LENI DOTHAN’S NEW MADONNAS
HORROR WITHOUT GOD
SICILY’S CULT OF THE BEHEADED
THE RESILIENCE OF ORCHIDS

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THE SIXTEENTH ANNUAL
DENISE LEVERTOV AWARD
READING AND LECTURE

Marilyn Nelson

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HUGO HOUSE, SEATTLE

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Besides, Before, Beyond Beauty

IT’S THE DAZZLE OF ILLUMINATION that catches your eye from the other end of the vaulted hall in the Cloisters. Your attention now fixed, you walk the length of the cool stone floor and draw near. At over seven feet tall, the panel towers above you, and your eye is absorbed by its golden upper half. It almost emits a glow.

What looked like a regal knight proves to be an angel. Here is Saint Michael by the Spanish Master of Belmonte, from the late 1400s. Up close, there is a sculptural quality to the work, like a medieval Rauschenberg. The joints of his armor, the hilt of his sword, the chain mail that protects him are all carefully crafted metalworks that protrude from the surface and beckon touch.

There is an undeniable, sumptuous beauty to the piece: Michael’s triumph is set in a courtly scene with intricate tile flooring, gold-leaf draperies, and wall coverings that could have inspired William Morris. His armor looks like it’s destined for the Met Gala; his golden torso is wrapped in a red velvet robe; his angel wings bear peacock feathers. The light and patterns delight you on that register where you receive all kinds of beauty: the light that speckles the forest floor like daytime fireflies; the crescendo of an Aretha Franklin song; the enchantment of Klimt’s Kiss.

But then you see it: the monster Michael is treading upon, like an echo of the promise made to Eve in the garden. Hideous green and brown and a burnt orange that speaks of fire, its eyes are yellow and sickly. Its hide is variously fur, scales, and skin. A creature without an essence, it doesn’t know what to be.

As you inch closer, you notice pairs of eyes all over it, and then you notice each is accompanied by a mouth. The creature’s limbs and torso are all devouring faces. Like evil itself, this predator is a parasite: the beast is eating itself alive. But Michael’s javelin has pierced its lower jaw. The battle is almost over, but the beast still flails and resists.

The work whose allure was beauty now includes its opposite: the repellant, the
monstrous. Yet it is no less captivating for that. Indeed, the image lodges itself in your imagination and you can’t shake it. And for a brief moment, you wonder if such a monster lives in you.

I’m tired of beauty. Or rather, I’m tired of hearing the word “beauty” overused and misapplied. When we become lexically lazy, we trot it out as if it’s the only way to justify art, a magical incantation to hallow our making. It becomes a buzzword of aesthetic piety, haloed with the hush of “meaning.” It’s a favorite word of religious folk who want us to care about art.

But beauty doesn’t do justice to a wide array of art-making that is nonetheless imaginative, evocative, and meaningful. It doesn’t do justice to the full complexity of what’s happening in the Master of Belmonte’s rhapsodic creation that dramatizes good vanquishing evil.

We need more than a one-word dictionary to affirm and praise art. Art is not just about showcasing beauty. Art is the cultivation of myriad artifacts that speak to the imagination for myriad reasons. Not all faith-infused art aspires to beauty. Beauty might be the pinnacle of a neat and tidy metaphysics, but it seems less at home in the minefields of human experience narrated in our sacred scriptures. In his latest book on theology and the arts, A Peculiar Orthodoxy, Jeremy Begbie admits his own worries about centering beauty in our account of art: “I believe that the concept of beauty needs very careful handling,” he says, “if we are not to distort the way the arts actually operate in practice, and if we are to avoid being captive to intellectual schemes that cannot accommodate a narrative that culminates in a crucifixion and resurrection.”

This protest against the hegemony of beauty is something I learned from one of my teachers, Calvin Seerveld. Across a lifetime of labor as a scholar, critic, and champion of the arts—as well as a hymn writer and translator of the Bible’s poetry—Seerveld persistently challenged the reduction of the aesthetic to the beautiful. There’s almost something inhumane about such a narrowing, he argues, because it discounts so much human imaginative endeavor.

Instead, Seerveld argues that at the heart of all our artistic endeavors is something more fundamental: “allusiveness” he sometimes calls it, or “nuancefulness”—a kind of subtlety and obliqueness and indirectness that somehow speaks to us all the more because it doesn’t confront us head-on but slinks into our being by other avenues. At the bottom of the aesthetic is, fundamentally, a capacity for play. That’s not to say art amounts to fun and games. Sometimes play can be deadly serious, sometimes whimsical. Sometimes the filmmaker plays with light to open portals to another world; sometimes a cartoonist plays with lines to show us the insanity of our politics. This play of allusivity that is art can be marshalled to many ends, of which beauty is only one.

I still like Seerveld’s example from his 1974 book, Rainbows for a Fallen World: “the decisive feature that turns photographic duplication of a face into art is
BESIDES, BEFORE, BEYOND BEAUTY

allusiveness. When the reproduced lines, shadows, and lighting subtly nudge into visibility character flaws or subterranean strengths of the person, for example, and portray by a quality of disciplined suggestiveness fine matters in the face that are simply neglected in photographic reproductions which merely depict so-and-so, then the result is photographic portraiture.”

Consider the difference between your passport photo and portraits by, say, Ohio photographer Michael Wilson. Your passport photo is governed by uniform rules of position and lighting. Every head is made to fit a frame. Smiles are verboten. So is nuance. There is nothing artistic about it, even if you look beautiful.

In contrast, Wilson’s portraits are revelations of people you don’t even know. While Wilson has made his name photographing singers and musical artists, from 2016 to 2018 he undertook a very different project. With a mobile studio (homemade frames holding heavy black cloth), Wilson camped out front of various branches of the Public Library of Cincinnati and invited passersby to sit for portraits. In a notebook from this project, he wrote: “This act of making pictures of people is starting to remind me of begging for alms.”

So Wilson is the mendicant artist, asking not so much for subjects as collaborators—donors, you might say, people willing to give of their time, sure, but also willing to give up something of themselves to the camera, to this encounter. To become vulnerable. To trust Michael. “I’m hoping there will be some pictures that echo that exceptional moment of vulnerability and openness with a stranger.”

The catalogue of resulting portraits, They Knew Not My Name and I Knew Not Their Faces, takes its title from a gospel song written by Albert E. Brumley and recorded by the likes of Bob Dylan, Ralph Stanley, and others:

Everybody I met seemed to be a rank stranger
No mother or dad not a friend could I see
They knew not my name and I knew not their faces
I found they were all rank strangers to me

Wilson’s portraits diminish stranger-ness without diminishing otherness. The faces we meet are at once immediate and elusive, but their very elusiveness and reticence is their dignity and humanity. We sense that each is more than we see; each contains multitudes. “Beauty” is not the only way to celebrate these epiphanies.

The narrator of the Brumley song is returning to his hometown after many years, and everyone is a stranger because all those he knew have passed on. “Some beautiful day I’ll meet ’em in heaven,” he sings, “where no one will be a stranger to me.” In that sense, Wilson’s portraits are a foretaste of what is to come.

Maybe art’s job isn’t to save the world. Maybe art shows us the world, brings us face to face with what we otherwise ignore and paint over with lying niceties. Sometimes it’s the beauty we’ve missed. But there’s so much more than beauty in this world.
Millat’s Orchids

MILLAT’S ORCHIDS were blooming again. After ten years of neglect in his basement, he’d moved them up to the kitchen, repotted them, watered as directed, and now they bloomed twice a year—big vibrant purple blooms in groups of four. Their sleek petals bared to the sun like open palms, they devoured sunlight and yawned in reverie. They grew luxurious and colorful.

A decade earlier, after the divorce, he’d relegated them to a basement storage room. He’d been overwhelmed then with the breaking apart, the ravaging, with little time to think about anything but consolidating, reevaluating, starting again. Many things were thrown away, some given away, others stored in the attic or basement. A four-inch clay pot with two bright green leaves was placed on a shelf by a grimy window and abandoned. Now and then as the years passed and he had some business in the basement, searching out one thing or another and excavating it from its burial place to reinstate it in his life, he’d notice the clay pot with a recurring surprise at a plant that remained green and alive though he never watered it or cared for it in any way. It must have been, he assumed, absorbing enough moisture out of the dank basement air to survive.

Piece by piece, year by year, he rearranged his life. His children grew and moved away. He partnered with and loved a smart, generous, open-hearted woman. He worked hard at all of it. He was not a good person, not at the core, not at heart. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say he had ugly corners in his heart, places where vile things flourished. He had to work toward decency. The phrase “building a life” seemed right. He labored at building a life, brick by brick. When things went wrong—and they did, some things went terrifyingly wrong—he turned to prayer. He opened his hands to an unknowable God and prayed as best he could, if not in the ways of his parents, still, honestly, in his own way.
It went on like that, the building and praying year by year. On a visit to one of his daughters, she’d shown him the orchids she adored and diligently cared for, misting them with distilled water, adding nutrients to their soil. When he returned home, he thought of the clay pot with the green leaves in his basement and remembered—or thought he remembered—that it might be an orchid. He brought it up and put it in his kitchen window. He attended to it carefully, and within months it bloomed—a single purple flower, petals open to the sun.

Now, to Millat, his orchids were as sentient beings, distinct lives that had sucked up what little sustenance they could find for as long as necessary, wringing it out of the air. Over the years, in his mind, they had grown together, the plants and the man and his prayers. Somehow he knew they were one thing: the prayers and the orchids, the desiccation and the flowering. When no one was looking, he’d touch his tongue to the base of the plant and kiss the dirt out of which such gorgeous things bloomed.
It was years after I read *The Black Stallion* and culled my herbarium from the jungle where my parents cut the edges of wet leaves and plied the air for berry-ripe birds, and yet, I had wanted something like a taxi and a white dress, a cigarette and furtive laughter with girls under a blanket. *It would be fine* my mother said, as we boarded the plane back from school, the taste of ginger from the holiday still riding my back teeth. And then—when I was let go—shot out past my prior sightlines in what must have been a blaze, I could see nothing until we all went to sea, the waves spindled in a way I knew, the wet leaves cut here and there from when my mother walked through the garden. Blood on my hair, the world holding me to its flailing chest and I was ready to leave, might have left with my mother in hand, but the oars were up, one white shoe, one white, white dress. The girls were popping champagne corks beyond the auditorium at the last school dance. The trees ricocheted back, caught me, still strapped in my mint vinyl Moses basket. The sky like water and the trees rejoicing: *I drew her out.* The bats circled my chest as if I were honey, as if I were theirs.
Rabies and Angels (Love in a Hopeless Place)

rabies and
angels

babies and
mangers

devils and
Handels

c I was reeding you
see I was reading you
si I was red in you
sea I was ready ewe
sea I was ready too
si I was ewe too
see I was always you
c how I love u too

broad daylight

and the
candles
weeping
on the
buck’s
antlers
blanch
summer
grass
winter
red

his eyes,
drooping
woofers
salty mats

stars streams and brainlines

we carry strings of lights into broad day-light where hearts walk the bulbs with bare feet
cry to the stars!

Christ in every where, every there, every here

O air
Danny and Newt

Danny is a little boy who went to hell and almost got eaten by the Minotaur. Newt is a little girl sent through space by a corporation to become a host to a monster. Danny is the poem in a world designed to trap and kill it. Newt is the life of the child hiding in airshafts when all life has been reduced to money and machines. Danny escapes the labyrinth and leaves the devil frozen in the snow. Newt looks raw, machinic life in the face and is brushed by gusts of fiery air. Danny and Newt have mothers who love them—who lay their lives on the line for them in impossible circumstances. Danny escapes from hell and is repotted in new soil like a flower. Newt falls into a peaceful sleep after her mother tucks her into bed. Danny and Newt go walking through Hölderlin’s woods each day. The hells they reproach are strewn around them like asphodel. Above, the Milky Way shines in broad daylight, a hundred billion burning strips of paper.
LAUREN SLAUGHTER

Vulnerable Targets

ACCORDING TO EVACUATION PROTOCOL, the oldest children, four-year-olds, would be first to exit the building. They had been taught to form a chain with linked hands behind their teacher and follow her through the door in the direction of the soccer field, then all the way to the tennis courts, where they were to sit crisscross-applesauce against the fence until the drill concluded. The courts were thought to be an ideal gathering place—a safe, contained spot—and beyond any potential blast radius. After the four-year-olds went the three- and two-year-olds in that same configuration. Next went the babies twelve to eighteen months, placed by fours into wheeled cribs and pushed to safety. Finally the newborns, some of whom had been curled inside the warm pink echoes of their mothers just six weeks prior and could not yet hold up their heads. The only way to dispatch these littlest of souls was à la carte—in a one-to-one ratio—by any teachers and office workers left.

While in years past, evacuation drills at the Kaiserman Jewish Community Center took place only every few months, now they occurred every other week. Jackie Mather’s eyes wandered to the huge hamsa hand hanging on the office wall behind Rachel Koffman, director of the early childhood program, as she explained the need for increased security in the current “political atmosphere.” The hand, cut from brown craft paper, was filled with tiny handprints in primary colors. Drips from some of the hands hung down like bright, frozen tears. “Vulnerable target” was a unit of language Jackie also heard, but she was having trouble concentrating on the actual words coming from Director Koffman’s chapsticked mouth. Jackie was nervous, desperate for this job, and she did not want to disappoint her mother. For the interview, her mother suggested the same dress Jackie had worn for high school graduation, a navy blue shift, and white pointed flats that made her feet look like speedboats.

