere:

Lithe girl, in the old days

been written by anyone, anywhere:

For. What is left, skeletally bare, is a

precision the personal details we long

for. What is left, skeletally bare, is a

single poetic gesture that might have been written by anyone, anywhere:

To read the fragments as fragments is to discover how much depends (unloading Williams' wheelbarrow) on the archetypal impulses of the genres in which Sappho worked and helped establish: the ode's impulse to praise, the hymn's to bless, the curse's to blight, the elegy's to bind, the hymn's to pray, the lament's to grieve. Perhaps a fragment, by its very nature, makes unreasonable demands of us. Some of the last lines Keats wrote, in 1819, appear upside down on a draft of a poem called “The Cap and Bells,” itself unfinished:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold,
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreamings

That thou would wish thine own heart dry

That in my veins red life might stream again

And thou be conscience-calm'd—see, here it is,

I hold it towards you.

The lines don't belong to “The Cap and Bells.” They don't seem to belong anywhere. Helen Vendler and other critics have suggested, despite the cadaverous setting, that “you” should be understood as Fanny Brawne, to whom Keats became engaged around 1818 but whom he would marry. Helen Vendler and other critics have suggested, despite the cadaverous setting, that “you” should be understood as Fanny Brawne, to whom Keats became engaged around 1818 but whom he would marry.

Some scholars give good reasons to think the lines were intended for another, hypothetical, “lost” poem or even that we should imagine them spoken by a character in the play Keats was working on, the forgotten Otho the Great. But such revisionism is no embarrassment; it is a poetic gesture that stood alone, without reference to particular persons, places, times (“I think someone will remember us”). Is it Sappho's? No. But that we emend, translate, engage in such revisionism is no embarrassment; it is a poetic instinct alive and well in our time.

To read the fragments as fragments is to discover how much depends (unloading Williams' wheelbarrow) on the archetypal impulses of the genres in which Sappho worked and helped establish: the ode's impulse to praise, the hymn's to bless, the curse's to blight, the elegy's to bind, the hymn's to pray, the curse's to blight, the elegy's to bind, the archetypal impulses of the genres...

What this fragment and Sappho's fragments so often reveal is the strength of such illusion and our appetite for it. Lyric poetry has always invited our participation. Its pronouns stretch to accommodate us. When Sappho suffers, we suffer; when she longs for a nameless you, we feel her longing. Dispassionate reading is bad reading and has always been. In the sixteenth century, a scholar named Isaac Casaubon emended the received text of Fragment 147, changing the past tense of mnasaethai (“remembered”) to the future mnaseethai (“will remember”). What had been a banality, a scrap of something else (“I think someone had us in mind”), became a poetic gesture that stood alone, without reference to particular persons, places, times (“I think someone will remember us”). Is it Sappho's? No. But that we emend, translate, engage in such revisionism is no embarrassment; it is the poetic instinct alive and well in our time. Our poets are inseparable from the history that maims and scatters their work. We might even say that very history.

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Despite Berryman’s wishes, it would seem, we now have *The Selected Letters of John Berryman*, edited by Philip Coleman and Calista McRae. Harvard University Press, 2020, $39.95 cloth.

In the past two years, numerous caches of poets’ letters have been dug out from archives to be cleanly packaged as published collections. Sylvia Pathé’s final letters piously crawled to their inevitable end point. *The Dolphin Letters* felt redemptive by contrast: over forty years after Robert Lowell converted private letters from his wife Elizabeth Hardwick into the material of poetry, both sides of the exchange could finally and fairly be judged. The recently unsealed letters from T. S. Eliot to his lover Emily Hale quickly exposed Eliot’s infidelity to his wife Vivienne, but more so his cruelty to Hale. Prolonging the suspense, researchers in the Eliot/Hale archives narrated their finds, letter-by-letter, as the drama unfolded.

Reading the letters of long-dead poets is like skipping to the end of a mystery novel and then doubling back, years later, to locate the first clue. Lowell recognized in the 1970s that readers had a seedy desire to read dirt about poets. Letters help us satisfy our curiosity about the minds of poets, perhaps especially “confessional” poets, whose private lives were as much the stuff of their poems as the other way around. We know what came of the poets’ lives, but we do not know how those lives came to be. Letters, or at least the letters that have lately been published, show us the destruction in slow motion.

If *The Selected Letters of John Berryman* presents far less drama than the Lowell or Eliot letters, it may be because the most titillating episodes appear already in Berryman’s poetry. In *The Dream Songs* (1969), Berryman drifts through the surreal, nebulous terrain of biographical events and mental collapse, a slow unraveling that is performed for us at a remove. Berryman speaks indirectly through an interlocutor named Henry, who from the very first Dream Song is “pried / open for all the world to see.” However, Henry’s openness obscures the facts and fictions of Berryman’s own life. Berryman explained Henry away as “nothing but a series of conceptions—my conceptions.” Henry’s unnamed friend is the more troubling presence. He speaks in the vernacular of a nineteenth-century minstrel and refers to Henry as “Mr. Bones.” The blurring between poet and speaker generates all the constant thrum of a good drama—especially when that blurring is caused by the reverberations of racial tension.

The racist dialect throughout *The Dream Songs* has been a frequent focus of contemporary black poets. Kevin Young has edited a selection of Berryman’s poems and written critical about Berryman’s diction. Tyehimba Jess gives us an antitode to Berryman’s blackface minstrelsy in his collection *Olio*, for which Jess won the Pulitzer Prize in 2017, as Berryman did for *Dream Songs* in 1965. Claudia Rankine repurposes Dream Song 53 in *Citizen: An American Lyric*. If any part of Berryman’s career was a call—for help, for attention, for a new poetic movement—these poets give him a long overdue response.

*The Selected Letters* can finally clarify which parts of Henry are indeed Berryman. But that clarity can be achieved only as a result of the meticulous and demanding work of sharp editors. Anyone brave enough to take on editing a selection of letters faces a heap of difficulties that shift as the book comes together. There is, foremost, the ethical dilemma of whether to publish letters at all. Many times over in *The Selected Letters*, Berryman asks his correspondents to destroy his letters: “don’t pass any of this letter out, of course,” he asks Lowell, of all people, in one instance. The appeal of Berryman’s letters is heightened by the drama of his desire to conceal them.

Then, there is the issue of how to...
frame the selection. Coleman and McRae note that it is “important to stress how many letters have not been included,” such as Berryman’s letters to his mother (previously published in We Dream of Homes, 1988), lost letters, and omitted letters that contain sensitive material about living persons. Previous assortments of Berryman’s letters have been, in Cheris McRae’s words, more and less than just “selected” letters, and the editors point the reader to a few of these other collections. The introduction to the Selected Letters (1999) showcases letters about the hard, and two Berryman biographies include relevant correspondence.

What makes The Selected Letters enjoyable is its utter capaciousness, its willingness to go where the editors’ process of selection leads. The introduction explains that the “main principle of selection was to shed light on Berryman as writer.” This does not mean that every letter is conducted partly through the negative, as the editors eliminated previously published and unavailable letters. We are left with a glimpse of more than just one life told from one perspective and unfettered by the demands of comprehensive biography.

As it has come to be known, Berryman’s life has the direness and dudeness of soap opera. He was born in 1914 in Oklahoma to John Allyn Smith and Martha Little. He was named after his father, but retained that name for only twelve years, until John Senior committed suicide behind the family apartment in Florida in 1926. Instead, the selection is an endnote that Berryman’s mother remarried the family landlord, John Angus McAlpin Berryman. At that moment, John Allyn Smith, Jr., became John Berryman. (Predictably, Berryman’s letters demonstrate his fondness for invented names, in particular cutey-poo names for his wives and friends.) He was married three times, fathered three children, and won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and a Bollingen Prize. In 1972, he committed suicide by jumping off of the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis.

Given the dramatic arc of Berryman’s life, it is merciful that his letters frequently focus on the minutia of daily life. James Merril supposed that if poetry were considered an aria to be sung by an individual, prose was the recitative—the explanation that moves a story along. In The Selected Letters, Berryman’s arias are barely announced, nearly drowned out by the humdrum of quotidien housework and errands. “All I did yesterday,” he writes to one of his youthful lovers, “was write out a long letter to Shea and half dozen others, unpack & sort ed all my papers of the last 8 months & address them,” began working on his fiction course, reckoned my bank account & bills.” Notes to fellow poets, including Delmore Schwartz, Ezra Pound, and Robert Lowell, likewise have the familiar pleasures and rhythms of small talks. Many letters run this same course, and are “short and practical,” as the editors note. Even Berryman’s marriage to Eileen Mulligan is disclosed for the first time in the midst of an angry letter to the couple’s landlord, in which Berryman berates him for a frige that never worked properly.