Glancing at her watch, Director Koffman explained that an evacuation drill was scheduled shortly and they would need to hurry along lest their time together be cut short, so, “Ms. Mather, tell me about a time when your character was most tested—
VULNERABLE TARGETS

how were you able to overcome the challenges set before you?” But then, as if on cue, all the alarms in the building began to blare. The sound was loud almost to the point of hilarity—half scream, half buzz—and accompanied by white-hot, pulsing strobes. Sorry! Director Koffman mouthed, excusing herself to choreograph the staff and students out the door. Jackie was relieved not to have to regale her would-be employer with the lame Camp Tawonga ropes course story, the only example of a character test she was willing to revisit.

Layered beneath the siren sounds came the apologetic screech of little sneakers across the linoleum hallway. Edging to the doorway to watch, Jackie was struck by the astonishing number of children—were there hundreds?—making their way out of the building in calm, controlled succession. “We’re having an adventure!” Director Koffman cheered, as ropes of hand-holding children flowed through the doors, a river of T-shirts. “An exciting adventure!” When it was all over, the three- and four-year-olds got popsicles, and Jackie, hired on the spot for the teacher’s helper position, helped rub down the stickiest ones with wet wipes.

This was how, despite her complete lack of both childcare experience and appropriate anecdotes, Jackie became the newest employee at the KJCC. It was an impressive longstanding facility in the suburban Mountain Brook community. In addition to offering fitness classes, swim lessons, Mah Jong and book groups, youth and adult Torah study, and an array of after-school programs, the KJCC maintained the most desirable daycare in town. Because the waitlist for admission was so long, it was not unusual for families to reserve their spot by shelling out tuition while their child was still in utero, no bigger than a bean.

Though she had grown up only blocks away, Jackie had not attended preschool here. Her mother, a first-time parent in her early forties, left her law practice to stay at home with her child. Still, their family enjoyed the many benefits of the center in relation to both physical and spiritual fitness. Jackie had spent summers swimming for the KJCC Barracudas and running on their track, and in the spring accompanied her parents to the annual Passover Seder—the only reliably Jewish thing her family ever did. This was not counting the dreidel game, played randomly throughout the year for chocolate chips or Skittles, and sometimes remembering to light the menorah in the midst of Christmas season, usually somewhere between Hanukkah’s third and fifth night.

Jackie had to admit, she really liked it when they remembered. She liked the shiny brass menorah, her grandmother’s, how by night eight it looked like a glimmering canoe with flame-headed passengers. The family would often go out to the street to admire how festive the menorah looked in the window, outlined by the varicolored LED lights Jackie’s father always strung around the exterior of the house. He had been raised Protestant, but Judaism was traced through the maternal line. Jackie’s mother and her mother’s friends assured Jackie that despite her waspy exterior, she was Jewish. Jewish, one hundred percent.
“But, really? Only half.” Jackie would playfully flip her blonde hair for effect. “If that.”

“Are you my daughter or a pie chart?” her mother would counter. “Your story is your story.”

Jackie loved the theatrics of Seder at the KJCC. She loved the plastic lipstick smell of the old women, the men in newly pressed trousers holding open the door, all the neighborhood kids dressed in their scratchiest best. A contrast to her own family’s customary fare of spaghetti and tacos, the Seder meal was curious yet thrilling: bright parsley dipped in salt water, matzah with spicy-sweet charoset, and the fiery horseradish Jackie challenged herself to eat by the spoonful. The litany of plagues often sent the children into giggles as they flicked dots of grape juice onto their white paper plates and, covertly, each other. Still, the Haggadah’s sober narrative didn’t exactly feel like her story. *Why is this night different from all other nights?* Jackie wasn’t sure. She also wasn’t sure why, with supposed plagues abounding, the Seder meal ended with opening the front door. Wouldn’t it be safer to keep it shut? She stared at Elijah’s full glass of purple Manischewitz as if the answers might be found there, its ripples tremors of the mystical instead of bored kids kicking each other beneath the table.

How long had Jackie’s parents been waiting by the door, radiating both anxiety and relief as their daughter’s hatchback, stuffed with box fans, notebooks, and trash bags of dirty laundry, pulled into the driveway? There was supposed to be the Real Job after college, secured by her dual degree in poli sci and art history from an elite liberal arts school—and the monumental debt that went with it. And when that goal went unachieved because, among other things, Jackie had taken no steps to actually achieve it, there seemed to be no other option but to move back home. Inside the house, Jackie found the familiar scent of citrus air freshener and a job advertisement that read *Teacher’s Helper Wanted* tacked to the kitchen bulletin board beside her yellowing drawing of a rainbow bent between two clouds, *J-A-C-K-I-E* crayoned into the sky. Next to that was a recent headline from the Times: *Jewish Cemetery Vandalized in Philadelphia.*

Later, Jackie’s mother appeared at her bedroom door with a dusty tub of Madame Alexander dolls that had been buried in the basement for years. “Of course you’ll need to practice,” she said, handing Jackie a mothball-scented baby. It wore a bitty white bonnet and dress. “Like this.” Her mother held the doll to her bosom to demonstrate the correct posture. “Now, you,” she directed, as Jackie began to sneeze. A dark cloud of mold spores lingered on the doll’s forehead, trailing like ants on parade down its face and onto the dress. A baby in a red and white dirndl was likewise afflicted. So was the one with matted blonde hair. Thus, into the garbage bin they all went, dead eyes popped wide to wet coffee grounds, uneaten oatmeal, and bananas too far gone.

Fortunately, the three-year-olds at the KJCC to whom Jackie was assigned barely wanted to be held at all. She remained nervous about her inexperience, but Ms. Alley,
the classroom’s head teacher, waved off those concerns like invisible flies. “Eh,” she said, “kids bounce.” Alley was in her early fifties, with Kool-Aid pink hair, a few vaguely Celtic tattoos, and a freakishly loud speaking voice—years of following the Grateful Dead had left her deaf in one ear. She told Jackie that before accepting her current post she had freelanced as a substitute art teacher, and one night a week still moonlighted as an instructor at Pinot’s Palette, a kind of art-for-dummies establishment that touted “paint night”—a pun on date night—for couples.

“The best thing about that crappy job?” At the end of her shift, Alley was permitted to commandeer any paintings abandoned by tipsy OkCupid dates: a blobby sunflower, a streetlamp pulsing light, a baguette-looking Jesus cross. The next day, Alley would merrily tote these crude canvases to school for the kids to decorate with sequins and glitter glue. Once, Alley came into class holding up a painting of two dolphin silhouettes leaping from a sea of blue scratches into a heart-shaped sherbet horizon. “As if this relationship exists,” Alley sighed.

“What about you?” Alley asked. “I suppose you haven’t found any boys in this town worth your time?” Jackie squinted at the painting, searching for an apropos witticism. Were those more hearts emerging from the distant clouds? “That bad, huh?” Alley asked. “Well, cheers to us, then,” she said, presenting Jackie with a chocolate milk.

“To us,” Jackie managed, as they bumped their cartons together.

When it came to relationships—both platonic and romantic—Jackie preferred casting her isolation as a choice, a self-sufficiency cultivated like one of her mother’s finely pruned bonsai trees. On social media, “Not over it” should be an option. Instead, Jackie had to choose “It’s complicated.” Freshman year she dated swimmer John, a beautiful breaststroker with silky, bleached hair, but his religion frowned upon premarital sex, and he seemed to want to spend all his time playing first-person-shooter video games. Sophomore year, Jackie was off-and-on with Ryan from political theory. In class discussions he was wonderfully articulate describing the nature of a just society, but out of class he expressed pretty much nothing at all. Then there was Thomas, the playwright who rubbed buttercups beneath her chin. She liked butter every time. He had an astonishingly large ribcage that she hoped might house a creature she could care for—something like a bird to pluck and feed. But his one-act told the tale of an aging professor seduced by his young pupil, and no singing sounds came from him, not a peep.

What was true? That Jackie had given up on boyfriends? Goodbye and so long to expectations? Hello to swiping right, then swiping right again? At first, hooking up seemed simple and fun. She liked all that foamy beer in red plastic cups. She liked CVS cologne on showered necks, mint gum liquor breath, electric fingers with the lights out. One guy’s petal kisses, another’s deep, sure tongue. Dude with a backwards baseball hat. Hipster with a man-bun. And Jackie? She could be Jackie-but-not, an impersonation of herself. Here was Jackie-ish in last night’s dress, performing the
walk of shame across campus like she might be anyone, no one, another pebble on the path tramped by her own Payless heel.

“I love Jewish holidays,” Alley announced one morning as she attempted to unlatch a felt locust lodged in little Henry’s mass of curly hair. The school was preparing to celebrate Passover. While Jackie had declined the invitation to accompany her parents to this year’s KJCC Seder, she was dazzled by Alley’s fanciful interpretation of the occasion. Alley devoted herself completely to class projects, often putting in extra hours at home—how else could she have finished that life-sized igloo made entirely of milk jugs, or the Roman aqueduct constructed from dried ziti noodles?

Her pièce de résistance, however, was her blanket of plagues for Pesach. For this, she cut out plague-shaped pieces of felt, then attached strips of Velcro to one side. Next, she affixed compatible strips of Velcro all over a surplus army blanket so enormous that the children could stretch it all the way across the classroom to make a fort. The blanket was thick and heavy, and the kids could remove and re-stick all the blood, frogs, lice, flies, locusts, boils, and hail. Being plagues, they spread. Flies turned up in the floor puzzles, lice appeared in the tub of Legos. Alley never quite figured out how to fashion the last plague, darkness, but she and Jackie agreed that darkness could be crawling inside.

Then, just as the locust in Henry’s hair was finally coming free, every alarm in the building began to blare.

“Shit, this early?” Alley groaned, giving the locust one final rip. “It’s okay, class,” she reassured them, already beginning, as per protocol, to count students’ heads. Jackie stood up from her tiny chair at the tiny table where she’d been helping Samuel and Samantha, twins, string colorful plastic beads onto a stretch of red yarn. During evacuation drills it was Jackie’s job to assemble the children into a single-file line with their fingers on the wall. While Alley confirmed who was present, Jackie quickly finished tying the beaded necklace around Samuel’s throat.

“But it’s my necklace!” Samantha shouted.

“Seven, eight,” Alley paused. “Hey, Jackie?”

“Just a sec.” Jackie’s knot did not hold, and the beads from Samuel’s necklace fell to the floor, scattering like hail as Director Koffman appeared at their door. She was red-cheeked, wheezing. “Against the wall now, kiddos,” Jackie sang, trying to make a show of competence for her boss. “Fingers on that wall. Line up!” Finally the class obeyed, their sticky fingers pressed to taped-up drawings of monarch butterflies with handprint wings. Last week they’d watched the caterpillar they’d been raising hatch from its cocoon and try to fly around inside its plastic container.

“This is not a drill,” Director Koffman said, as if quoting an action movie.

Alley rolled her eyes. “Another fire.” Small fires were a regular occurrence in the facility’s industrial kitchen, mainly used for school lunches and kosher meals. “Are you kidding?”
But nobody was kidding. In slow motion, Jackie watched Director Koffman’s lips silently spell the word B-O-M-B. A tall, clear birdfeeder was suctioned to their classroom window. Jackie watched a chickadee dip its beak in for seed, then fly swiftly away.

“Everyone out!” the director ordered.

During the many evacuation exercises they had completed, the teachers were able to guide students neatly from the classrooms out into the hall and through the exit in a well-ordered manner. The children had been obedient, quiet, straight-backed dominos. But this was not an exercise, and despite Director Koffman’s careful crisis planning, all ten classrooms emptied instantly—and now the teachers, children, and staff clutching à la carte babies and rolling cribs shoved their bodies through the narrow atrium toward the door in a glut of confusion. Jackie lost her spot as the caboose for her room’s line but kept saying “All right now” to the back of Henry’s curly head, which she could barely see. Soft, shaky voices were singing “You Are My Sunshine.” The floor was slippery where a child had spilled a sippy cup or a teacher had spilled her coffee. Would they be stuck like this—body-to-body, breath-to-breath—for hours? Years? No, as the authorities would tell them later, the evacuation had been completed in less than five minutes—an acceptable time.

How exactly the baby came to be in Jackie’s arms as she stepped from the siren-filled building into that cloudless afternoon, who could say? She thought she’d heard a voice command, “Here.” And then it was—there—the child, impossibly light in her arms, like a grocery bag that appears way too heavy until you pick it up. The baby had a spice to it—sour milk, sweet milk, diaper perfume. It squiggled against her chest, making vague digestive grunts as Jackie pushed her nose into its velvet head, breathing in that certain smell she knew would be there. Together, they followed the others into the field.

Jackie was staring at a red speckled birthmark on the baby’s head, trying to decide if it looked more like Greenland or a bullfrog. She looked up to see the three-year-olds sitting along the net of one of the tennis courts, rolling neon balls back and forth between them.

“They’re saying the call was automated,” Alley puffed, winded.

“Look how amazing they are,” Jackie said in the direction of the children.

“Automated. Like, some kind of robot or something.”

The baby began to make unhappy whimpering noises, and Jackie started to sway, spontaneously, from side to side. “What did the message say?” Jackie asked.

“Not sure exactly,” Alley paused. “Something about slaughtering a lot of Jews. A bloodbath.” She reached down to open Goldfish baggies for Samuel and Samantha and to put another straw in another juice box for another kid. She paused, holding the straw, as if considering how Jackie might handle what was coming next. “It said it would blow the head off every last sleeping baby.”
Jackie liked being at home. At first, she thought she wouldn’t, but she liked falling asleep in her childhood bedroom, gazing up through the skylight, a hole her parents had cut from the roof just for her. She liked seeing the stars stay put up there. She even liked how, at the grocery store, her mother let her pick out any kind of cereal she wanted.