For those familiar with Berryman, there is a certain suspense in reading these letters and waiting for the moments we know are coming—the divorces, the deaths, the affairs, the failures, the triumphs. When such moments surface, there is a sudden rush of relief, as if Berryman who have been expecting has at long last arrived in front of us, delivering bad news we have perversely been waiting to hear. “In short, I can’t live, and my insurance, the only sure way of paying my debts, expires on Thursday,” he tells Mulligan soon after their separation in 1953. “So unless something happens I have to kill myself day after tomorrow evening or earlier.” (The letter ends mid-sentence, and an endnote tells us that “subsequent pages of this letter are missing.”) Here is a familiar Berryman letter: “I’ve embarked on a manic depressive voice of The Dream Songs.

Once the course of the The Selected Letters, Berryman reveals a stylistic tic of suppressing many of his major life upheavals, literally pushing them down into the gaps of the letters and the text body. To reveal upsetting information in the appended space of the postscript was something of a Berryman signature. The “P.S.” lingers below the material that Berryman wants to present to his correspondent. He can pretend everything is fine if he technically leaves it out of the letter. Yet one effect of the delay is that these revelations come across as clifftop. The first time Berryman signs off in these letters as “John Berryman,” in 1929, he does so in a letter to his stepfather which ends with a note so devastating it must be sincere: “P.S. I’m a disgrace to your family. My work of Edmund Wilson, he adds as a valediction. “I am divorced. God bless tomorrow evening or earlier.” (The letter to the couple’s landlord, in which Berryman berates him for a fridge that never worked properly.)

Some of the narrative is predictable. Letters to publishers and editors smell of advice, when it does arrive, can sound like weak sotto voice encouragement rather than a strong opinion about what poetry should be or do. Berryman dishes out his best advice when he is barely published, and it is worth quoting at length: “The poet invents some of his materials, and others he takes where he finds them,—from personal, conversational and literary experience; what he gives them is order, rhythm, significance, and he does this by means of style and the inscrutable operation of personality.” These letters touch our the myriad ways Berryman’s inscrutable personalities control the rhythms of his conversations and, ultimately, the development of his style. But not all the materials of a poet’s life should be published. Berryman wrote to D. D. Paige, the editor of Ezra Pound’s selected letters, “I’m glad Pound’s correspondence is to be done; it should make a very useful book. I don’t envy you any part of it, the collection, the deciphering, or the annotation.” He believed that “a complete collection would be intolerable,—the problem is to select, and then make clear for readers what has been selected.”

The editors of The Selected Letters of John Berryman have performed valuable, painstaking work, and although the result may not have pleased Berryman, it is certainly far from intolerable.

Even scavenging birds seemed reticent to circle that dead thing washed ashore in its gray dress of skin and net. Bright red cuts were raw and crossing—struggle’s map. If you followed the slow freezing of the eddies in winter’s grasp this told the creature’s death, each crystal building upon itself until a body cemented at the edges. If you stumbled upon the carcass, carapace, you would see it was fresh—not yet smelling of destruction but of hot blood tinged in ice. You would know suffering was long—weeks, maybe months, before this frozen beacon. Netting is a heavy, slow noose. You’d contemplate closing the eyes that likely don’t, consider lying along the body’s shadowed side, hoping for the cold sand to open, to swallow its own. Who of dignity wants to be carried off by organ by ligament by vessel in the sea’s onslaught or in the tiny mouths of the living?

—Kara Penn

Struggle’s Map
SHORTLY AFTER I moved into this house, more than a decade ago now, I was startled to find myself being stared at. One night I was reading a novel my sister had left the last time she visited, and I put the book aside and glanced toward the large Palladian window that overlooked my yard. It was the first time I noticed that at that time of night I could see my neighbors' houses, built behind the fence. Even when my husband was sleeping in the room, his image was in my mind as I went through the day—caring for my husband, working at a large chain store, along the hill, enclosed by fences, and all properties sat on at least an acre of land.

When my husband and I moved here the house felt enormous and there were rooms we did not even use. This was before so much happened—before the death of my mother, before the diagnosis of my husband's illness, the disease that made it impossible for him to work. So much has changed in the past decade, but what I've been thinking about lately, what I've been holding in my mind is the night I was reading and my neighbor and her husband were standing there. I could see her wide hips and those lumpy legs, which ended in sports socks and brightly colored running shoes.

THE CALIFORNIA sun in summer spreads over our yards, the streets, the hills where I walk each morning, as I'm sure it spreads, honey-smooth, over the poorer neighborhoods that lie close to the commercial core of this small town, where the Mexican field migrants live. It reaches as far as the eye can see, and if we decide—as we used to when we had more funds—to travel over the moutain, through the forested pass, to the throbbing ocean, it would be there too, its shards of light touching each wave with a blinding brilliance. These things continue unabated despite what happens to us in our little house. Of course, the house is only small in comparison, especially to the huge, never-still ocean. It has high ceilings in the front rooms, two-story windows, a kitchen, breakfast nook, and family room make up the rest of the first floor, with a master suite and three more bedrooms with washrooms on the second. We bought this house before the collapse in the market and over the past five years or so we have barely been able to hang on to it.

THE NEIGHBORS behind us live there alone, they're childless, or their children are gone, married, far away, for I never see or hear visitors in their yard. The fence between our yards is solid and high and I only had the opportunity to speak with the woman who lived there when our dogs started barking at each other through the fence. I heard her voice before I saw her. “I'm so sorry,” she said. “I can't seem to make Rodeo calm down here.”

It had been only a few days since we moved in and I did not want to seem like a problem neighbor with an unruly dog (although the unruly dog was certainly true). “Oh no, it's this crazy creature of mine,” I said. “He thinks he owns the neighborhood.” And then I worried this made me sound entitled, as if my dog had a right to be a nuisance. “I'll bring him in,” I said quickly, and she said, “Oh, thank you. I'm sure they'll learn to behave.”

“I'll just be happy if they learn to shut up,” I said and then thought I sounded harsh. “I mean Cracker here. He should shut up.” And I heard her laugh in response.

THE FIRST year we lived here, a community group organized a neighborhood BBQ, and it was here that I was able to meet my neighbor in person. These BBQs were to end when the economic situation worsened, when more and more houses stood abandoned, or people were publicly evicted. I witnessed this trauma twice in my block and gained three cats from those neighbors, who begged us to take in their animals.

On the day of my first neighborhood BBQ, ten years ago, I was introduced to the woman who lived behind us, the owner of Rodeo, a poodle, the dog who continued to bark at Cracker. The woman was shorter than I am, which makes her short, with sturdy white legs that I could see below her shorts. Her blonde hair was curly and loose to her shoulders, and she, true to my over-the-fence impression of her, was quick to laugh. She wore a T-shirt and was what some people would refer to as “chubby,” as if she were put together in chunks—hey!—shoulders, a block of chest, madriff, wide generous hips, and those lumpy legs, which ended in sports socks and brightly colored running shoes.

This time, I was working in the office with my husband, looking after pay-rolls and the accounts. The day of the BBQ was a Saturday and I needed to return to work to complete a report for the auditors who would be at our office on Monday, and so I was only able to stay long enough to greet my neighbor and her husband. He was lanky and gave off an air of befuddlement, with a moustache that seemed wanted to an ancient face figure of the 1970s, and I wondered how one night I saw them in a private moment when they were unaware I could see them.

THE MASTER suite in my home takes up the entire back area of the house. Above the bed there is a cathedral ceiling with a fan which, when on, moves the air about languidly. I would lie some nights when I couldn't sleep looking at that fan, when I was worried about making the mortgage, or those months after getting my husband's diagnosis—the information that told us why his leg trembled, why he had trouble holding utensils and his hands shook. Those nights alone, if my husband had fallen asleep downstairs, or beside me but turned away, I'd watch the fan moving in the evening heat, its endless loop. California nights are seldom humid, even if the day has been, and usually you can trust a breeze to rustle the trees, bringing into the room the sound of its sizzle, as well as the perfume of the cleander and lilac bushes, the hibiscus and wild roses.

One night, when I was reading a novel my sister had left the last time she visited, I put the book aside and glanced toward the large Palladian window that overlooked my yard. It was the first time I noticed that at that time of night I was able to see across my yard to my neighbor's and into their bedroom. It was that moment of the day when the sky seemed to gleam metallically, to almost shimmer, while the darkness was settling in the streets and yards. When I looked over, I could see my neighbor's husband lounging on the bed, watching television. The door to the washroom opened but his attention stayed on the show he was watching, even though his wife entered the room completely naked. Her skin had a rosy glow as if she had just stepped from a hot bath, and she moved with an unconscious confidence, draping the towel in her hand along her shoulders, a block of chest, madriff, wide generous hips, and those lumpy legs, which ended in sports socks and brightly colored running shoes.

Sitting in my room, I often wonder when I see someone looking as if they were from a different era—what delusion of style kept him looking this way.

I remember this day in particular because my husband was standing with another neighbor, a tanned woman who lived a few doors down from us. She was tall and wore—a again, I remember this clearly—a wide patent-leather belt with a huge buckle that stood out against her white dress. Strange that I should remember this, standing with my neighbor and her husband as my own husband laughed his sharp, bark-like laugh. I barely heard what my neighbors said, or some anxiety, or was it merely angst, settled. As I watched him I thought how comical he looked when I knew he was trying to look cool, or maybe even mysterious. I interrupted him and this woman whose smile never wavered, saying we had to leave to get back to the office. “Oh, duty calling,” my husband said, smiling broadly at the woman. There was a small patch of spinach on his front tooth that I did not tell him about.

The Three Penny Review
everyday. I wonder what has happened to her. My husband and I were to lose
this business within a year, and Karen was never to speak to me after we were
unforced to make payroll and she was out a month’s wages. But on this day, the
day after I had witnessed our neighbor, she and I sat on the porch of a restaurant
close to our office in the industrial park where our business was located. She
was speaking about a man she’d met the weekend before and did not notice my
attention slipping from her, until she said, “He’s Canadian. Like you.”
 “Really,” I said. “Good guy, then.”
 “You think?”
 “I’m joking, Karen. There are some pretty awful Canadians, you know.”
 “I guess. But you always speak so well of Canada.”
 “My family, of course, my family is wonderful.” This reminded me of my sister
was staying with my sister, the first visit since the death of our mother the winter before. I
had gone home then and stayed with her last week of our mother’s life. The
night before the death, my sister and I stayed at our mother’s nursing home. Her
body under the flannel sheet was small, withered, and the skin parched.
“She’s used every bit of her body,” my sister said as we placed new warmed
blankets on her legs. “Every part.” It snowed heavily that night and we could
see it accumulating in the courtyard outside her window. Karen mentioning
Canada brought this view back to me, and it struck me then, not for the first
time, the capriciousness of memory, how it drills down and settles on an image
or a sentence said in haste, and how there doesn’t seem to be any hierarchy to
what the mind remembers and brings forth. “This reminds me, my sister is com-
ing in a few weeks,” I said, but Karen wanted to talk about the man she met and
the conversation soon returned to him and her hopes for the future.

MY SISTER LIVES IN OTTAWA, WHERE I Grew up. She is more than a decade
Younger than me, and when I was a teenager I was often tasked with look-
ing after her, especially during the years our father was ill and our mother was
forced to work. This was before my marriage, before my first husband, the father
of my two children, before the move to California after he landed a job there as a
map maker. Our divorce shattered so much. I look back at it, at how liberating
this business within a year, and Karen was never to speak to me after we were

AFTER DINNER—broiled salmon, salad, corn, and buns—when the night
began to rest darkly upon the neighborhood, my sister and I went for a walk
on the hillside pathway. It was a long walk, and as we passed some of the large
erst while the sun was up, come on, like sudden fireflies. We spoke of our mother, the
last night of her life, we spoke of our memories of her and we laughed at times,
became silent at others, and made it almost to the top of the steep hill before
turning back. When we reached Valley Oaks, our street, it was late and dark.
There was a mingling of scents, garlic from the nearby farms, citrus from the
lemon and orange trees in the back yards, and the warm perfume of the oleander
bushes that grew wild along the street. I think back on that night, how two cats
came down the wide lane to greet us, how we could hear the sound of my hus-
band’s cheer as he watched a football game and we entered the house to its rau-
cous sound. I think back, and wonder why we were not happier.
Do It Over

Ross Feld

THERE ARE cosmic jokes, as we all know; and the one I'm probably most familiar with on a daily basis is the one whose punchline goes: “I don’t write—I rewrite.” As cosmic jokes go, this is hardly the most terrifying; but, as I say, it’s the one I’m most often bound to like all such jokes its aim is to chasten.

Everyone who’s ever written anything at all knows about this humbling joke—or at least who’s ever written one with a term paper on Thomas Paine or a few blistering remarks to be delivered before the next sub-committee, or whether it’s Anna Karenina—the semi-comic truth is that whatever is first put down on paper shouldn’t be seen as much more than simply a way to get the ink accustomed to coming off the pen. That’s it. Even to call it a framework or a scaffolding is probably is to say too much.

Better to think of it as the beginning of a dizzying process of subversion—with the exceptions perhaps of teenage poets and professional philosophers. Whether it’s to be a love letter or a term paper on Thomas Paine or a few blistering remarks to be delivered before the next sub-committee, or whether it’s Anna Karenina—the semi-comic truth is that whatever is first put down on paper shouldn’t be seen as much more than simply a way to get the ink accustomed to coming off the pen. That’s it. Even to call it a framework or a scaffolding is probably is to say too much.

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way...and it then happened. Day after day of going in there and rapping away for hours without more than a glimmer of wistful confidence that things may really resolve: it's nerve-wracking, and can make a writer quite impatient. When novelists become impatient, they either seem to turn excessively stylish or they begin dropping moral hints that are about as subtle as horseshoes. But underlying this hysterical skill and/or didacticism is basically a layer of embarrassment—at not having got it right the first time. At, in other words, being human. Art is both forgiving and unforgiving of its creators’ fallibility. But I have a feeling that the placidity of the relationship between the ideal and the reality—what you meant to say and what finally came out—is where the art of fiction is found. The old and really beautiful maxim, Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans, is one a novelist should understand. Slipping in the words A novel for Life, I know this all sounds like the writer’s side of the matter, which is where there is something that rewriting, the fairly ghastly process, can reveal about re-reading—or the other way around? Perhaps as no one but a librarian is in a better position to know, mostly read a book one time only. They perhaps reserve the right to re-read, but isn’t exercised too much. (Although libraries are in some way designed to be there in the expected event such a right is acted upon.) Yet it does happen sometimes of course: pride will spur a vexed reader on to try again and get into something that the first time locked him out—or vice versa. Or there’s a book that you weren’t ready for. It’s my suspicion that, like a not completely pleasant secret, every veteran reader privately carries a book be or she guiltily knows they failed and not vice versa. Failed through mattenation, laziness, or simply meeting it at the wrong time. When I was thirteen, I read everything I could find by John O’Hara. What could I have understood of John O’Hara’s at thirteen? What possibly? But my suspicion is that the reason the general reading public doesn’t re-read is simply because they’re never asked to. Children crave hearing the story, the general told them many, many more than once—Oh, that thing again—nor at seeing a reproduction of the Sistine Chapel. Art may be the one place where familiarity doesn’t breed contempt. So why can’t a book be read again? Why can’t favorite books be for adults what they are for children: things to be responded to as though a kind of music? Is it because we already know how a novel or a story turns out? Unlikely; adults stay up through Casablanca at two in the morning, knowing exactly who will and who won’t be getting on that plane. We probably don’t re-read because we’ve forgotten how to—and why. Writers, though, happen to be a group of people who frequently do re-read. They’re looking for how to tricks and hints; and they also have a habit of re-reading as a form of self-punishment, going back to books they wish they could beat, wish they could be better than—and which paradoxically are the ones that provide the most hope, the ones that break, as Kafka said, “the frozen sea within us.” They also re-read, however, because they’ve got some insider’s information: they know that all literature is itself basically a re-reading. Fiction, for example, reads and re-reads life. In a novel or story, we are encountering a small slice of a heightened reality different from ours yet somehow recognizable, as if it already had been buried in us. To take an arbor-train model, let’s say a very lowly book set in the Egypt of the Pharaohs. You pick it up and then very shortly put it down. Why? Because you didn’t ring true; it seemed too “unbelievable.” But how was it unbelievable? What do you know about the Pharaohs? Honestly, nothing—or only things from other speculative sources that may themselves be incredible, who knows. Yet you do know, somehow: you do know about what’s credible, on either the banks of the Nile or the banks of the Ohio. Somehow, especially when the book is not lousy and instead is great, you know a whole raft of things you never knew you knew. You find yourself able to respond fluently to the days of a Russian prison camp inmate as you can to the rudiest shock of a young man waking up to find he’s been turned into a cockroach during the night, or to the daily anguish of a Jane Austen maiden as fully as to the sexual frustrations of the wife of a French bourgeois named Bovary. My guess—my writer’s guess—is that the reason fiction can let us do these amazing acts of sympathy and identification, it’s because it instinctively calls up in us our inherent taste for complication. And no other art does this so well—since only this one is produced by humans for humans and expressly must be in some way about humans. Fiction satisfies our last for muddle that our daily lives repress. And so fiction turns out to be anything but a means of escape. Actually, it’s a recapitulation. Into mischievous messes, into the capacity we all have to screw things up. It’s no wonder, then, that writers, who give storn to these screw-ups by screwing them up themselves, know this best of all. And that they therefore are able to read with a kind of humility and shame and readiness for re-experience and re-focus that’s not at all a bad thing in this very disposable world. Libraries have a shelf with a sign that reads something like: Books You May Have Missed. “Missed” here presumably means never read when first issued; but as you’ve guessed by now, I’m sort of suggesting an even longer shelf. It doesn’t have to be in the actual, physical library. It’s probably better off, more potent, in the mind of the librarian—that there are books we have missed and maybe always will, and that every now and again they deserve another shot. To come back at a book ten, twenty, thirty, even forty years later is always a remarkable experience, whether disappointing or exhilarating, but it can be something more also a refresher course in why we read at all.