“Listen,” Alley said, “they aren’t letting us call the parents, but I’m already getting texts. Someone must have tweeted it.” She held up her phone. It blasted with frantic messages:

*What is going on?*
*Do you have the twins??*
*OMG on my way!!*

Jackie thought of her own mother getting a call from one of the receptionists, Doris, Kate, or Irene. “They’re coming,” Alley said. “We need to be ready.”

Before the parents arrived, the emergency units came, speeding like angry bulls down Montclair Boulevard and into the KJCC parking lot. Fire trucks, ambulances, police cars and motorcycles, even an army truck of some kind. The figures tumbling from these vehicles were dressed in yellow hazmat suits and military gear. One group set to work blocking the lot’s entry with orange cones and laying caution tape around the perimeter, while others helped usher the last of the elderly patrons from the building, some with walkers and canes. Next, a round of men holding rifles entered the place with German shepherds.

In one of Jackie’s required poli sci courses, PSC 220: Introduction to Domestic Extremism and Hate Groups, Jackie learned that radical hate groups were on the rise, especially those connected with white supremacist factions. To help the class grasp the influence of the most active umbrella organizations, the professor distributed a detailed handout listing Ku Klux Klan, anti-Muslim, neo-Confederate, white nationalist, racist skinhead, anti-LGBTQ, and neo-Nazi groups. On the white board, the professor drew an umbrella in blue marker, the group names scrawled inside it. At the time, the names were just there to put on flashcards and memorize. But now mini-vans and station wagons hurtled over curbs and onto the grass outside the KJCC parking lot. Frantic parents, sweating through their work clothes, rushed to find their children among the mass of others gathered on the tennis courts. Jackie thought she recognized her mother’s white Volvo in a row of other Volvos.

“Whose baby is this?” Jackie began to zigzag around the tennis court, approaching teachers who were patiently trying to appease and organize the children as they waited for the go-ahead to release them to their parents. “Does anybody know?” The baby startled awake and began to wail as Jackie made a beeline for Director Koffman, who was speaking into two walkie-talkies at once. “Excuse me,” Jackie said, feeling the tears come, “but what should I do with this baby?”
There was no bomb. They were calling it a hoax. After an hour, the whole place had been checked by the authorities and given the all-clear. One of the teachers hurried over to claim Rosie, the infant Jackie had been carrying. Jackie watched the teacher gently offer the child to a woman who’d been gripping the tennis court’s chain-link fence with such intensity that her knuckles made a row of bone ghosts. The teachers kept a log to account for each child as the stunned, furious parents approached to collect their own. The resiliency of the children, who recovered instantly, presented a stark contrast to the overwhelmed adults. What a strange and silly day, the students might have thought. In Director Koffman’s words, What an adventure!

By that evening, local and national media reported that the Kaiserman Jewish Community Center had not been alone; more than seventy Jewish community centers across the country had received bomb threats that same day. The threats came within minutes of each other, with the identical recorded message: the same threat of bloodbath, of babies’ heads blown off. The recording had been leaked and was already posted to YouTube, though Jackie could not make herself listen. Alley messaged a spoof video on Twitter that showed the threat coming straight from the mouth of the president. But it was just a prank, the pundits agreed, a prank designed to scare and intimidate. Still, Jackie had trouble sleeping that night. Each time she closed her eyes she saw the baby, little Rosie, and her mother’s row of hot, white knuckles. She saw her own mother’s red, squished-up face as she’d run from the Volvo toward Jackie, straight out of her silver Birkenstocks.

Some parents took their children out of school for a few days following the incident. Some proceeded with hesitancy, grateful to receive proof-of-life text messages from the teachers throughout the day. See! Their own living kid on the seesaw! At story time! Sitting around the table for snack! Of course there were also parents who found themselves memorizing the sight of their child’s bobbing backpack as if it might be the very last image of their precious baby alive, because why shouldn’t the same fate befall their Lucy, their Benjamin, their Elizabeth, their Daniel as had all the other children murdered in their classrooms? In a surge of panic those parents might scoop up their wee one and head back to the car, then back home, then back under the covers, where maybe they would stay forever.

A few days later, another bomb threat came in to the KJCC and to more than one hundred other Jewish community centers in the nation.

“Here we go again,” Alley sighed.

This time, the evacuation went off without a hitch. The teachers and students remembered their roles and were able to act from previous experience. Jackie quickly and easily coaxed the children away from the butterflies she’d been teaching them to construct from clothespins and tissue paper and toward their spots against the wall. There was no whining, no tears, and Jackie only had to swallow a dime-sized knot of fear in her throat. “We’re expert evacuators!” Director Koffman cheered as the whole school streamed through the doors to the tennis courts once more. The
authorities were in and out of the center within fifteen minutes, and the parents were only contacted after the children were safely back in their classrooms eating apple slices. The day went on as usual. A baby was not thrust into Jackie’s arms, though she had been careful to walk with them wide open.

How quickly they all adapted to this new vileness. “These acts of anti-Semitic terrorism must not be allowed to endure in our communities,” said Adam Geller, the director of strategic performance at the JCC Association of North America, but by the end of the month close to three hundred centers had experienced similar threats. The KJCC was forced to double down on their already tight security situation, which included stationing off-duty police officers at the entrances and changing out all the regular windows for bulletproof ones, including the window in Alley and Jackie’s classroom. The birdfeeder had to be removed.

“There is no viable danger,” an email to the parents read. And, the thing was, it seemed to be true. The more often the sirens screamed, the less Jackie could hear them. There was work to do, the alphabet to teach, spills to clean. Soon, parents no longer snatched their children back as they walked with oversized backpacks into the school or texted for updates throughout the day. To calm her nerves, Alley had been downing two Benadryl with a bottle of wine each night. Now wine alone would do.

“The local and national authorities are working around the clock to make sure those who were responsible for terrorizing our community will be stopped and brought to justice,” the weekly email read. “In the meantime, please remember to do your part to keep our children safe by observing the no-nuts policy.”

When the story broke, Jackie was at home with her parents watching the nightly news. The suspect was a nineteen-year-old Israeli kid who’d turned his basement bedroom into a makeshift control center where he sold bomb threats on the dark web at thirty bucks a pop. Apparently his services were much sought after and garnered rave reviews. “Badass!” one customer gushed. “School was let out and our teacher had to cancel the final exam!” To whom, exactly, these threats were being sold was still being determined, though at least one customer had been located in California.

“I don’t understand,” Jackie’s mother said. She was immobilized in her recliner, weighted down by their two obese cats. Jackie’s father liked to play solitaire on his laptop while he watched TV.

“What don’t you understand?” he asked, looking up.

“Well,” Jackie’s mother said, scratching the tabby’s flea-bitten backside, “isn’t he Jewish?”

Jackie thought back to that poli sci course, to the enormous blue umbrella her professor had sketched upon the whiteboard and filled with terms for hate groups. Even with her glasses on, one word bled into the next.
A full-time position became available at the KJCC, working the front desk. The extra hours meant Jackie could make more of a dent in her student loans, and even though she was going to miss Alley and the children, the responsible choice was to take it. It would mean no more lunches at home on a random Tuesday watching golf on mute with her father while her mother shush-shushed around the kitchen in slippers making them ham sandwiches.

The departing receptionist, Kate, had a shock of white hair—a bolt against her dark curls.

“Unlock the front door first thing, then just go behind the desk and sit there,” she explained to Jackie during their one and only training session.

“Sit here,” Jackie echoed, staring at an intimidating bulwark of phones and a newly installed panic button.

“That’s it!” Kate exclaimed. Kate was Jackie’s age and had also landed at the KJCC as a failsafe after college. Now she was leaving for the local vocational school to train as some kind of technician—ultrasound or MRI—whichever’s probe was more exact.

“Okay,” Jackie said. “Just sit. Thanks!” Kate left.

There must be something else for her to do. She began to thumb through the aerobics schedule, wondering what the difference might be between Body Pump and Body Flow. She began to count the Stars of David scattered around, the kind made from two triangles stuck on top of each other. Some of the star shapes were obvious: the granite plaque, for instance, listing board members and donors. But some were not immediately apparent: wood beam patterns on the ceiling, the star she thought she glimpsed on a patron's necklace.

“Wait!” Kate reappeared in the lobby, startling Jackie from her daze. “I forgot. Whenever someone walks in—even some total skeeze—you’re supposed to say, ‘Welcome!’”

“Got it!” Jackie called out.

Funneling through the foyer came a group of elderly women dressed for the noon water aerobics class. Like the children who’d learned to join hands, the women steadied each other, elbows hooked, as they swipe their membership cards and proceeded in the direction of the pool. “Welcome,” Jackie said, following the patchwork of bathing caps, robes, and flip-flops through the new bulletproof glass doors to the pool area. She took a deep, full breath of chlorinated air, then returned to her desk to sit and wait to open the door for whatever appeared next. The panic button glowed red, lit with man-made fluorescence.
Pentecost

Like Noah’s wife I loved
the water till it was all I had. Is it her
voice I hear lately coming through
the downpour calling o and o and...?
My brother thinks it’s easy
to lose faith, underestimates
how hard I’ve worked to get
here. But the dove is just
an ordinary pigeon, I remind him,
some small dull thing sent to test

the flood mark. I wish I had
his gift for submission. Truth is,
our mother’s gone and we’re
struggling. Maybe peace isn’t
any one thing, he offers, his face

so lucent—like a painting of
the Son we were raised on.
He’s waiting now, for me
to answer, but the rain keeps
coming, inexhaustible as fact,

its tears iridescent green
and violet as a bird’s wringed neck,
or the dress our mother loved
but we couldn’t afford
to bury her in. When we were children,

she took us to a dead fountain
where we tossed imaginary coins
into missing water. Is it wrong
to believe I’m due what was
promised? I don’t have two nickels
to rub together, but rest in the quiet
light of that memory, as light
rests in her final X-ray, metal
ring flaring over shadows of
bone, there, in her still-living hand.
RICHARD COLE

ICU, Four a.m.

In the dark, everyone is kind. 
Nurse Ho gently taps along my arm,
looking for a possible vein. People 
from all over the world are rushing 
to help me. The hospitalist from India 
asks, “Do you know where you are? 
Who’s the president? What month is it?” 
These seem like important questions 
but somehow difficult. Impossible. 
“Make a fist,” she says, inserting the slow drip. 
My compass needle wobbles, confused. 
Do I know where I am? 
Some sort of midpoint. Or not. I loosen my grip. 
Strong hands carry me through the dark. 
The journey has already started.
Walking in Circles

I get lost easily, even now,
entering the dim, allegorical woods
preserved inside our city, always
the faint white noise of traffic
somewhere beyond the trees as I wander
with diligence down a dirt path beaten
by others and myself. I’m on my way
I think, until I think I’ve been this way
before not twenty minutes ago. I’m never sure.
Nothing is a straight line
or even a labyrinth but a squirrelly maze
I trace and retrace almost every day
for whatever thoughts that might arrive
as I walk in circles, truer circles described
inside of circles, having learned
that I need to get lost, a parade of one,
to find my calling, then lost again
to find my own way home.
Jam

Along with a knitted hat, Cousin Paula sent a jar of homemade jam each Christmas. The jam was apricot, or Rangpur-lime marmalade made from fruit that grew on the trees in her California backyard; it was plum jam spiced with cinnamon and cloves, or pear steeped in vanilla; it was made from cherries she’d purchased from the market.

Each year, when my husband and I opened the box, we exclaimed in appreciation. Then we set the jars, labeled in her precise script, on a shelf in our basement and forgot about them.

Our last photo of Paula: visiting us in Minnesota, she’s standing in the doorway of our daughter’s bedroom, along with my brother-in-law Mike. A cousins’ reunion. At this point Paula thinks her cancer is in remission (it isn’t). She’s maybe sixty years old, with short, thick, white hair, wearing cargo pants and a shirt from an outdoor clothier. Brisk is how she looks. Her mother and my husband’s father were siblings, and Paula and Mike, standing there, looked so much like each of their dead parents that when I came around the corner with the camera, I was momentarily shocked.

As a young man, my husband had emulated Paula: the summer between his junior and senior years of college, he camped in National Parks all over the US while traveling on a Greyhound bus with a pass, the way she had done ten years before. During that trip, he visited her in Sacramento, where she was working as an environmental lobbyist. He wrote her after, but she never wrote back.

But then, when our daughter Anna was born seven years ago, Paula reappeared. This time we were the busy people who did not always write back, but Paula remained constant. She knitted hats for Anna, each different from the last. With the first hat, she sent a small mesh laundry bag and neatly printed instructions on how to machine-wash hand knits. Her early hats always seemed to turn our baby into food or maybe a flower. Many had pompoms. We saved them all. My favorite made Anna’s baby head look like a strawberry flecked with seeds, a green scruff of stem on top.
And then the jam, which was kind, but we only use jam for our daughter’s sandwiches, and she will only eat one particular brand of strawberry.

It isn’t that I dislike jam, but I do find it spectacular in its uselessness. When canning came back in vogue and my friends were enchanted by the idea of saving Minnesota’s summer in a jar, I balked. Jam lacks the healthfulness of actual fruit, and it’s not substantial enough to be dessert. I’m not even sure it counts as food. Jam is the lace doily of food. Louis the XIV loved jam. At the end of all his court dinners at Versailles, he served jellies and marmalades, mounded in little silver dishes and made year-round from the fruit grown in his palace’s orangeries. Just imagine some of the richest people in the world in petticoats and powdered wigs, sighing and exclaiming as they eat jelly from tiny silver spoons.

I am being unfair to history. Three centuries ago, almost no one could get fruit that did not grow near them, much less at the time of year that fruit didn’t grow. Only the very richest people could afford the large panes of glass necessary to build an orangery, a conservatory where fruit trees and summer could exist in perpetuity. Sugar was imported and cost the equivalent of fifty dollars a pound today. A little jam balanced on a spoon—sticky-sweet, concentrated, fruit out of season—would have carried an intensity and a wallop we can barely comprehend.

And really, other than fruit itself, the one ingredient you need to make jam is sugar. The necessary sugar-to-fruit ratio in jam is one to one. The scientist Marie Curie, whose cookbooks are still so radioactive that archivists keep them sealed in a lead-lined box, detailed as much in her notebooks. In the summer of 1898, when Curie first isolated the dangerously radioactive element polonium (which would eventually give her cancer), she also made a batch of gooseberry jam. The jam, she wrote, required eight pounds of fruit and eight pounds of sugar, as any jam would. It’s sugar that makes fruit gel. Sugar preserves. Sugar is an everyday miracle. It causes fruit to retain its bright color, until it is brighter than it ever was on the tree. Heat and sugar alchemize to turn a jar of jam into a glowing jewel.

Paula delighted in photos and videos and updates of our daughter, and we obliged. In return, she sent Anna dresses that were colorful but not cloying. Paula sought out skirts that would spin out into a circle as Anna twirled—that was Paula’s own ambition at Anna’s age, she said, twirling. One dress was red and kimono-inspired, another fuchsia with big turquoise flowers and a flounce. A third, a trim and tailored meadow. She turned Anna’s closet into a cornucopia of fruit and flowers.

Apricot, raspberry, lingonberry, pineapple, strawberry, grape, orange: jam is heightened fruit, idealized fruit.

Paula could also be a little difficult. She had a habit of finishing your sentences for you, inserting something you hadn’t planned to say at all; after a day or two of this, I’d stop trying to clarify what I meant and let her misconceptions stand. When she visited us, she was forever powering down our laptops and unplugging the chargers from the wall to save energy, or shrinking my T-shirts while drying them on the
highest possible setting because it was fastest and would therefore use the least amount of electricity. A family legend claims that a college-aged Paula cried about air pollution as the older, WWII-era generation grilled steaks at a family reunion, nursing highballs and rolling their eyes.

A fellow environmentalist said at her funeral, “Paula pissed people off, but usually for the right reasons.” Paula knew this. Even as she lay dying, she limited the number of hours hospice would be allowed in her house. When her friends and even her doctor protested, she said, “I live alone for a reason, guys.”

Down in our basement pantry yesterday, I noticed all of Paula’s jars of jam tucked in one corner of a shelf, quietly luminous.

If you asked Anna what was the best present Paula ever sent, she would say the pop-up book of US National Parks that came at Christmas. The day we opened it, a three-year-old Anna spent hours arranging her plastic zoo animals on top of the pages, as if Paula had really sent us a series of 3-D landscapes on which we could make tableaux. It was as if all the continents were once again Pangaea, and time and space had ceased to exist. Let there be zebras near the geysers of Yellowstone! May gorillas walk the swamps of the Everglades! Blessed be the tigers of the Grand Canyon!

Now Paula’s life can be seen as a whole, its sweetness concentrated. She had recently retired from her work as a lobbyist for the Sierra Club. Deeply Catholic, she worshipped at a monastery with a small group of Benedictine monks. She was a genius of small talk, a quick thinker with a clear, precise voice: probably she was a good lobbyist.

If she had ever been in love or had a lover, none of us knew. I can’t believe this is all I know to tell. Because she did so much of the talking, I’m surprised now she told me so little.

*If someone doesn’t have kids, what happens to the ancestors?* Anna asks me over a bedtime snack of buttered toast.

Occasionally, I turn to the Indo-Europeans for advice, as if there’s truth to be found in language itself. Their language is the language of my deep ancestors, of so many of our common ancestors; it’s the most widely spoken language family in the world. Linguists believe the language first developed in the area of present-day Ukraine. No written record of the early language exists.

Imagine what their language sounded like, tasted like. Imagine what the ancestors said:

*Go back to where so many languages begin. Go back to the steppes, the prairie north of the sea. Be one of the first people to domesticate a horse. Be a herder of cows, sheep, pigs; and a farmer, a semi-nomad in search of grasslands where your cattle can feed. Drive carts with wheels; ride horses along the river’s bank.*

*We have a god who lives in the sky. We have snow in which we track bears, wolves, and mice. A dog trails at our heels. We have hard bright winter stars,*
clustered like berries. The way we say heart is also the way we say love, leave, and I believe. We seek; occasionally, we find.

We crave sweetness and almost never find it. We migrate west from the plains into the forests. There, in the fleeting moons of summer and fall, food is plentiful. We watch the trees, learning where to find edible fruit. We wait for small, hard apples and plums to blush and grow heavy with juice. When they finally soften and purple and redden, we gorge. Other than the occasional honeycomb, wild apples are the only sweetness we taste all year. They feel like a gift from the dying earth, and we perform no labor to will them into being. They are beautiful and fragrant, there for our taking.

Then come the days uneaten fruit falls from the trees, the sweet but not unpleasant smell of decay. The bees sway over the fallen apples and suck, delirious on sugar, and the pleasure is gone for another year.

We write down nothing. We say: Bhrug-, fruit, “to use, enjoy, to harvest, a proceed.” Fruit: a result, a child. Fall, as in, “to drop from a height, fail, decay, die,” or windfall, “to find, or stumble upon.” Fruit becomes connected to the idea of bearing, to babies, who in this time and place are born of women upright and squatting, and the babies drop from the women like fruit from a tree. That’s when becoming married loss: the child is born at the moment it separates from its mother; the fruit is palmed by the woman as it is plucked from the tree. The apple is perfect at the moment it starts to rot.

When Paula’s friends asked her whether she wanted any words said at her funeral, she waved them off, saying that picking out readings is a living person’s problem. Finally she offered this from John the Evangelist: No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is made complete in us.

We still talk about Paula’s small kindnesses, the little gifts she sent through the mail to Anna. In fact, now that Paula is dead, I feel an intimacy with her that I previously didn’t—one of the many oddities of death—and I will never get to talk with her about it.

Soon after Paula died, we were contacted by her lawyer. She left:

1) to my husband John, a set of Victorian cut-glass liqueur and water glasses and a matching pitcher that had belonged to their grandmother;

2) to our daughter Anna, that same grandmother’s wedding ring and a lump of money so generous that I called my husband’s name, then dropped the lawyer’s letter in shock.

An aside about that cut glass. It took us over an hour to liberate each little stemmed glass from the enormous amount of packing tape, bubble wrap, and newspaper in the cardboard box. Water glass, wine glass, water, water, wine. We don’t care for fussy
crystal and were certain that they would sit forever on a shelf, taking up space and gathering dust. Even that turned out to be different from what we expected.

The set looked exactly like one my husband’s father had inherited from his parents, as if my husband’s father and Paula’s mother had inherited identical portions of a single larger set. My father-in-law’s set no longer exists; it was shattered one afternoon when he was very old, when the woman who cleaned his house accidentally pulled over the hutch on which he displayed it. My father-in-law was kind to the woman, but after she left, he cried. Now, twenty years later, a nearly identical glass collection had appeared, it seemed, out of nowhere.

The crystal doesn’t have to gather dust. The jam doesn’t have to be Anna’s favorite flavor. We do have to eat the jam—unseal the jars and unstop time to say hello to Paula, wherever she may be.

Here is how I imagine it: some weekend later in fall, when the yellow leaves are falling from the ash tree outside our kitchen window, we buy a delicious loaf of bread. We slice it, toast it, and serve it with Paula’s jam. We invite our friends and neighbors, fill the fussy glasses. We didn’t say it would be potluck, but people keep showing up with food anyway: unpacking brown grocery bags, handing over covered dishes wrapped in kitchen towels. Later in the afternoon, the kitchen gets crowded with people laughing, the floor sticky where something has spilled. A glass breaks, and we reassure the breaker as we sweep up the fragments.

Our dead relatives show up. There are Paula’s parents on their first blind date on New Year’s Eve in 1945; there are my husband’s parents, the grandparents my daughter never knew, but young again, and energetic looking. And my great-grandmother, who worked in the vineyards in Alsace-Lorraine. And further back, and further back. By this time it’s dark outside, with the windows turned to mirrors, and we think we only see our own reflections. We drink to memory, love made complete and whole as we devour it.
Custody of the Eyes

Should this mean adding the slow returns
in shadowed columns, currying to a glow the dappled
horse of her alone in winter stall, should winter stall
be gold with summer-windrowed hay, hay they
aired and cured, the sweeter for bedding and feeding.
Could she be leaning forward after faith, leaner for
the habit of not looking, promised to the long, dry
braid of disincentive with incentive. It takes
a kind of will. And then some time apart. Abashed,
crushed in—in earshot, still, of holding dear. Her
grazing won’t have asked to see.
Will have stood beyond velleity, the pollen path
of lightest wishing, the fair but faintest blues
of nothing almost carried out.
Leni Dothan is an Israeli-born artist and architect living in London. In this photo essay, based on practice-led research she undertook at the Slade School of Fine Art at University College, London, she examines and critiques how motherhood has been presented in western art history. She finds that celebrated images of obedient mothers—above all the Virgin Mary—constitute “ideological prisons” which continue to confine contemporary women. “I call these masterpieces Visual Contracts,” says the artist, “and with my work I aim to breach them and create new narratives.” In the images and captions that follow, the artist presents a powerful re-vision of motherhood.

Following Pages:
*Woman, stone, projection on boulder, digital image.*

I created this site-specific work as part of my exhibition *Birth & Death* in Hå Gamle Prestegard, a contemporary arts venue housed in an old vicarage on the Norwegian coast. First, I took a self-portrait with a boulder in the background, then I projected this photo at night on a different boulder, just outside the gallery. Finally, I photographed the projection with a long exposure. *Nordic Eve* creates a new mythical narrative. This Eve was born in the North Sea. As soon as her foot touched the land, she picked up a boulder and began building. She was the first woman on earth. She had no role models, no concepts or understanding of her role. She had no need or desire for a man. She did not know about the possibility of a masculine version of herself.
*Mother, child, pencil drawing on wall, 2:46-minute video in loop.*

In this video, a young mother breastfeeds her baby until they both fall asleep. The languid act of breastfeeding gives the video the qualities of a painting. The iconic Mary becomes a real-life mother, weak and exhausted, unable to live up to her own myth. In Renaissance paintings, Mary’s traditional red dress symbolizes the future—her son’s blood and death—while a blue cloth symbolizes the church. *Sleeping Madonna*, made in the secular culture of Israel, is not part of the Christian religion or narrative. However, she sticks to the red dress as she is bound by a contract with the state, one in which she is asked to potentially sacrifice her son for the sake of the country.
Mother and son stand within a wooden structure, the son on a step that makes him as tall as the mother. This step makes them equals. The middle point of this structure splits their bodies in two and covers their intimate areas. The title implies a quantitative question: How much do you love? How much do you care? How much do you want? This title has a double meaning. First, it’s the mother-son relationship that is being quantified. But the question can also be turned on the viewer. How much, we might ask, does art invite us to care or criticize?
*Mother, child, wooden structure, 2:21-minute video in loop. Commissioned by Procreate Project.*

Must she always be loving, caring, and ideal? Must he always be a passive victim? Can a portrait of mother and child depict a spectrum of emotions, rather than being bound to the adoration of traditional nativities? What will be the social impact if a mother is allowed to have complicated feelings toward her child, and vice versa? For this work, I created a confrontational structure that depicts mother and child as two individuals rather than an inseparable, loving unit.

*Mother, child, wooden structure, photographic image.*

The mother in this work seems vulnerable. She is no longer the nurturing figure but now needs the support of her child. The classical roles are being redefined. Though the figures are roughly similar in proportion, the child’s maturity is visible in the way his arm covers his mother’s shoulder, a gesture of reassurance. Flesh meets flesh, meets wood. The title implies the middle point between mother and child, their average, the place in which they meet as equals. The darkness—reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915)—is a portal to both past and future, a suggestion of dark times which may lie ahead.

*Mother, child, 3:00-minute video in loop.*

This work was created as the fourteenth and final stop in the London exhibition *Stations of the Cross*. It explores the liminal period for Jesus and his mother when he was in the tomb. In the circular space of Temple Church, I installed a video sculpture in which a projection of mother and son silently and continually revolves in a non-space. Her palms are open, anticipating the moment of his sacrifice. As they rotate like clock hands, the two figures embody all narrative possibilities and cancel them at the same time. The sacrifice of the child is not yet determined, as it is in the traditional pietà.
For hundreds of years, the mother has been presented as a predetermined, professional mourner. This work proposes an alternative iconography. Forged as an asymmetrical heart, the double coffin imagines a mother who chooses to die with her child, refusing to accept either his destiny or her own. The coffin appears custom made to fit a particular parent and child, and thus the structure itself becomes a replacement for the usual notation of death: dd/mm/yyyy. It stands quiet and foreboding before parents, who cannot bear the thought of sacrificing their children. Not for God, not for the state, not for anyone.
Curriculum Vitae

The lives of others have a point and aim.
Each stage prepares them for the one to come.
They know the rules, and how to play the game.
Their calculations yield a tidy sum.

My opportunities were premature,
Or late. My deepest love went undeclared.
I hesitated when I could be sure.
I should have been more cautious when I dared.

And so our talents, dormant, pregnant, wait;
Our wisdom deepens and accumulates;
Until the day when finally we stare
Death in the face. Was all this heaven’s share,

And not our own? For this alone makes sense:
The heretofore is nothing to the hence.
Marriage

There are two ways to marry: right and wrong.
The right way is to find the proper mate:
God-fearing, wise and prudent, chaste and strong
(They say such folks exist)—then you await—

Stemming your desire until you’re wed—
The fierce abandon of the marriage bed.
Without hypocrisy you’ll teach your heirs
To live well and resist the devil’s snares.