I make my students write sestinas to prove they are more than machines. Do not go gently into that blue light. I joke. We are reading the unknown, characters who want to be bodiless, free from our stone-age flesh. They don’t despair over pronouns, prefer their avatars to despair in pixel hearted dreams. They never write sestinas. I used to think the goal was to see through the body—who is a favorite topic for poetry. The class nods, their own sestinas suddenly dimmer, less worthy, a cog in the teacher’s machine. Maybe they feel used, like discarded bodies in our online utopia. The poem is the body, I say. The words are the soul. I feel erudite, light cascading from my mouth, so not a machine. I wave my expo marker around. The heart is despair! Near-scout. The poem is love! Most of their sestinas are about broken legs and puppies. Don’t forget the unknown

I whisper to B. She looks at me oddly, unknown. Another girl is writing about her lover’s body, and I am horrified by the word—lover—in a sestina by a fourteen-year-old. I fear how she will incorporate luminous and am concerned perhaps it is I who dwell in despair. Still, not a machine! At least she is writing about sex and not machines. This reassures me, hedges the unknown so I can continue on with the usual despair attaching teenagers. At least she still wants a body. There is hope in that, and the bullet, and the light shining through each child’s truly horrible sestina.

If I am a gentle machine? I give each sestina an A for effort. Let the bullet’s despair illuminate the unknown lover. Let the poem glow inside every body.

—Jennifer Garfield
A Symposium on Rhyme and Repetition

Editor's Note: As is always true in the case of our symposia, these contributions were written simultaneously and independently in response to the assigned topic. Any overlaps, parallels, or violent disagreements are therefore purely serendipitous.

Attempting to define these terms, I found myself lost. Considering how I rhyme and repeat within my own work, as a choreographer of dance to music, I realized that I could not discuss rhyme or repetition without including rhythm.

Rhyme is a pair of things that agree. Repetition is something that happens again.

Rhythm is the establishment of a pattern of R in just about any occurrence of any duration: the beat, the measure, the phrase, the movement, the full "piece," the evening, day, week, month, year, etc., infinitely large and small in every direction.

I believe that fundamental R is based on heartbeat, on breath, on bilateral symmetry; the body spatchcocked, split down the middle; pairs of eyes, ears, knees, thumbs, ovaries, lungs, feet, nostrils, and nipples. Bipedalism freed the arms to swing in coordination with the legs, and to clap hands, row a boat, knit. Songs and chants, and their R, unite people in actions such as pulling ropes, moving water, herding livestock, lulling an infant, plaiting hair, dancing and singing. Walking is a steady beat, a pulse, a repetitive, rhyming rhythm... and it gets you somewhere; you're striding through space and time.

When I start to think about these subdivisions and accents of time—of R—I go nuts. There are so many examples, so many tangents, that it is hard to pick a few to pursue. I'll skip that part in favor of the general.

It's all about arriving, albeit temporarily, in consonance, satisfaction, completion. R lets us know when to stop: the rhythm, the repetition, the rhyme all meet on the terminal beat, the tonic, the end of time and of tempo. The punchline, the terminal cadence of the symphony, the "cherry on top," the orgasm, the "button," the "Tristan chord," the sunset. R bears us, seduces us willingly through the whole experience, to the end. We made it! R creates memory, ritual, satisfaction, nostalgia.

At the resolution of even the most densely complicated figures in American square dance, the four couples of the quadrille head back to their start positions: "Home." It is a re-set, an end-rhyme, a conclusion. A task completed, with style. Home

—Mark Morris

I love trains with a city boy's love. Train horns are elsewhere, ad remises, a route or pattern of deliverance. And I love the repetitive sounds trains make. No matter where I am, I catch myself pausing with attentive happiness at the clack-a-clack-a-clack of wheels—city or country, streetcars or boxcars. Best heard in the darker hours of the day. Best while paired by a day's fatigue or night-worries.

Repetition can satisfy our need for steadiness and predictability. It can pacify the jagged unhappy soul. It enters with its sheer clockwork normalcy and has a peculiar moral force, a persuasiveness. Its constancy consoles, especially in times of distress, upset, manic irregularity. Repetition is the mesmeric heartbeat of old-style rock and pop, though its beauty and slipperiness will give it a maddening unforgettability. (Get out of my head!) It induces an aggravating wakefulness. "Na-na-nana-na-na, Hey, Jude." "Bar-Bar-Bar-Bar-Barbara-Ann." Repetitions like these, which can sound like entreaties or come-ons, charge us up with hope, undetectable cellular hope, because they assume an enthralling ongoingness. On a dance floor, repetitiveness makes us feel happily lost.

In poetry, repetition is essential to cadence and pacing, which means it's critical to the shape of feeling. In "During Wind and Rain," Hardy's great poem about household and familial change—mortal change—the haunter-lines that alternate through four stanzas, reacting to scenes of domestic tranquility and dislocation,
are “Ah, no; the years, the years” and “Ah, no, the years O!” The repeats (the lines are used twice each) intensify the mournfulness and doom.

Poets have their favorite instances in Shakespeare, favored because of the musicality of the repeat or reflection, or because of how it textures meaning. When Macbeth goes into himself in Act V with “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,” you hear the tremen- dousness of the defeat he feels in his destiny-defining aspiration, to have action trampeled up and out rebirth, to be dictator of reality, summary lord of events. The phrase voices a tragic tedi-

us. Near the end of King Lear, the old man pleads with the universe not to take his daughter from him, and his speech whose cadence reverses what Shakespeare achieves by hammering “No, no, no life? Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life? And thou no breath at all: from death no more thou comest. Never never never never.” The reductive pestoning monosyllabic ques-

tion is followed by Lear’s desperate repetitive “never” answer. In a differ-

tent context it might turn into a non-

sense jingle, instead of a gasp of end-

stop pain. The line also reverses (with desolate emotional neediness) the established pattern of the previous line, the mighty little jamb, nuightenh right when timed to completely overcome and overturn life. The language is itself an agonizing summary. In metric counts out the end of continuity, of the for-

warding of existence. The pitch of grief, the agony of Lear’s existential reckoning, is measured by the metric mechanics. In these punchy blank verse lines, he’s also punching himself for having armed himself too late to save Cordelia. Then the turn, the recognition, enacted in those five words the immediate context for every later moment of doubt who controls that late.

The baby also finds words to repeat: “o-o-o-o.” In emphasizing the untrong repetition of disappearance punctuated by the toddler’s spoken “o-o-o-o” [fort], Freud isolates the centrality of need you. I’m sending you away myself.” And there’s the additional sat-

tural “twice” from the child’s reverie: he throws her away. In repeating the rep-

resented experience of abandonment and return, he’s like a poet, and like his essayist grandfather, working through his grief—a “great cultural achievement.”

But in this game there’s never a moment of doubt who controls that wooden spoon. The little boy is the choreographer of loss. This constantly reasserted authority reminds me of the talking cure Freud invented. In psycho-

analysis, too, one stages scenes, repeat-

edly rehearsing and rehashing experi-

ences in the mind. The patient may feel stuck, but the repetitions, he or she restoration in the mind: When I was sick and lay a-bed, I had two pillows at my head, And all my toys beside me lay, To keep me happy all the day.