The other way’s what films and novels show:
You fall in love, you fall in bed, you live
Together maybe, marry, and divorce.

And what can we who took the latter course
But cautionary lessons glumly give
Of what we did—not what we lately know?
In Consequence

For hours we hid behind the false wall
Henrik had constructed in the barn
before he was caught and changed.
Hours of stiff silence, our breathing
soft as daisies in a bowl.
When at last the special detachment
gave up and moved on, firing the house
in a parting gesture of contempt, we loosened
the secret latch and stepped out, new born
among the dead.

Beyond asking why, we considered God’s absence,
a notion evil in itself, we thought, finally,
and set out with three tins of soup, a blanket, two
loaves of black bread and each other, damaged
but alive.

Moving by night, steadily
north, it was difficult to avoid the dogs
run wild in packs, the bounty hunters mad
to curry favor with the directorate
charged with mopping up.
Twice, by accident, we led one to the other
and escaped in the dust and screaming.

Through the endless days we hid
in caves and thickets, fighting off or eating
whatever else might live there.
Weeks of this. Luckily
our shoes held up, and patches of snow
could still be found in shaded corners of the heights
to which we came at last. So we had water.
The rest is as I told you. We came in sight of the border, dashed across, and so became new, faith rising in us again. Joyous and broken, we stared at our hands, folded, strangely unable to pray.

Inset: Antonius Roberts (right) in his studio with James Piercey.
In this new regular feature, we’ll invite contemporary artists from around the world to describe their art practice, spirituality, and current work.
Andy Goldsworthy’s Sticks & Stones

_I climb out of my fear._
_The mind enters itself, and God the mind,_
_And one is One, free in the tearing wind._

—Theodore Roethke

You are alone. You are alone naked in a forest, surrounded. Alone, surrounded by a live ossuary of trees, shed twig, spell of oval stone. You are separate from hours in a forest of small yet perpetuating sounds. No one will hear you breathe. You are alone, bare hands like large up-curving leaves still soft from the falling. Your expression sheds itself into the ground next to rounding stone, the numberless past tense of soil breathing. You are alone. From end branches, light mows down on you in a forest, oncoming wind, almost words between its trees’ teeth. Spell freefall memory far forward from your mind to make nothing happen like those nothing spaces between the rooms you left behind, left alone to be alone, unaccounted for. No one can hurt you now. Your face, hands in the synonyms of leaves, hair caught combing pinecone, like a pulled potato a child of you knew how to be here alone, falling out of your house made from cut-down trees.
A Conversation with
William Giraldi

William Giraldi was born in 1974 and grew up in Manville, New Jersey. He studied English literature at Drew University and holds an MA in creative writing from Boston University. He is the author of two novels, Busy Monsters (2011) and Hold the Dark (2015), which was adapted into a film from Netflix, as well as the memoir The Hero’s Body (2016) and a collection of criticism, American Audacity (2018). His writing has appeared in The New Republic, New York Times, Oxford American, Poets & Writers, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Virginia Quarterly Review, and The New Criterion. The recipient of Pushcart and Balcones Fiction Prizes, he has been granted fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Giraldi is a master lecturer in the writing program at Boston University and an editor for the journal Agni. He was interviewed by Image culture editor Nick Ripatrazone.

Image: Let’s start with your conversation with the formidable Harold Bloom that recently appeared in the Los Angeles Review of Books. In your introduction, you frame your discovery of Bloom’s work via an anecdote from when you were nineteen: “The product of a severe Catholic education, I kept hearing the King James Bible at work in Hemingway and Dante at work in O’Connor. This was both distracting and enhancing.” Who were you at nineteen? Where (and why) were you reading Hemingway, Dante, and O’Connor? And what about literary influence seemed “both distracting and enhancing”?

William Giraldi: At nineteen, I was still mostly in the closet as a reader and writer, because in my tiny working-class hometown in New Jersey—a manful town of Catholics named Manville, if you can believe it—the arts and intellectual endeavors were not only not accepted but outright ridiculed. Too femme for Manvillians. I was nearing the end of my three-year stint as a teenage bodybuilder then and, by
inches, beginning to understand that reading and writing were to be my life. I touch upon this briefly in my memoir, *The Hero's Body*, although I could have written two hundred more pages about my closeted days as a reader.

It was really a mentor who altered my life and gave me permission, so to speak, to accept myself, to quit reading in the shadows despite my hometown. I started showing up at writing classes at the community college a few towns over, even though I wasn’t enrolled. The instructor, Ed Minus, not only let me stay and participate, but was the first person to tell me, at nineteen years old, that I was a born writer and that I might make a career of it. I can’t overemphasize how revamping that was for me, how radical and how final. Minus was a transplant from South Carolina, thirty-five years my senior, had published a novel in the eighties with Viking, and had had stories in *The Atlantic* and all the top literary quarterlies, so this confirmation from him was vital to my selfhood. My friendship with him, for twenty years, was the most important relationship in my life. I’d been reading in secret since I was small, but I became a wider, more careful reader under his tutelage. It was Minus who turned me in the direction of Harold Bloom and the problem of influence.

Tyndale’s language in the King James Version has such a limpid potency that I began always hearing it in my mind the way some hear pop songs. I’d first read Hemingway in high school and was immediately zapped by awe: I didn’t realize American language could reach such a demotic sublime—though I’d later find this in Whitman, too—and after high school I read all of Hemingway, including the letters and reportage. But because I had Tyndale crooning within, it was distractingly obvious to me that Hemingway’s prose rhythms came directly from the KJV. I say distracting because it sometimes interfered with a full appreciation of what Hemingway himself was achieving with his prose, how revolutionary his style was in the early 1920s, though Sherwood Anderson and Ring Lardner had made similar forays into such prose.

But my hearing Tyndale in Hemingway was also enhancing because it allowed me to see what Hemingway was up to beyond or beneath the mannered simplicity of his prose (recall his famous “iceberg” theory). I mean to say that Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories, for example, are only ostensibly about a young boy’s growth into a man through fishing, hunting, and war. They are really about the state of Nick’s soul in a world suffused by sin, a world blitzed into godless modernity by the ravages of the First World War.

The same was true for my reading of Dante and O’Connor: see how critical Dante is, not only of his beloved Florence, from which he was exiled, but of swathes of Catholic theology and dogma. O’Connor is just as critical of the South and of both Catholicism and Protestantism. Remember, as a Catholic in Baptist Georgia, she, too, was a kind of exile or expatriate. She is also a richly imagistic stylist, as was Dante, and it was obvious to me that she was taking that line from him in her work.

Again, this was both enhancing and distracting. But I soon got over the distraction of it, with Bloom’s help, when I accepted the inevitability of it: *of course* strong writers
must engage in agon with their predecessors if they are to come into their own sublimity. There are no idiot savants in literature as there are in music, or painting, or math. The only way to come into your own strength as a writer is to absorb tradition.

I agree that Bloom has been reduced to his most pugilistic and sclerotic moments, but I think he has a real power to surprise. Here’s how he ends your conversation: “I think when I depart that I will think of myself as a secular rabbi. One reads to the congregation yet also to oneself. Yahweh bewilders me. I cannot accept him. I cannot reject him. The God of my mother and my father cannot be just an old story. I do not trust in the Covenant, but I cannot deny the transcendental and extraordinary.” What do you think of Bloom’s words?

WG: Bloom once said to me that it’s hard to go on living without some hope in the extraordinary, and that’s essentially what he’s saying at the end of the lines you quote. I don’t have any issue with the seeming contradiction of “secular rabbi” because I’ve been an unbelieving Catholic for most of my life. One needs to find a home in contradiction, paradox, antinomy, in Keatsian negative capability or Yeatsian tragic joy, or else reality quickly becomes untenable. Mysterium tremendum is or should be the state of things for any poet, artist, or believer. Bloom’s “congregation” is the legion of literary disciples he’s earned over the last sixty years, and while it might sound absurd or even blasphemous for him to refer to himself and his readers in such a way, I know precisely what he means, because literature has been, for me, the only religion worth having. I’ve prayed to Homer and Milton more seriously and ardently than I’ve ever prayed to Yahweh or Christ.

When Bloom says he can neither accept nor deny Yahweh, I hear him assenting to the necessity of paradox, but I also hear him making an aesthetic assertion and not a spiritual one. As a literary potency, as sheer poetry, Yahweh is hard to take or leave. I’d say the same for Christ, by the way; I’ve always experienced a simultaneous attraction and repulsion with Messiah. I happen to know that for Bloom, the concept of Yahweh is complicated by his mother’s love for and reliance on the Pentateuch and Torah, and so further complicated by Bloom’s love for and memory of his mother. The Covenant has let Bloom down, as he says—aesthetically it just doesn’t work—but the transcendental has not let him down, only he found it in Shelley and Whitman as the poetic sublime.

Image: In the summer of 2015, you published “The Problem of the Catholic Novelist” in The New Republic. Although you reject the title of “Catholic novelist,” you “concede to being a cultural Catholic, since I recognize the aftershocks of Catholicism on certain avenues of my worldview [and] on my conception of the dramatic.” Tell me about the Catholicism of your youth—and when your belief was replaced with unbelief.
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WG: As a fellow New Jersey Catholic of Italian descent, who was also a lover of literature coming of age in the eighties, you must understand this better than many: my relationship with Catholicism was always literary in a place and at a time when it was supposed to be literal. Children have no choice in their upbringings, their parents, their hometowns, or religions, but I remember knowing I had a choice whether or not to believe in what was being dished to me in parochial school and at mass on Sundays. The poetry of the gospels and liturgy was what I heard, not the dogma of them.

I’m not sure I’ve ever been a believer as that term is typically employed; even when, as a child of eleven or twelve, I sometimes thrummed with the fear of hell, that fear had more to do with Dante than with dogma. When, at confession at our Catholic school, the priest would ask us boys if we masturbated, that was the height of hilarity to me. I just couldn’t take that seriously in any way, and I think I understood that the query had more to do with him than with me. My parents were already divorced by this time, my mother off into another life, and my father, embattled on multiple fronts and raising three small kids alone, didn’t have anything to say to me about faith or the church, and neither did my grandmother, who helped raise my siblings and me after our mother left the family. So, in our house, Catholicism was a reality without being a requirement.

I’d left the church formally at fourteen when I decided to go to public high school and not the Catholic high school most of my pals were off to, but it took me another four or five years to understand that I’d also left faith, belief, piety of any stripe. My reading life had a great deal to do with that, Nietzsche and Shelley especially. I was obnoxiously atheistic in my twenties, spewing Schopenhauer and Swinburne at people. This was long before the atheist onslaught begun by Dawkins and Hitchens and company in ’06 or thereabouts.

Image: In your conversation with Bloom—published four years after the Catholic novelist essay—you identify yourself as a “nonbelieving Catholic.” It reminds me of your (very accurate) encapsulation of the novelist Thomas McGuane’s identity as “a cultural Catholicism that remains vaguely sacral but is no longer connected to the church’s liturgies or devotions.” Do you still feel pulled (or pushed?) toward liturgy, devotion, those old Latin rhythms? Can nostalgia ever cross over into belief? Would you write that essay in the same way now?

WG: Those are important questions to me. I’ve struggled to explain this to people, that one can be an unbelieving Catholic just as one can be a secular Jew. I’ve certainly been in the fangs of a spiritual crisis more than once—what in Donne’s day was called “religious melancholy,” suicidal spots that had me in a “struggle against pointlessness,” in Erich Fromm’s wording—but the crisis did not concern the dilemma of whether or not to return to the church, but of whether or not I was going to use Christ the Metaphor, Christ the Poem, in my own understanding of myself.
There’s a line I’ve been mulling over: *You would not seek me if you had not found me.* Blaise Pascal has Christ say that to him in a meditation called *The Mystery of Jesus*. Christ is already in him, which is how Pascal knows in the first place to seek him, to find the source or the name for the force that already pumps and hums in him. It’s a lovely formulation. I’ve been mulling it over because, as the father of three small boys, I am, yes, currently tugged between raising them with Christ and raising them without Christ, with the sacraments or without, etc.

Why am I being tugged? Because having small children transports you back to your own childhood, and I can’t fight off my awareness of the differences between how I was raised and how they are being raised. Nostalgia can cross over into the land of belief, yes, and I think that’s a strong way to frame it, although I still don’t call myself a believer. I have gone back to referring to myself sometimes as a Catholic or Christian, though. But again, those tags are for me literary and intellectual tags, ways of seeing and not necessarily ways of being or believing.

I’m not sure how I would write that essay on Catholic novelists now, although I can’t imagine it would be too different. I would one day like to look at the squalid excellence of Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. The essay is really about novels and not faith, about the uses of dogma for the novelist, and for a long time now I’ve been irrevocably wed to my view of what a novel should be and how a novel should function.

*Image: American Audacity*, your latest book, is a teeming, charged collection of essays—a testament to how great, energetic criticism is done. This book follows a memoir and two novels. Do you see a symbiotic relationship between criticism and creative work?

*WG:* I think about this a lot, as I’m sure you do as well, since you practice both. A trinity of heroes—Walter Pater, Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde—taught me what I know about the symbiosis of creative and critical work, though I prefer to think of it as reciprocity instead of symbiosis, and I also have an obnoxious dislike of the term creative when it’s applied to writing: I prefer imaginative because imagination is a more substantive tool, method, aim. (I also have a visceral dislike of the American MFA mill, that paint-by-numbers plan to get through grad school.)