And sometimes for an hour or so I watched my lead soldiers fight. With different uniforms and drills, Among the bed-clothes, through the hills;

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets All up and down among the sheets; Oh brought my trees and hung them out. And planted cities all about.

I was the great giant and still That sits upon the pillow-hill, And sees before him, dale and plain, The pleasant land of counterpane.

Deprived by illness of the world beyond his bed, Stevenson’s boy, like Freud’s toddler, is a choreographer of loss. And like Freud the essayist, or any other writer, the poet creates a scene—the protagonist stuck in bed and in his own head. My head, my toys, my soldiers, my ships, my trees and houses. Five repetitions of authori-

ty and control followed by the last stanza’s stillness, and calm: “I was the giant great and still! That sits upon the pillow-hill”—the past of “I was” and the eternal narrative present of the seated giant, both strung on the thread of desire.

—Ellen Pinkus

W HAT BETTER than rhyme epito-

mizes both the blind lack intrin-

sic to poetry and the humiliation of using shabby words to communicate? I remember the rush of fortune when, in an early poem, searching for an echo for the word “flecks,” I stumbled on “vortex” and crested into an image I wouldn’t have discovered otherwise. But when rhyme slips into our everyday speech, it is embarrassing, undercutting the force of what we’re trying to say. Sometimes an unintended rhyme even prompts that wincing joke about being a poet with-

out knowing it, as if the art comes to mind only when language is at its least convenient.

“I am overtired / Of the great har-

vest I myself desired,” Robert Frost rhymes in “AFTER Apple-Picking,” a poem about appetite and pattern—that is to say, about the conditons of art-

making itself. Poems that employ rhyme foreground the art’s relationship to repetition, constructing a sonic game out of the mind’s hunger for cor-

respondence. But in Frost’s poem, the speaker is haunted by abundance, by nature’s excessive answering of his appro-

aching desire. “The ruminating bin / Of load on load of apples coming in.” There is a sickly-sweetness in tasting, or “hear-

ing” (for Frost puts it in some terms), too many similar things. And in a poem full of recurrent sounds, Frost’s final repetition is telling: the word “sleep” appears four times in the final six lines, and twice in the last two lines. The pursuit of correspondence has given way to dullness, deadness, a closing down of possibilities:
One can see what will trouble this sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is. We're not gone. The woodchuck could say whether it's like his Long sleep, as describing its coming on, or just some human sleep.

What happens when a poem's traditional scheme of echo and variation breaks down altogether, and a poet rhymes the same word with itself? Thomas Hardy's "Who's in the Next Room?" features four intricately rhymed stanzas of dialogue between two voices, drawing to a close on a final couplet that undermines the previous resonances:

"Who's in the next room?—who? I seemed to see
Somebody in the dawning passing through, unknown to me."

"No: you saw nought. He passed invisibly."

"Who's in the next room?—who? I seem to hear
Somebody muttering firm in a language new
That chills the ear."

"No: you catch not his tongue who has entered there."

"Who's in the next room?—who? I seem to feel
His breath like a clammy draught, as if it drew
From the Polar Wheel."

"No: none who breathes at all does the door conceal."

"Who's in the next room?—who? A figure was
With a message to one in there of something due?
Shall I know him anon?"

"Yea he; and he brought such; and you'll know him anon."

Cutting through Hardy's prosaic awkwardness, the doubling of "anon" produces a chill at the poem's end. Throughout "Who's in the Next Room?" and especially in each stanza's rhyming couplet, we have been experiencing repetition as difference—just as the next day of our lives diverges from the previous day, even while reeling in it. At the poem's end, as at the end of a life, Hardy gives us repetition as identity. As in "After Apple-Picking," similarity has succumbed to sameness. That the word Hardy chooses to repeat is "anon" heightens both the banality and the terror of the final stanza's turn. The figure in the next room is death, of course, and with that second "anon" we realize how closely he's been lurking all along.

Sameness is what Frost's and Hardy's patterned correspondences nod to but keep at bay until the end. Often associated with closure, rhyme in these poems actually enables suspension, a maintenance of distinctions. Is it going too far to extrapolate an ethics from these observations about form? We want the world to arrange itself into patterns we can recognize, and recognize ourselves within. Rhyme, whether intended in art or accidental in speech, suggests the pervasiveness of such patterns. But in seeking correspondence too insistently, we might fail to see the world; we might only see ourselves. Emmanuel Levinas argues that it is the otherness, the "irredeemable alterity," of every human being that contains divine value and must be preserved. As Sufi wisdom puts it, "When you first meet a master, you may seem to be very different from you. He is not. He may seem to be very much like you. He is not."

—Nate Klug

Boogie-woogie is one of the few genres of music whose rhymes repeat sound, and the musical characteristics of boogie-woogie include melodies and rhythms that constantly replicate. Standard boogie-woogie generally feature an unaccompanied pianist. Both hands of the player repeat short musical ideas, in each case looking to generate hypnotic and danceable joy. The left hand stays in the bottom of the keyboard, romping through a churning ostinato pattern, sometimes called "Eight Beats to the Bar." The right hand offers a bit more variety, but it is still repetitive. Short, groovy, and shouting blues phrases can be called "riffs," and a good boogie pianist infuses full conviction of them at the ready for their right hand. When "riffs" cycle over the polyrhythms conjure the sound of a level crossing, and eventually the pianist slows down as the train pulls into the station.

Lewis's masterpiece was the end product of several decades of community research. After the Civil War, African-American musicians in the South were allowed access to pianos. They began using that keyboard to combine ragtime, blues, church music, European classical music, guitar langes, popular song, and everything else. The primitive turn-of-the-century bars knitted together as bars frequently had pianos; if you could play for dancing, you could drink for free.

Pinetop Smith knew Lewis—they practiced together—and a year after "Honky Tonk Train Blues," he released the 78 LP that named the form: "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie." This record is one of the key documents in American music, a template for hundreds of hit records since, from Tommy Dorsey to Ray Charles. Tragically, Smith was killed in a dance hall fire a year later.

"Pinetop's Top of Boogie Woogie" features exhortations from the pianist explaining what the dancers should and shouldn't do. It's party music. The best boogie-woogie remains connected to that celebratory partnership, but the pianism is refined into high art. Meade Lux Lewis and Pinetop Smith made their mark in Chicago alongside two other legendary practitioners, the out-vestigous Albert Ammons and the surreal poet Jimmy Yancey. From Kansas City came Pete Johnson, a drummer turned pianist whose direct approach offers an obvious link to rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and even the most repetitious American music of all, hip-hop. Many other great pianists contributed to popular music during those early halcyon years, often bearing colorful names: Cow Cow Davenport, Little Brother Montgomery, Big Maceo Merriweather, Cripple Clarence Lofton, Montana Taylor, Speckled Red. I have a special fondness for the 1939 side of "Little Joe From Chicago" by Mary Lou Williams, who suavely varies the top and bottom patterns in a notably carefree fashion. Musicians call that kind of initiative "mixing it up." Williams mixes it up, but her performance still has enough hypnotic danceable repetition to make it classic boogie-woogie.

—Ethan Iverson

Portrait is an art that performs the magic trick of converting sound, prosodically, into song and calls a semantic illusion out of the phonetic hat. The rabbit dangles before our eyes only as long as we can imagine, when the final words trail away, sound collapses back into its intrinsic meaninglessness. Good rhyme, insisting on likeness of sound, produces a frisson, even a shock, of simultaneous relation and incongruity: the sound chimes, the sense differs. We feel the gorgeous force of this hybrid art, mingling sensory excitement with intellectual exercise. In a whole poem, rhyme sets up a structure of memory, anticipation, and revelation.

Auden is one of the masters of modern rhyming. His poem “As I Walked Out One Evening” plays along with a faux-naïf trimeter melody in quatrains that is immediately transformed into a twelve-bar blues. The blues is right at the beginning of this hybrid art, mingling sensory incongruity: the sound chimes, the sense differs. We feel the gorgeous force of this hybrid art, mingling sensory excitement with intellectual exercise. In a whole poem, rhyme sets up a structure of memory, anticipation, and revelation.

As I walked out one evening, / Walking down Bristol Street..." The first rhyme is simple: "street?/wheat?" But in the second quarter, the misplaced stress throws off the apparently simple rhyme of "sing" and "ending," and so throws the romantic illusion off balance. "Love has no ending": we can see what will trouble this sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is. We're not gone. The woodchuck could say whether it's like his Long sleep, as describing its coming on, or just some human sleep.
The poem unfolds in a savvy sequence of chimes and dissonances, delivering in stanza seven one of my favorite rhymes in twentieth-century English:

In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

The clash of “of” and “kiss,” with the sinister hiss of “Justice” echoing behind them, perverts the ideal coupling of sound the pattern has led us to expect. In vain does the poem revert to simple rhymes like “Jack”/“back” and “distress”/“bless.” The damage has been done. “Made” is no longer “Mnemosyne,” romantic love cannot be made whole.

T. S. Eliot’s “Marina” rhymes much more irregularly and completely. It doesn’t even present itself as a rhyming poem, so its few instances of rhyme, and one stanza built on exactly repeated words, stand out in high relief. This intensely moving lyric, written in 1930 at a time of Eliot’s estrangement from his wife Vivienne and his recent conversion to the Anglican Church, recalls an early landscape of joy, the Atlantic shore of Cape Ann in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where the poet spent his boyhood summers. It’s a poem of regeneration set in a frame of destruction, and its themes of images return and reappear with a rush, and a rediscovered daughter are sounded out in the rare rhymes, which restore sounds we might have lost.

Marina, we know, is the lost daught er in Shakespeare’s Pericles, miraculously restored to her grieving father. But this fable of return is shadowed by the rigging weak and the canvas rotten and remember. I made this, I have forgotten
And in Leipzig for one of those performances reaching an audience of perhaps two thousand people in total. If you weren’t in Leipzig for one of those performances, you would not have had another chance to hear it in your lifetime.

Perhaps that is why Bach chose to play so radically with his audiences’ expectations to make sure they were paying attention. The whole of the John Passion is full of subversion and irony, but the greatest example comes in the final soprano aria, Zerfließe, mein Herze (“Melt, my heart”). It seems that we are in a standard da capo aria—the conventional form, ABA, for arias in opera and oratorio in Bach and Handel’s time. Rhyme and repetition are in place:

Zerfließe, mein Herze, in Flächen der Zeit;
Doch Hochsten zu Ehren
Erzähle der Welt und dem Himmel die Not:
““““Dem Jesu ist tot!”
Melt, my heart, in floods of tears
In honor of the highest
Tell the world and the heavens the anguish:
Your Jesus is dead!

We get an instrumental introduction with solo flute playing the melody that the church will take up in a while; we then hear the sung A section of the text with internal repeats, and this is completed by a play-out from the instruments. The B section takes place conventional ly in the relative major key, again with internal repeats, and we start on the da capo with the original instrumental introduction, only this time the soprano interrupts as if to say, “No, you don’t understand! Your Jesus is dead!”—interjecting the last line of the B section to shout out the shocking enormity of what has happened to the crucified man. Only then can the da capo resume, returning us to the (changed) world with a new understanding of the necessity of those tears.

In an age of instantly accessible music, when we can listen to the John Passion while doing the laundry and while doing the washing up and Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony whilst driving to the shops, it is all too easy to take these pieces for granted and not notice what is being said. But the great est music demands attention. Its rewards come from a listening that is not merely passive but alert and imagi native, that gives as well as takes.

As Bart Simpson once said about another art form: “C’mon people! This poetry isn’t gonna appreciate itself!”

—Mark Padmore
Back at the Berlin Philharmonic

Wendy Lesser

I
N MARCH OF 2020, Berlin, like the rest of the world, shut down its live performances. Gradually, as the Associated Press wrote, in fall, indoor concerts began to reappear in a few selected places, and by the time I got to the city at the beginning of November— I was able to attend several performances in five different locations.

At first, I was like a hungry person set adrift in an empty world, stuffing myself past the limit of comfort and attending a performance on the very night I arrived, something that expec-
tatively nourishes the soul, but I found myself barely able to focus on anything; the germ-laden aerosols I imagined were more unsettling than my stomach. I’m not sure I would have enjoyed the Belcea Quartet concert if the Berlin Philharmonic had been my first experience back at the Berlin Philharmonic, as we were allowed to do. At the Pierre Boulez Saal—a vast, beautiful old auditorium—the ceiling was high and the surrounding spaces seemed unnecessary. I was also distracted, during that first week or two, by observing the differ-
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...
Inspecting the Game

Poled upriver in teakwood dugouts we disembarked and were greeted a second time paraded up a prayer-flag avenue and mounted on five elephants, seated snug in the howdah's pillowed canework carriage, three to a pachyderm under the canopy plus the mahout with his hooked goad up front in a tasseled beanie, riding astride the neck, Carol and I on the same colossal beast as yesterday. Our magisterial behemoth led the way for the procession tearing off obstructive branches and muscling aside debris that compromised his passage and meanwhile, at intervals, picked and stored between his tusks pale shoots of a favored foliage he ate with relish in our idle moments.

The jungle was not exciting—bedraggled sparse trees, the forest floor burnt over, scorched. Back out along the river again we sported a pair of sambar—a largish, handsome deer—and crossed to an island, the elephants wading a languid current belly-deep with flocks of waterbirds escorting.

Soon game abounded. The principal attraction is single-horned rhinoceros, now rare; also hog deer, swamp deer, water buffalo and more sambar. The rhinos are immense lumbering things, massively armored and quite tame. One stopped and mugged for cameras shamelessly. They are complacent creatures. Formerly they were trained to plow. Now old bulls have started tagging along behind the elephants which gives the tourists a poor impression of their ferocity. The charging buffalo is reputed the most dangerous. A holstered double-barrel howdah pistol is strapped behind the mahout ready to hand. Its 20-gauge slug load can stop one short.

The view afforded from our swaying vantage was lordly but unpromising. This country is without resources. The market price of timber will not meet the cost of transport. The farming villages are self-subsistent, imported goods are rare and odd exotics. The Paris Zoo acquired a stockade rhino last year for twenty thousand rupees, and now the price is forty thousand. Such is prosperity.

Two hours was enough of the mosquitoes, the heat, the back flies, the humidity. I detached our elephant from the party taking a guide and rifle to contend with possible tiger. Much of our passage back to the field station guest house was downriver, belly-deep again at times. Once our animal noticed an object on a gravel bar, picked it up in stride and delivered it to his mahout, a liddless film canister.

—Jim Powell
I WAS PROMPTED to write this article by two photos of Hitler I came across in a copy of 150 Years of Photo Journalism. We have become so accustomed to images of Hitler that we barely notice them any more; he has become an icon of evil so well-known and so often reproduced—so ubiquitous—that we tend to gloss over such images, to ignore them, to dismiss them briskly with a meaning and a name: ah, yes, Hitler. His face has become some-

least not fairly. In that photo, accord-
ing to the caption, Hitler is reviewing the guard of honor before receiving the new Spanish ambassador at the pres-
dential palace. He’s not wearing a mili-
tary or even a paramilitary uniform, but the formal garb of a diplomat; he is dressed and ready for the occasion. It appears that the Spanish ambassador has not yet arrived. Since it’s unlikely that anyone would have dared keep the Führer waiting, one cannot imagine

THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

Ridiculous Men

Javier Marías

how all too déjà vu, so familiar that we find it neither strange nor shocking: what you might call a normalized anomaly. There are hundreds of images in which Hitler appears in the most his-
tironic and grotesque of poses, a lunatic caught in mid-harangue, disguised as a soldier or, rather, disguised as himself. We confuse him with all the parodies and caricatures, especially Chaplin’s version of him in The Great Dictator, and because of this he has become, in a way, a deactivated icon, divested of all his real horror, as it is also the case with the more hackneyed versions of the Devil, complete with horns and hooves, trident and tail. Nowadays almost no one fears or takes seriously such a fig-
ure, not even when depicted by those who did once believe in his existence, a belief that now arouses feelings of either pity or laughter.

This is precisely what struck me about those two photos, because they made me stop and see Hitler almost as if I didn’t know who he was, as if he were someone to whose face I had not yet grown accustomed, as if I were looking at that first photo through the eyes of someone seeing it in 1935, long before the Second World War, long before our own Civil War, when Hitler had come to power just two years before, following a democratic elec-
tion—a political process he then ensured would not happen again, at

our compatriot (who would have been a Republican) arriving late, and so one presumes that Hitler had a few spare

moments, time enough to make sure that the guard of honor was properly turned out and that all was in order—

either because he was keen on protocol or simply loved playing with soldiers. What is most striking, and most shocking, is that Hitler is in civilian dress reviewing thirty-nine armed

guards, complete with helmets and high boots. He is shorter than the shortest soldier, or so it seems, and that front row could, with just one movement of their arms, so easily become something very different: a somewhat overman掩饰ed firing squad.