For me creative calls up images of children and Legos, and the other problem with the term, when applied to writing, is that there really is no such thing as writing, any writing, that isn’t in some way creative. Of course it is, and all criticism worthy of the name is always as creative as the fiction or poetry or drama it aims to evaluate and appreciate: in its language, in the assertiveness of its mind, in its structures. Think of Christopher Ricks’s book on Beckett: it’s more imaginative than many novels. The criticism of Virginia Woolf, or of my other trinity of heroes (Elizabeth Hardwick, Mary McCarthy, and Cynthia Ozick), is frequently more alive, dynamic, and sagacious than the books they’re writing about. It’s also hard to read the reviews of Dorothy
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Parker without delighting in her irrepressible ability to be two steps ahead of the writer she’s reviewing.

Matthew Arnold’s brazen switcheroo was to say that critical work does not need imaginative work to exist, is not the handmaiden to imaginative work, or leeches on the limbs of poetry and prose. Rather, the imaginative work requires the critical work to know itself fully. By this he means that criticism at its best completes the poem or novel or play: not just evaluates or appreciates or excoriates it, but completes it. And the poem or novel or play, if it is strong, will then, in turn, further inform the criticism. This is the reciprocity I mean. They need one another, no matter how imaginative writers denounce critics as snipes or assassins or asses. You might have noticed that no one complains about critics and their role when the reviews are good. It’s curious: dancers don’t dance about other dancers, sculptors don’t sculpt about other sculptors, but writers do write about other writers. Perhaps this is part of the reason there is so much backbiting and infighting among writers. Or so I hear.

Image: In your introduction to the essay collection, you write that the “critic is a reader before he is a writer, a spirited lover of literature, and criticism is one important use to which he puts his reading and his love.” I think the word love is apt here; the loveless critic strikes me as grating, capable of muting the finest literary music. What do you love, then, about writing criticism? When does it become song and performance for you—and not merely utilitarian work?

WG: You’re right about that: critics with no love of literature really have no business sticking their snoots in the art, and I hope I’ve underscored by now that criticism is an art—in that it requires talent and skill and craft. I have to admit, though, that I don’t love writing anything as much as I love reading, and this is partly because reading is intensely pleasurable for me and writing is not—writing is work. I come from a working-class family of macho guineas for whom hard work is itself a religion, and I don’t pray in that church: I prefer to read, or wrestle with my little ones, or drink wine and smoke cannabis, or watch old episodes of The X-Files.

It’s not that I don’t care about writing—although I think I’d quit in a second if the gods let me win the lotto—but rather, if I’m going to do it, if now I have to do it to buy all these diapers we need here, then I’m going to try to do it right. So many contemporary writers have been abandoned by language, left linguistically destitute, all that arthritic prose, gnarled by cliché, buckled by platitude, and I can’t abide that. I want to aim for sentences so fertilized with perception, with vision, that they’re constantly sprouting fresh means of seeing. Writing is the hardest art because everybody has some currency in words, written or spoken or both, which makes freshness of perception immensely difficult. If you’re content to write the way everyone else writes, to sound as everyone else sounds and see as everyone else sees, then you’ll have an easy time of it.
So while I can’t say that I love to write anything—criticism, or fiction, or essays, or memoir—I can say that when it goes well, it’s very rewarding. There’s that great line in *Jesus’ Son* where the narrator and his drug-smacked chum burglarize a home and afterward have “the feeling of men who had worked.” It’s like that for me: I’m just burglarizing all the strong books I’ve read in my life, trying to have what they have, attempting to be worthy of them, and if I get close some days, I have the strong sense of being a man who has worked, and that’s fulfilling. But my failures in fiction and criticism and memoir—of vision, of story, of language, of character, of assessment, a whole day’s work in a heap at my feet—are more numerous than my successes, and those failures sting. I don’t want to experience such stinging, and so I spend a lot of time reading and not writing.

Let me try to be less digressive and answer your question more directly: for me, what is fulfilling about writing criticism is precisely what is fulfilling about writing fiction or memoir: the possibility of putting down prose with a high red blood cell count, a prose with propulsion that might birth a new way of seeing. Never mind self-expression; I have nothing to express about myself, and if I did, I wouldn’t express it. Rather, I aim for a substantive self-assertion aligned with imaginative might, the right words in the right order with the right sound, words that provide some cognizance of the strong words that have come before, of tradition. The song and performance, as you say, are paramount, because unless you’re writing with your ear, you’re not entirely connected to the sentences on the page. I’ve never seen criticism as utility because I’ve always seen it as art, and art—to crib from Auden who was cribbing from Wilde—is perfectly useless outside its ability to provide beauty and pleasure.

*Image:* We’re both sons of New Jersey, so I was especially drawn to *The Hero’s Body,* your memoir about growing up in the Garden State, your family (including the death of your father), bodybuilding, and the “sacral creed” of living in a town called Manville. In what ways—implicitly and explicitly—do you think being born and bred in New Jersey contributed to your literary and critical senses?

*WG:* That’s another important question to me, and one I tried to wrestle into an answer in *The Hero’s Body,* though I’m not sure I succeeded, or succeeded to the degree I’d like. “The Child is father of the Man”: Wordsworth beat Freud to that formulation, and this is what you see enacted peerlessly in the *Prelude:* the degree to which the poet’s imagination has been composed by childhood, the poet’s conception of the world and himself “deeply interfused” by “a sense sublime.” The time and place of my childhood didn’t offer the sublime except insofar as every child experiences incessant newness and mystery, and so whatever inklings of the sublime I was offered came from Christ and the church, which I didn’t recognize then as sublime. The reductive answer to your question is that Manville, New Jersey, informs my critical and literary senses *not at all,* since my adult days have been an effort to leave Manville behind, to
give myself grander experiences via literature and my adopted city of Boston, where I’ve been for half my life now.

But of course the reductive answer will not suffice. Manville is always with me; I can’t lessen its pressures upon my vision. I suppose that’s probably true for all people and the places that reared them, no matter how far behind they leave those places. The only credit I can give Manville, New Jersey, for my current critical and imaginative sensibility lies in Catholicism, by which I mean that, for me, Catholicism is indistinguishable from literature. So if Manville made me a Catholic, and Catholicism made me a writer, then Manville made me a writer. Perhaps that’s not too tortuous a way to conceive of it, but it certainly sounds odd to me because there’s no less literary place in New Jersey than Manville, and I don’t mean just unliterary: I mean antiliterary. Books and a life of the mind were not acknowledged, never mind valued. In that regard, then, I created myself, though that creation must remain necessarily and partly a mystery. I don’t think I was ever conscious of needing to create myself as a writer: I simply grew up and left Manville. There was never any question about that, never any possibility of my staying there. This is an old story, but we don’t conceive of ourselves as old stories, only as individual wills to power and realization.

My closest friend, the writer Steve Almond, has been baffled from the beginning by how I was able to become who I am after being raised in Manville, New Jersey. It really shouldn’t have been. I should be shoveling dirt on some construction site near Newark. That’s what I mean by self-creation remaining a mystery, at least in part. I simply wasn’t wired as most others in Manville were wired, and I’m lucky to have escaped into this life of literature, and to this city. There are, as you know, a great many who never get the chance for jailbreak.

Image: We’re also both admirers of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (you, like Elizabeth Bishop, call him “Father Hopkins”—his true moniker). You said that learning about Hopkins from the famed poet Geoffrey Hill was “the most transformative classroom encounter of my life.” In an interview about your novel *Hold the Dark*, you quote some of my favorite lines of Hopkins: “What would the world be, once bereft / Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left, / O let them be left, wildness and wet; / Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.” What has Hopkins taught or shown you about poetry, passion, and the literary language of belief?

WG: Yes, Father Hopkins has been immensely important to me for the last twenty years. F.R. Leavis once made the point that you can’t spend any time with Hopkins’s poems without quickly having to deal with his theology, and I think that’s right. I learned Hopkins from Geoffrey Hill when I was in grad school at Boston University in the early aughts. Hill was a stern Anglican, and the Hill-Hopkins cocktail was responsible, I think, for the recrudescence of, if not faith, then my reverence for Catholic tradition, for those old Latin rhythms, as you nicely name them, and also for my own upbringing.
As for language: Hill had no patience for those who insist on tagging Hopkins an obscurantist. Hopkins might not be immediately accessible, but that does not mean he is deliberately cryptic. He was a whole generation before his time, anticipating the modern while remaining loyal to tradition. If he sounds like no one else in the English language—and I mean in the *whole* language, not just in poetry—that’s because he had the dire need of innovation, a religio-poetic need for which common Victorian English simply would not do. His syntactical and metrical innovations, his “sprung rhythm,” were reactions against iambic pentameter, rhythms influenced by the nursery rhymes he knew as a child. The lines are marked by stresses instead of syllables, and each unit of a line can contain one to four syllables but only a single stress. This rhythm has got to be heard as equally spiritual and structural. The inverted syntax, enjambment, and internal rhyme create collisions of new meaning, new speaking. The severe intensity of that sound aims to commune with God and Christ. His sound is often mysterious the way God must always be. A poet with Father Hopkins’s needs must modify his sounds in order to be heard by the recipient of those sounds.

In other words: the style *is* the substance, as it must be—you can’t disentangle them—and Hopkins was my first true lesson in this truth, a truth not reserved solely for poetry. His “Terrible Sonnets,” written in Dublin in 1885, have always meant the most to me: they are, even next to Donne’s “Holy Sonnets,” an unrivaled chronicle of a poet in the damp grip of religious melancholy. To hear them is to fall into Hopkins’s abyss, and *hear* is the only word that will do since Hopkins wrote all his poems for recitation—they are prayer, they are liturgy—which is something he emphasizes again and again in his many letters to his closest correspondent, the poet Robert Bridges. Hopkins meticulously accented all the stresses in his lines so that we can hear him the way he intended.

There’s something else Hill was miffed about: those critics who dub Hopkins a poet of despair. For Hopkins—a Jesuit priest of militant piety, of Ignatian severity—despair of course meant doctrinal despair, the sin of shunning God. Despair was simply an impossibility for Hopkins; it would have meant the losing of his eternal soul. The evidence is right there in the poems: “Not, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee.” In “The Leaden Echo” he writes: “So be beginning, be beginning to despair,” but then pivots with: “O there’s none; no no no there’s none.” His language is a working out of these pressures: the necessity of piety versus “the slough of despond.”

By all of this I mean to say that Father Hopkins was my first and most important example of what should be the imaginative writer’s task: an inventory of the soul. A talent for storytelling and crafting characters is not enough. A writer must learn to *live in* language, and for me, this living wasn’t possible before my communion with Hopkins. Hill led us in serious attention to words and pairs of words in Hopkins—I remember, especially, “disabling cold” and “chilling remembrance” and “baffling ban.” The Hopkins-Hill alloy fired me with a respect for words as pregnant instruments
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not to be rushed, splashed down, considered gifts from a self-satisfied muse. In his
dedication to art's hierarchy, Hill compelled us to break down to the smallest detail
just how one thing is superior to another, a superiority substantiated by every word
the writer employs. I mean to say that it is possible to show how one book is better
than another. Major writers write into the density of language—you see this with,
say, Nabokov and Bellow—while minor ones merely float atop it. All careful readers
know they're holding a book whose sentences show an astounding lack of register,
vigor, or revelation, sentences that have appeared on the page without a commitment
to the dynamism, dimensions, and connotative complexity of language.

Image: You’ve noted that Hold the Dark was real labor to write, a “painful slog.”
It’s a profoundly melancholic book—it surrounds the reader, shocks us, forces us to
confront our worst possible moments. Do you see yourself, as writer, returning to
that narrative space of evil?

WG: I certainly do, and I’ve had thrumming inside me now for a couple of years
a new novel that returns to the narrative space of evil. As a fiction writer yourself
you know that fiction isn’t, or shouldn’t be, conceived of as a working out of
grand problems—political, social, religious, what-have-you—but rather, as Waugh
maintains somewhere, an investigation into the efficacy of language. I mean that
the language has to come to me first, the language of the novel’s assertive potency,
and not characters or plots. Of course I have plot and character in mind, as much
as the commercial hack does, but without the language necessary to the novel's
particular telling, plot and character won’t mean a thing. Some of this happens
below the consciousness line: Nabokov talks about this, about a certain sensation
in the body, the language and story beginning to acquire form, a mood, a weather,
that thrumming I’ve mentioned.

The reason Hold the Dark was so difficult to compose is twofold: first, everything
I write is difficult in that I don’t want to do it, don’t want to work or confront
the possibility of failure; but second, I needed to marshal the proper language for
the telling of it, a language that could correspond to the landscape of an Alaskan
nowhere while also corresponding to the spiritual tundra of the characters, to
this problem of evil. I’m having a similar issue now with this new novel gestating
in me: my laziness, and the opposite of my laziness, which is my conviction that
if one is going to do it, one best be sure the language is right and best toil in
tears and sweat until it is. And of course there’s that other issue: not wanting to
descend into that domain, the consideration of evil and all it implies. I would
much rather guffaw with Wodehouse and Wilde and Waugh, my three sacred Ws.

Image: You’ve written about your desire to “impart to readers the Eucharistic component
to the strongest literature, the necessity of its sacral communing.” As a writer, are
you a member of a community? Are you a member of one as a reader? How is this question different now from when you first started writing?

WG: When I first started writing at eighteen years old, when I knew for certain that writing would be my life, I really didn’t know the first thing about it: I was all intuition and expression, no assertion whatsoever, stories that were poor Hemingway-cum-Carver counterfeits, orgies of undisciplined realism, the splurgings of my shattered heart, so precious to me at eighteen. All of this was staunchly supported by the mentor I mentioned earlier, Ed Minus. I wonder about that. I am a member of no community with a name—I’m with Nabokov in eschewing all groups and flag-wavers of any kind—but I have certainly studied in the Bloomian school that declares literature a secular religion, and of course I bring my atheistic species of Catholicism to an understanding and defense of that religion. Without the sublime, without some intimation of divinity, we are lost—and worse: we are boring. We can’t tell eternal stories that way. For the artist, and for the writer especially, it’s certain suicide to shun that junction where this world grates against the other. As a reader, I turn to those books I wish I had written, for both aesthetic and intellectual reasons, though those reasons are really a single reason: the intellectual is born of the aesthetic; substance cannot be disentangled from style. This makes me a very picky reader, for sure, but I know of no other way that means anything.