The person reviewing them is not, of course, a condoned man, but some-

one who himself tirelessly handed out death sentences, and while he may not be in uniform, his haughty demeanor shows that he is in command. His gaze is so stern as to be ridiculous, so over-

the-top that it could be that of an impostor playing the part of an inspec-

tor of the guard. There is even some-

thing phony about his arms: his right arm by his side, in a simulacrum of militarism, his left arm bent as if he were carrying an invisible whip. But look at his feet—good grief, those feet—placed awkwardly one in front of the other really let him down and trans-

form the whole image into a scene out of a vaudeville show or an opera buffa; it’s the kind of step a staggering drunkard might make, and one finds oneself picturing the next step (the step not captured by the photographer) as he brings that laggardly right leg forward. If this is a still from a movie, we would replace Hitler with Chaplin or Jerry Lewis or Peter Sellers, or some self-absorbed, inebriated clown taking advantage of a case of mistaken identity or usurpation or a concession to his evident madness; a nobody, a fool. It’s hardly surprising that the Army despised him, because he seems so inoffensive.

The second photo shows him at the launch of the Volkswagen in 1938, gazing enraptured at a model car. Around him are nine other men, who

could easily epitomize the devoted, mil-
tarized German society of the time. There’s the old man with peasant fea-
tures and the young men from good families, the shopkeeper sporting a small, imitative moustache and the industrialist concealing his bald patch with a very precise comb-over; per-
haps, also, the civil servant revealing the vehicle’s secrets to Hitler. The degree of submissiveness is apparent in the fact that no one is looking at Hitler, but only at what he is looking at: they see it purely through his eyes. The Führer is smiling a smile border-
ings on the imbecilic, captivated by the sight of the engine being shown to him—what a beauty. However, despite the innocuous nature of the scene, that mouth drawn back in a smile and those pale cheekbones send a shudder through me, for I can sense the irasci-
ble man beneath that proud exterior; indeed, those cheekbones look as if they had a life of their own.

It’s easy to be wise so long after the event, but it’s still hard not to wonder how it was possible for entire nations—not just one—to trust such an indi-
vidual and idolize him. Perhaps it was precisely because his clownish, risible appearance made them think that in his hands power would be less power-
ful than in other, more imposing hands. Nothing is more dangerous than disdain. We are disarmed by those we laugh at and who fill us with something akin to pitying derision, those to whom we feel so superior that we see no point in stopping their tracks or stooping so low as to confront them, just as, in ancient times, noblemen would not deign—or were not allowed—to fight a duel with someone not of the same class, hierar-
chy, or rank. But as we all know, such noble men have long since been erased from the face of the earth by the ridic-

ulos. (Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)
The Voice of the Turtle and Bell, Book and Candle. Two are period dramas and kindred romances, specifically narratives that trace the development of young writers: I Remember Mama and I Am a Camera. One, Old Acquaintance, is a high comedy that focuses on the complicated lifelong friendship of two middle-aged writers.

The Voice of the Turtle, from 1943, is the story of the unexpected romance between a young actress, Sally Middleton, and a sergeant on leave, Bill Page, who get thrown together one evening in Manhattan. What almost keeps them apart is their shared cynicism about love; each is still suffering from a broken heart. The Voice of the Turtle is the only one of this quintet of plays that isn’t of much interest; one guesses that its three-season Broadway run was due to a combination of factors—the wartime mood, the frankness about sex, and the presence of the disarming, attractive middle-aged actress, who is destined to be known as the fiancée, whom she always manages to right, get back at the fiancée, whom she always manages to love for Van Druten’s inspiration was a Malachmore Night’s Dream—he even references it—and the magic allows him to build a layer of high comedy around the insulated community of witches and warlocks to which Gillian belongs. In both Shakespeare’s play and Van Druten’s, the magic underscores the theme—for Shakespeare, that love turns us into something other than ourselves; for Van Druten, that love is its own sort of enchantment. But Shakespeare separates the magic out from the structural romantic-comedy convention of an obstacle that the lovers have to overcome (it’s Hamlet’s father, in this case), whereas in Bell, Book and Candle the magic provides the obstacle. Witches aren’t supposed to fall in love; if they do, they’re supposed to be inspired, as the sorceress Mrs. de Pass (Hermione Gingold), whom Shep pays (exorbitantly) to un-witch him. The fact that we get to see Merle rather than just hear about her also has the effect of softening Shep’s treatment of her, because we can tell from the outset that she’s simply not right for him—not good enough for him, just as the characters Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn are engaged to marry in Holiday and The Philadelphia Story, respectively, are not the people we want to see them wind up with.

Of Van Druten’s two portraits of young women, the 1944 I Remember Mama is by far the superior one. I Am a Camera is the first dramatic version of Christopher Isherwood’s Berlin Stories, set in that city during the rise of the Nazis. The main problem with it is that you can’t help comparing it to Jay Presson Allen’s screenplay for Cabaret, which restores plot elements that the stage musical took out, as well as some of Van Druten’s dialogue. I Am a Camera has fascinating characters, and it’s extremely ambitious, but
the tonal shifts are clunky (not general-
ly a failing of Van Druten's), and the last
act—where the writer-protagonist,
Markham and Mildred Watson Drake
is a commercial
view of Van Druten's), and the
major bone of contention between the
three women is Milly's nineteen-year-
old daughter Deirdre, who finds her
own mother tiresome and is entranced
with the shop owner to get the brooch
for a graduation gift, but Mama
had intended to give
it to her in a false position. Kit, who's forty-
seven, as Milly learns in the course of
the play, is a magical death, a death from
moral suicide. She's got an extraordinary gift of
self-awareness and reflective character,
and thus Van Druten's, is
in the middle of the game to realizing
what she doesn't know is that Mama
has been fueled by an obsessive jealou-
sy of her best friend, whose bohemian
way of being. Milly has qualities that
surprise you. Kit asserts that she's a
shrewd-eyed reader of Kit's manuscripts:
"She's got an extraordinary gift of
clear, of her best friend, whose bohemian
way of being. Milly has qualities that
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shrewd-eyed reader of Kit's manuscripts:
"She's got an extraordinary gift of
self-awareness and reflective character,
and thus Van Druten's, is
an old play by someone they'd never
heard of.

That John Van Druten could write
Old Acquaintance, 1 Remember Mama, and Bell, Book and Candle,
plays that are all ideal pieces of dra-
tative construction, that have emerged from the same imagina-
tion, is mysteriously wonderful. That the
play has vanished from cultural memory isn't so mysterious, but it is dismaying.
When the Roundabout produced Old Acquaintance, a friend of mine who
runs the box office was kind enough to make sure I didn't miss it but told me sadly that audiences weren't shov-
eling up for it. Why should they? It was
an old play by someone they'd never heard of.

Cinderella in Reverse

You finish cleaning the toilet on your knees, sour, unsung, no one looking for you. Your looks are gone, bought, it's all you can do
to finger that rosy archive of memories,
flacking the ghost channels, bored, your lease
on luck expired, bi-polar, in rags. But who
was that sexy charmer? He really knew
how to spin you 'round the floor and grease
your hips. I'm sure he's dead. This bead; that touch
shivering your thighs—remember when you
Dress up a tree, gin fizz at dawn, silk and marabou
me, you're smoldering naked as Eve? It all ends much
too soon, Pumpkin, youth's royal, hot mess.
None of it fits you now, not even that shoe.

—Peter Spagnuolo
She was the sort of person who anticipated accidents. So many had already occurred. Her coat was a subdued rust-orange. All the lint had been picked off her black cloche hat. It was important for her to be clean and stylish. She didn’t want people to think she was a gypsy—it wouldn’t be convenient. In this country, gypsies often weren’t clean, and had stopped being stylish more than a half-century ago.

Back home, she had enjoyed flaunting a cat-eye, but here she wore her face straight. No curls, no tan. Her face didn’t need to be painted for the features to stand out. Everything was already clearly visible, and when people were taking the measure of her, she wanted a single glance to be enough. Not that this worked on the bald guy.

She called him “bald guy” in her mind, because she didn’t know his name. They had never spoken, but they had communicated. And here he was again today. Muscles under his leather jacket. A quiet, black scarf. Looking at her and looking away. Taking a seat that would face hers, as he often did.

Her name? Myrtle. An unlikely place for an American woman to live. But for her it was the right wards. “No, I see enough of it when I work, and I can always stay back for something in the evenings if I want,” she replied. Astonished.

“Really?” asked the bald guy. “I’m Roan,” he answered, with his head cocked to one side and a smile playing on his lips. “Actually, yes,” said Myrtle. “But as I said, my family’s Indian.”