Image: I’d like to end by returning to one of our favorite Jesuits. In one of Hopkins’s final poems, he wrote, “The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong / Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame, / Breathes once, and, quenched faster than it came, / Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.” What has been the “fine delight” that fathers your thought?

WG: I’ve held those lines close to my chest and spine since they first found me: they are some of the finest lines ever written about artistic and cognitive assertion, though perhaps rival lines by Coleridge and Shelley come close. For Father Hopkins, that “fine delight,” that “spur, live and lancing,” must be Christ: there was no way around that for him. Christ need breathe into us only once, and our thought, as Hopkins sees it, is forever “mother of immortal song.” To Hopkins, those songs were for God and Messiah; remember, he was a student of Saint Ignatius, who writes: “Man was created to praise.” Christ the Poem is with me almost always; Christ’s suffering is with me almost always. But literature is my true “fine delight.” There’s that great line by William Carlos Williams: “If it ain’t a pleasure it ain’t a poem.” I’ve sought that pleasure all my days, the aesthetic splendor of language at its strongest. Aside from my children and wife, literature has been the intensest delight of my life.
Every time my father dies, I write a poem.
Say it is an offering or testament
though it is he who offers me the white stone
he found in a persimmon.
My father lives on, faithful.
My mother tends his garden
of marigolds, oregano and a giant fir.
A nest in the top branches is an omen,
an image of the reliquary his mind is.

Let me tell, let me sing, let me pray—
be still, he’d whisper, and think of Christ,
his great journey out of this world,
taking only the most needful thing.
He’d say—Don’t say anything about me
when I die. Just let all the people say
amen.
Silence Is Sufficient Grace

Today I am going to try not knowing, learn little and get nothing out of it. Pliant and afloat as a waterlily, I’ll cradle my cup of water and sip it like wine, knowing good and well the taste of it is plain as glass, as a sucked-clean dime. I’ll try not thinking of God and wonder why he keeps me in the dark though I beg and beg for help, my prayers sharp as skeins of red vinegar on my tongue.

Lord, the trees can let go of every leaf when the air tells them: Now.

Tonight, I am going to water my ball of mud and try not to touch and touch the tender blades of grass shooting up like the thorn, the thorn in my side.
I didn’t heed the warning, and I walked to the Street of the Beheaded in Palermo. The day before I had finished the “sacred circuit,” a self-guided tour of the city’s historic churches. I kept track of my progress by crossing off names on the limp paper ticket crumpled in my purse: San Matteo, Sant’Antonio, more than one Santa Maria. At my last stop, the man checking tickets at the door noticed I was finished with the circuit. I told him I wasn’t quite done with churches yet; I planned to visit a few that were further afield—including the Sanctuary of the Souls of the Beheaded, a small parish church on a street of the same name. He frowned and said I shouldn’t go alone. “I’ll be fine,” I said. He tried again, more pointedly: “You came all the way to Sicily, stay around Sicilians.” The souls of the beheaded didn’t frighten him, but the markets with Chinese names and the sounds of African people speaking French in the street did.

Generally, Sicily considers itself a melting pot and points to its Greek-Arab-French-Spanish-Italian heritage with pride. But the man at the church was repeating what I had heard a new wave of populist politicians say on the news: that these new people from “there” are inextricably bound up with crime, that their presence is illegal, their very existence somehow a violation of the law.

Outside the city core of Palermo, baroque churches give way to blocky postwar apartment buildings. There are no souvenir shops selling yarn pompoms or miniature donkey carts. What is sold in this neighborhood isn’t the idea of “here,” a place you can take back home with you as a souvenir, but “there,” the mundane things imported from the place where you are from.

My destination, the Street of the Beheaded, is really more like an alley. A literal translation would be “the street of the taken off,” but in Palermo everyone knows that the things taken off were heads. It’s a third of a mile long and runs perpendicular to roads named after Sicilian writers, scientists, scholars, and politicians. These were people who changed the landscape of Palermo, at first figuratively and now literally.
So did the beheaded, though their social status was much lower than that of the average name given to a street. The beheaded were Palermo’s executed criminals—men and women who, through the efforts of their fellow citizens, collectively earned the honor of having a street and church named after them, despite being known only for their death sentences.

Their rise to prominence began when the Spanish imported their deadly Inquisition to Sicily. In 1487 Tomás de Torquemada, a Spanish Dominican friar and son of a Jewish convert, began sending inquisitors to Spanish-ruled Sicily. He was already the architect of the expulsion of Jews from Spain, and within six years he was responsible for the extortion and expulsion of Sicilian Jews. This exodus still shapes the religious landscape of Palermo today. In 2017 a Catholic oratory built on the site of Palermo’s fifteenth-century synagogue (curiously renamed Holy Mary of Saturday) was finally rededicated as a synagogue—Palermo’s first since the days of Torquemada.

Under such extreme religious persecution, Sicily became the deeply Catholic region it is today. But the Inquisition wasn’t satisfied with a professing Catholic population. As it settled in, it found more work investigating false converts and alleged blasphemers. It rooted out Sicilian Catholic rituals that veered too far from Spanish ones and thus, in the opinion of the colonizers, verged upon witchcraft. In 1601, the Inquisition established a headquarters in Palermo just off the Piazza Marina. Today the square is known for the thicket of strangler fig trees at its center, but in the seventeenth century it was known for its scaffold that elevated the bodies of men and women strangled by the noose.

If you examine execution records from the days of Palermo’s Inquisition, the way people died can tell you a little about how they lived. Nobles were beheaded, the executioner never touching their bodies with his hands. They were allowed to die quickly in a pious kneeling position, and privately if they were important enough. People from the lower classes were publicly hanged, their deaths hastened by the executioner’s assistant, who jumped up and hung from their feet. (The word for “minion” in Italian is tirapièdi—literally “pull on feet.”) Those who were hanged were beheaded posthumously. Women were treated more gently than men, except when they weren’t, like Thofania d’Adamo, the expert poisoner who was sentenced to death by manual strangulation, or Giovanna Bonanno, another poisoner for whom the scaffold was built unusually high. Other intensifiers could be added depending on the severity of the crime. The amputation of limbs or drawing and quartering were common, but these punishments were inflicted on the recently executed more often than the living. It wasn’t pain that was important, but marking the soul as unfit for heaven.

Once the afterlife is considered, it’s easy to see how postmortem punishments functioned as a second kind of death sentence, one even harsher than the first. It wasn’t about killing the person—it was about absolutely shattering the body so it could never rest completely in consecrated ground. It’s why the Inquisition not only
burned unrepentant heretics alive but also posthumously or even in effigy, scattering their bodies and souls to the wind.

The eponymous beheaded of Palermo (who were not always beheaded; many were hanged men and women from the lower classes) were not obliterated in the way heretics were. At the time, the Inquisition was just one piece of a fragmented justice system. Each part had its own legal processes, precedents, and officials. While the Inquisition dealt with religious crime, other clusters dealt with violent crime, property crime, or the breech of social taboos. But the new inquisitional processes influenced all other parts of the justice system. People accused of crimes found themselves facing a new kind of adversary.

As the name suggests, inquisitional charges were brought against people as the result of private investigations. Prior to this, in order for there to be a crime, there had to be an accuser. Accusers represented not only themselves, but the voice of the society whose security was threatened by the presence of a lawbreaker. Once the Spanish Inquisition’s investigators began seeking out crimes that were not apparent to the public, the Sicilian people found themselves entangled in an increasingly clandestine legal process conducted either by the Catholic Inquisitors or the Spanish state through its viceroy and their network of local henchmen called familiars. The opaque inquisitional process proved to be the perfect breeding ground for corruption, greed, paranoia, and cronyism. People could now find themselves imprisoned without even knowing the charges.

The logical defense against this influx of a Spanish “them” was the formation of an opposing Sicilian “us.” Today in Palermo, groups based on an idea of “us” can have nationalistic and xenophobic overtones, but colonialism inverted the power relationship of insiders and outsiders. Though not many people cite the era of Spanish rule as a precursor to today’s attitudes, a charitable view of history might find the roots of some of Sicily’s insular tendencies here, in a time when Sicilians were subjugated in their own land.

Given the power dynamics of the time, the Sicilians needed a group of exceptionally influential men to credibly oppose the ruling Spanish. This role was often attributed to the Beati Paoli, a proto-mafia with Robin Hood’s politics that allegedly brought renegade justice to Palermo. Tour guides like to point out their secret tunnels, and there’s even a Beati Paoli museum, questionable in both taste and veracity, illustrating their history with tableaux of department-store mannequins draped in black polyester hoods. But the evidence for their existence is thin.

More likely, it was not black-hooded men who resisted the excesses of the Spanish, but white-hooded ones, the Noble Primary Company of the Most Holy Crucifix. Colloquially they were named for the color of their robes: the Bianchi.

Their work has been most thoroughly documented by social anthropologist Maria Pia di Bella. They were founded in 1541, between the time of the first Inquisitor coming to Sicily and the Inquisition establishing a headquarters there. They worked
through 1820, assisting 2,127 condemned prisoners. The Bianchi strove to redeem the condemned not by saving their temporal bodies, but by preparing them for a holy death, elevating their souls to a status close to sainthood.

The road from criminal to saint began three days and nights before the execution. The condemned person was taken from his cell to a room where he met six members of the Bianchi: four laymen, a priest, and a novice. All were cloaked in white with their hoods covering their faces. From now on, the Bianchi would be known as the prisoner’s “comforters.” In their midst, the prisoner would not be called condemned but “afflicted.”

The comforters began by telling the afflicted he was lucky—most people do not know the hour of their death, but now, with their help, the afflicted could prepare his soul and die confident he would enter the kingdom of heaven. The comforters then took off their hoods, revealing their identities only to the afflicted. They accepted him into their aristocratic ranks by kissing his feet. From then on they stayed with him, even while he slept, until the moment he died.

For the next two days, the afflicted prayed with the Bianchi. He repeatedly kissed the hands of the Ecce Homo (“behold the man”), a statue of Christ on his way to be crucified: bloodied, bound, and mocked. To meditate on this image was to look into a trick mirror, one that reflected the best outcome under the worst circumstances. In the image of Christ as a condemned man, the afflicted saw an ideal version of his own death. Christ could be a model, just as he was to Saints Agnes, Sebastian, Lawrence, Lucy, or any of the thousands of Christian martyrs who calmly and even happily affirmed their faith through death. And through the ministrations of the Bianchi, he could hope to participate in that ideal death. If he confessed his sins and was absolved, the state would be executing an innocent man who was calmly choosing the Catholic afterlife over his life on earth. For martyrs, death confers instant sainthood because of the purity of their souls and the strength of their conviction. The hope was that with the proper preparation, the afflicted could join their ranks.

To help him approach death as much like Christ or a martyr as possible, the priest among the Bianchi offered to hear the afflicted’s final confession. This confession could be amended over the three days to ensure its completeness. Once it was finalized, the sacrament absolved the afflicted of all sins, pointedly including the sin of falsely incriminating others, even under torture. Inventive torture was a hallmark of Spanish jurisprudence during the Inquisition, in both Spain and its colonies. It was often used to extract names of others who might be investigated next, drumming up business and the possibility of more confiscated property for the Spanish government. But the Bianchi were clear that the freely given confession was what mattered. Men might use confessions made under duress, but God didn’t.

During the third and final day, the Bianchi and the afflicted completed the most difficult spiritual exercise, the ladder. At the time, the ladder, not the noose, was the symbol of capital punishment. As such, it worked its way into the future as a
symbol of bad luck—something to avoid walking under—and into the past, as an anachronistic addition to crucifixion tableaux and paintings from this time forward. The exercise of the ladder was a dress rehearsal, where the Bianchi and the afflicted practiced everything that would happen on the day of the execution. It was done no fewer than four times, until the afflicted was prepared to die.

When that day came, the afflicted had very few lines to remember. On the way to the scaffold, he was blindfolded and only allowed to say, “Pray for me.” Upon arrival, he knelt before the Bianchi priest and was asked if he wanted to die like a Christian. If all went according to plan, he would say yes and receive absolution. The afflicted would then climb the ladder. As he ascended, the priest would recite the Apostle’s Creed. On the words “he suffered and was buried” the noose was put around his neck. At the end of the prayer, he was pushed off the ladder, and the executioner’s assistant would hang from his feet until the afflicted was dead.

Diary entries and letters describe the execution crowds in Palermo as particularly somber and sympathetic to the criminal. The people of the city understood the likelihood of corruption within the various parts of the justice system. As they witnessed the Bianchi prepare the criminal’s soul for the afterlife, the hope it instilled undercut the death sentence imposed by the Spanish.

For this reason, the Spanish mistrusted the Sicilian Bianchi, though the brotherhood was too pious and, more importantly, too powerful for the Inquisition to move against it. To be admitted to the Bianchi a man had to prove noble lineage going back one hundred and fifty years. If he was a priest, he had to hold a doctorate in theology. Their oratory, which suspicious Spaniards called the “secret oratory,” wasn’t far from the Street of the Beheaded. Today it is an art gallery in the gentrified neighborhood known by its informal Arabic name, La Kasla. The neighborhood’s formal name is Mandamento Tribunali, “the district of courts,” as it functioned as the seat of the Inquisition and the other courts of the time.