“You like to eat plants?” he asked with a grin. “Actually, yes,” said Myrtle. She had been Christians for two centuries. They gave their daughters names like Angelique. “Why not? I’m Myrtle,” and she stood up, suddenly all very businesslike, and held out a hand for him to shake.

“I’m Roan,” he answered, with his head cocked to one side and a smile playing on his lips. “Actually, yes,” said Myrtle. “But as I said, my family’s Indian.”

At this he threw his head back and laughed.

“He always sat in the fourth row of seats. And never on the driver’s side.”

As she looked out at the receding gleam of Prague’s domes and spires as the bus left the city, Myrtle often wondered if things would have been different for her, career-wise, if she hadn’t been a “woman of color.” Such a politically correct term, and one that the Czechs were wonderfully ignorant of.

She didn’t need to huddle with all the other foreigners in Prague. The Czech lands were not closed to her as they were to them. In Brno, she had a wood-burning stove in her attic apartment, and her landlady’s garden was fenced with raspberry bushes.

Myrtle taught English in Prague. It was supposed to have been Czech literature. But this wasn’t possible anymore. Her position as a visiting lecturer hadn’t become anything more permanent. She had been an adjunct for a while. Which she had accepted. After all, how much was a doctorate in Czech literature worth back home? She also translated. It had been business reports and policy documents at first. And now she had an arrangement with a Czech publishing house.

“My name? Myrtle.”

“Actually, I’m American,” said Myrtle. “But as I said, my family’s Indian.”

As she looked out at the receding gleam of Prague’s domes and spires as the bus left the city, Myrtle often wondered if things would have been different for her, career-wise, if she hadn’t been a “woman of color.” Such a politically correct term, and one that the Czechs were wonderfully ignorant of.

But she wasn’t thinking about this on that first day. She was thinking about the bald guy.

The driver had shifted gears and the bus was powering its way up the summit of a small hill with a thresty whine. The bald guy didn’t look comfortable. The sun was setting at an angle that sent rays of orange light deep into his irises. They were blue with flecks of green. Now glowing with more light than they could stand, and they had begun to water. But he wasn’t going to move. He liked his vantage point. He loosened the scarf around his neck and lowered his head, as if he was trying to play with and he began tapping.

And then Myrtle did something unusual. She got off. At Svaty Jan pod Skalou. The church under the rock. Her ticket was for Brno. The next stop.

“Sorry,” she said. She had a terrible accent. “Sorry,” she said. She had a terrible accent. “Sorry,” she said. She had a terrible accent.

After their first meeting, both of them suffered three awkward bus journeys that began with perfumy hellos and an exchange of pleasantries at the bus stop, followed by Myrtle’s retrieval of a slim novel from her bag, absorbed phone-tapping by Roan, and a subsequent scramble for separate seats.

And then, one day, Roan had asked her if she would like to walk with him. Risky. It implied an intimacy that was fragile, if existent.

She had said yes. Her yes was coy. Perhaps there had been no other way to say yes. She couldn’t have said yes with eagerness.
It is a beautiful autumn evening when Myrtle says yes. The sky still holds an orange sun. There is that autumn sadness in the air. All the leaves just starting to say goodbye to the trees. The knowledge that the heat will soon go out of the land, a starkness will descend, and people will bury their chins into their scarves and look at the ground when they walk.

"Have you ever been to Divoká Šárka?" he asks her.

He has raised his head from some frown-inducing swiping and scrolling. His thumb is on the screen, he can lower his eyes to it in the same second that he will take to stroke it.

"I haven't," says Myrtle.

"Do you know the story of Šárka?" he asks.

"I do," says Myrtle.

"You know everything," says Roan. He smiles, and shakes his head in admiration. "Tell me what you know," he says.

"A Bohemian tale. Some think it is legend. Others think it is oral history. It first appeared in writing in the twelfth century. Women didn't want to be ruled by men, so they initiated an armed rebellion against them. A war. Šárka was a key figure. A female warrior. She used tricks to entrap a band of men, led by a man called Citrad. Ultimately, she was defeated. Along with the other female rebels," says Myrtle. Adding, "Citrad was killed. And after the war Šárka kills herself."

"There's some sort of romance between Šárka and Citrad," says Roan.

"Hints of it, yes," says Myrtle. "But it's not clear if they fall in love."

"Why do you think she kills herself?" asks Roan. "Isn't it because she feels guilty about being responsible for Citrad's death?"

"That's what some interpretations argue," Myrtle says. "The most common explanation is that she jumps off the rocky ledge because she can't stand the shame of being defeated by the men's army."

"Would you like to go to Divoká Šárka?" he asks her. "You know too much about it not to go there. We can walk among the rocks."
orange crowns around while the gnarled fingers of their roots grip the rocks that I can't hold it. Everybody laughs. They are pleased by its size. I totter with standing—handing out shots of Slivovice on the sofa. Two other men would be sitting on the chairs. All of them would be my grandparents, my mother, everyone. Everyone drank. In the green crystal glasses—recognized it from the pictures we had seen in books. A bottle of champagne as we ate it. It was fun. No one had ever seen a fresh pineapple before…we often wear will do for hiking and she's got them on. He comes in a car. An old olive-green trousers. The trees are throwing leaves at her. The black boots she used to work with the cows in the farm. But then he saw that the widow was lonely and that he could be the master. You understand? he asks.

Roan looks at her. A bald guy-baby look.

"My childhood?" he says.

"Yes," says Myrtle.

He nods. And begins to tell her a story. A story of hams and a big car.

"My mother was very beautiful," he begins. "But my father had left us because there was a widow in the village. He used to live in the village. His eyes were always expressionless. Not a pretty place where a man can hold a woman's hand. A place where a woman died.

Tell me about your childhood," she says. Maternal feelings, and a tide of thought that would make me ask questions. I didn't need to ask. I knew. I could see her always and to have me in the white car all night and all day."

"My family come from..." he says.

"And now Myrtle's hand is on his arm. Pat pat, pat pat."

"You know that's not true," she says.

He lets out a short, snappy laugh with a sideways jerk of his head. Unbelievable, his headshake says. His childhood is unbelievable. His life is unbelievable.

"Your mother is a very special lady, you know," he says. "Hams and oranges. Once, even, a pineapple. Which they didn't know how to cut. We pricked our tongues on the eyes when we ate it. It was fun. No one had ever seen a fresh pineapple before...we recognized it from the pictures we had seen in books. A bottle of champagne as well. I watched them drink it together at the kitchen table. The big man, my grandparents, my mother, everyone. Everyone drank. In the green crystal glasses. These were the nice things. But there were things my mother didn't like. Like...like she didn't like it. She always changed the bedsheets the next morning. She didn't want to do it at night because she thought that would make me ask questions. I didn't need to ask, I knew. I could smell his sweat when I was brought back to my bed. I knew he had been in it with his clothes off. I could smell my mother's juices. I knew what they had done while I was being driven around in the big white car."

And then the bald guy stops.

An image of his beautiful mother with the big male sweating into her bed bends between them. Myrtle looks him over. "Well, well," she thinks. "But we all have our stories now."

---

Photograph

He was framed

Sitting pretty

With a tough guy

Look that said

I've had it good,

And now you

Have it unknown,

Seeing me drop

Out of a book

You picked out

At a garage sale.

—Charles Simic
Thanks to Our Donors

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Springtime, Permanent Supportive Housing

Once again ransacked by the actual—
By the down-slurred chirps of a cardinal
Outdoors as much as by Jack, fetal, slack
In the bathroom stall, startled back
To life by a nasal shot of Narcan.
Once again Susan’s riled, resolved again
To focus on coping skills; thus she works
Markers on a mandala coloring book.
A dumb brass band of daffodils tunes up
As Dan who’s off his Seroquel is schlepped
In cuffs by CPD back to Beau Vista.
Replete with incident, event-laced, the
Day scintillates with joy and grief; it shines
Both the tragedy of Roy off the wagon
Dragging a bag of Bud cans to the bin
And the rapture of Shanée skipping the lawn
With her therapeutic Pomeranian
With equal brilliance.

Ephemera in,
Ephemera out, ephemera held,
Ephemera lost to the erstwhile world.

Out back where Jim, in eternal sweatpants,
Tends to his motley spread of plaintive plants
Is the flicker of courting woodpeckers
Wrapping an oak. It’s enough, more or less.
The squad screams into the lot; the squirrels
Screech into the nut. Redbuds, crabapples,
Magnolias effloresc; green ensues.
And, of course, case management continues.

—Jake Crist