Other cities in what would eventually become unified Italy had groups of comforters similar to the Bianchi, but none of them elevated the souls of criminals to the status of minor saints. The cult of the beheaded was a uniquely Sicilian phenomenon—probably due to three differences between the Bianchi and other comforters. The first was simply the amount of time the Bianchi spent with the afflicted. While other groups concentrated on soothing and protecting the prisoner on the day of execution, the Bianchi worked to transform a soul over the course of several days.

The second was the power and nobility of the Bianchi. The prominence of its members inspired men from lower classes to form confraternities that complimented its work. In 1614, men from the upper classes but not aristocracy formed a confraternity which prayed for the afflicted during their last three days. Middle-class men formed their confraternity in 1599. Lawyers and aristocrats were specifically banned from this group, which prayed for the release of souls from purgatory into heaven. Artisans formed their own confraternity in 1602 and devoted themselves to burying the
bodies of the executed, ensuring that even if they wound up in a mass grave without a head, theirs would still count as a Christian burial. Men of every class in Palermo felt a responsibility for shepherding the soul of the executed to its rightful place in the afterlife. It’s no wonder that the execution crowds in the city were particularly respectful.

The third and crucial difference that allowed the souls of Palermo’s criminals to become folk saints was the Sicilians’ paradoxical relationship to the Spanish. The cult of the beheaded couldn’t have formed without the Inquisition’s corrupt and secretive legal system. It led Sicilians to question the legitimacy of many charges and sympathize with the convicts. However, the cult of the beheaded also couldn’t be fully realized while the Spanish were still in Sicily. Sicilian religious practices were (and are) based on personal relationships to the divine, which often exist outside of the formal Catholic hierarchy of popes, bishops, and priests. The Spanish viewed these Sicilian practices with suspicion, and practitioners risked attracting the attention of the Inquisition—that is, until the Spanish finally left.

The Inquisition in Sicily ended with a whimper and a bang. Sicilians had mustered periods of intense resistance over the two centuries since the first inquisitor arrived. Rule of Sicily turned over several times. By the end of the Inquisition period, Sicily wasn’t even Spanish; it had been ruled by Austria and then by the Bourbons. The Inquisition as Sicily had come to know it was formally abolished in 1783. Sicilians were quick to dismantle the Inquisition’s prisons and deface their insignia, but they could not prevent a final order from Ferdinand I from being carried out: the burning of all records to protect the Spanish Inquisitors.

With the Inquisitors gone, the souls of the beheaded soon came out into the open. The Bianchi and all its related confraternities continued their work assisting men and women condemned to die in Palermo, but in 1799, they stopped burying the executed in mass graves at Saint Bartholomew’s hospital. Instead, they interred them in the church crypt (more of a pit in the courtyard) of the recently constructed Our Lady of the River. Though it still constituted a Christian burial, the bodies were hastily stacked without paperwork or, for that matter, heads. The heads (usually removed from hanged members of the lower classes, since the heads and bodies of decapitated nobles would be taken to private crypts) were arranged in a pyramid-shaped ossuary in the courtyard with small windows that allowed them to be seen. The pyramid bore the inscription “To terrorize and warn the criminal!”—but after hundreds of years of questioning the validity of the death sentence and working to ensure these souls would enter heaven, the people of Palermo didn’t see a warning. Instead, they saw a shrine.

Seeing a human skull in a shrine is not particularly unusual in Palermo, even today. In a side chapel of Sant’Orsola in the city center there are three, all wearing plastic flower crowns among a larger mosaic of human bones. They are relics of saints, many of whom were also martyrs. The bones are venerated body parts that Catholics pray
with in order to be closer to the holy dead. These relationships are intensely personal and sometimes quid pro quo. Promises are made by the living, and gifts are brought to the dead when prayers are answered. Once the Inquisition wasn’t watching, the people of Palermo simply treated the skulls of the beheaded the same way they had long treated the skulls of more orthodox saints.

The practice began among the lower classes and women—not coincidentally, the people farthest from the kind of official Catholic power that was condoned by the Spanish. They believed that the souls of the beheaded walked the streets at night, sometimes in the white robes of the Bianchi. They prayed to them, particularly for protection, as it was common knowledge that the souls hated robbers or violence of any kind.

The beheaded also had wisdom or warnings to offer people who asked them for love, money, or any of the other little miracles we need to get by. They spoke in clipped or broken words, or sometimes in a more esoteric language. They communicated through the sounds of the street if they were summoned outside of the church that bore their name or by a candle lit in front of a holy card showing a man on the gallows. Roosters, dogs, whistles, guitars, bells, songs, knocking, fast carriages, or the sound of a window shutting were positive answers. Cats, donkeys, fighting, weeping, farts, or water being flung into the street were negative. Chance words overheard from passersby became their words as well.

Thanking the beheaded for their help required its own kind of prayer and even pilgrimage. In the early part of the twentieth century, folklorists Giuseppe Pitrè and E.S. Hartland documented the rituals taking place on the Street of the Beheaded. Women rose early on Monday and Fridays to walk up the road to the church. They said rhyming prayers in dialect interspersed with a rosary that traded the traditional joyful, sorrowful, or glorious mysteries for something more mysterious—decades of the rosary dedicated to the specific sufferings of the beheaded.

When they arrived at the church, the women offered a rosary for their intentions at the altar of Saint John the Baptist, a side chapel marked by the image of a man’s head on a plate. Then they put an ear to a stone in the floor. The sound of rattling was positive, silence was negative. If a prayer had already been answered, they would leave a gift in the chapel. The chapel was filled with rosaries and amulets hung from the statues and wax votive offerings in the shapes of the things that were prayed for: mostly body parts and babies. There was also a case of small paintings—amateur watercolors of murders, shipwrecks, wounded men, people being crushed by trams, and other calamities. In every painting, the beheaded were shown above the fray in a cloud of purgatorial fire with ropes around their necks. Above them were the Virgin and Child, the church-approved source of miracles. (Although the beheaded are the ones invoked, all interventions are still believed to come from a more orthodox place.) The paintings were signed with VFR or VFGA—shorthand for the Italian phrase “vow made, graces received.” Pitrè wrote of the chapel, “When my foreign
friends come to Sicily, I take them to this church and this chapel. When they see what happens there, they’re dumbfounded, unable to comprehend the nature of the world they’ve wandered into.”

However, this was not quite the world I wandered into when I finally made it to the church. By the second half of the twentieth century, many of the physical traces of the cult of the beheaded had vanished in postwar chaos. In 1993, sociologist Michael P. Carroll visited the church and found it nondescript. But a stone bollard bearing a bronze plaque of a hanged man still functioned as a shrine. Carroll photographed it surrounded by red votive candles. I located that monument a short distance from the church, but there were no plaques or inscriptions anymore. It stood crumbling on the sidewalk near a parking lot, hollowed out in the center and barely distinguishable from a public trashcan. A lone red votive and bouquet of wilting flowers betrayed its significance, if only to a few.

The pyramid of decapitated heads is also long gone. As a warning to would-be criminals it was doomed to fail; capital punishment has never proved an effective deterrent. But that’s not the death penalty’s only purpose. While it may not discourage crime, it’s the surest way to remove someone from society. It’s used when a person becomes a threat, his existence a violation of the law—in other words, when a human becomes illegal.

I considered the illegal Sicilians buried beneath my feet under what’s now an ordinary parish church with a colorful name: the Sanctuary of the Souls of the Beheaded. The Spanish had tried to remove them and failed. The living still talked to them, prayed to them, bargained with them and brought them gifts. And, critically, they saw in these souls more than their convictions and transgressions. Sicilians saw the flaws in the system that purportedly brought people to justice, and they saw the divine nature of the souls caught between man’s retribution and God’s forgiveness.

The dead who walk the streets might be a relic of the past, something your Sicilian grandma might tell you about, but the Sanctuary of the Souls of the Beheaded is very much alive. Its community service program and an outreach program on the Street of the Beheaded are well known throughout the city. While the church is off the beaten path for tourists, it’s often a first stop for migrants. Pope Francis ate lunch here, sharing a meal with prisoners in a nod to the past, but also with refugees and immigrants—the people now deemed illegal. Under the Inquisition, Sicilians learned to question the state’s narrative and find true sanctity in what seemed to be the least likely people. The only question is, will anyone remember?
Eva Fischer-Hausdorf
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany

*Image:* What exhibition are you currently curating?

*Eva Fischer-Hausdorf:* The title is *Icons: Adoration and Worship,* and the show will run from October 2019 through February 2020 at the Kunsthalle Bremen. It will examine how the concept of the icon unites aspects of worship, the sacred, and the idea of transcendence. It focuses on the exploration of the spiritual, mystical, and emotional power of art—and how the qualities of traditional icons continue to live on in the spiritual presence and auratic power of many modern and contemporary works of art.

*Image:* How have you decided to organize the exhibition?

*EFH:* Different aspects of the “iconic” will be explored in seven sections, including its origins in the Byzantine icon and its succession in contemporary art. We will have sections focused on abstraction and spirituality as well as meditation and contemplation. One particularly interesting section will be the disappearing icon and images of nothingness in art, from the Reformation until today. Then there is art as an object of veneration and adoration, which we see in everything from the “readymade” to stardom. Lastly, we want to ask: how do artists imagine themselves religiously? Are they creators, priests, saints, or shamans?

There will be a lot of variety; we’ll have religious icons and reliquaries as well as modern masterpieces. Some names will be extremely recognizable to the general public such as Kandinsky, Rothko, and Warhol; others like Hilma af Klint, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Isa Genzken still deserve wider recognition. We also want to use popular objects to create a contrast between traditional notions of the iconic in art with the proliferation of icons in everyday life and the media.

*In this new recurring feature, art editor Aaron Rosen will interview curators about their current projects.*
**Image:** Why is this exhibition important for viewers to see?

*EFH:* For the first time, the Kunsthalle Bremen is undertaking a single exhibition that will occupy the entire museum. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience the space this way. The central curatorial decision was to present only a single masterpiece or small related group of works in each of the galleries. We hope this means visitors will experience the power of the works on an intense aesthetic, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual level. With this show, we want to transform the museum into a place of reflection and contemplation.

*Image:* Do you think it will change people’s perception of religion, art, or both?

*EFH:* Since the modern age, art has taken over the role of religion. We can describe art as a faith-based system which combines, to paraphrase philosopher Simon Critchley, “an uneasy godlessness with a religious memory.” Our exhibition is conceived as a unique aesthetic experience that I hope will give visitors a better understanding of art as, in Hans Belting’s words, the “sole modern heiress of religion.”
The Dead Class

Tadeusz Kantor is already dead in the small self-portrait, his jaw held shut with a cloth that loops under the chin and ties at the top of his head. Scratch marks outline his clavicle. The skull is drawn as well, in both senses of the word. What pain the body felt at the end remains apparent here, shoulders lifting toward the ears, the mouth a tight knot. A thumb-tip has smudged in shadows of cheekbone, hollows around the nose. The artist has imagined his own death mask, has cast his features in bleak repose.

Seeing the piece for the first time, I ask my father: Why is he wearing a scarf? I think the man must have a toothache. He’s dead, my father tells me.

Approximately the dimensions of a piece of letterhead, the sketch doesn’t have the oversized presence of many of the other paintings in my parents’ house. Its paper has a sickly tinge. Kantor has used a quick hand to rough out a face and the top of a torso. The whole thing feels urgent, as if the artist is in a race with the death he’s depicting. Indeed, my parents buy the piece in 1989, less than a year before Kantor dies.

As his obituary in the New York Times explains, Tadeusz Kantor was “an internationally known avant-garde theater director, author and painter,” one of the great Renaissance men of twentieth-century Polish culture. Born April 6, 1915, in Wielopole, a village in the part of southern Poland that used to be called Galicia, “Kantor was known for creating dynamic, inventive theater based on historical and personal themes,” the obituary continues. “He was present in his productions not as an actor but sitting on stage, watching along with the audience.”

Watching along with the audience—I understand positioning oneself this way. For many years, I am an only child. And even when, at the age of twelve, I become an older sister, I remain often alone or am left in the care of our housekeeper, Pani Basia. Our home, with its vast spaces for entertaining—a “representational household” as they say in the Foreign Service—holds several freezers in the basement, enough china and crystal to serve fifty, a great formal table that can be expanded by pulling
a lever, an extra leaf sliding into its center. Frequently I peer around the edges of
doors, observing the conversations of grownups, my father so gifted at this kind of
performance, the charming anecdotes that end with laughter, easily shifting from
English to Polish to French, a little Italian or German tossed in if the discussion
turns to opera.

After a cocktail party, when the guests have left their empty champagne flutes
behind, left spoons sitting in glistening gray bowls of caviar, these rooms are quiet.
My parents may have already returned to their offices at the US Embassy, long hours
of meetings still ahead of them. I sit on a couch, staring at the things on the walls.
Even a corpse can become a companion, if I look at him long enough.

Kantor’s most famous and most performed play, Umarła klasa, premiered in Kraków
in November 1975, four days after my birth. Sometimes described as a “dramatic
séance,” The Dead Class explores what critics characterize as Kantor’s central obsessions:
the World Wars, Poland’s history as a site of invasion and oppressive rule, and the
artist’s intimate memories of his early life. In 1976, the great Andrzej Wajda—who
only a year later would release one of his most renowned films, Człowiek z marmuru
(Man of Marble)—shot the original production of The Dead Class as performed by
Kantor’s theater company, Cricot 2.

In the film, the audience enters the space, which appears to be one of those stone
cellars so common in Kraków, the walls carved and ancient, the ceiling and doorway
curved. The cast is already there, facing us. Kantor stands, while the rest sit in
wooden pews, as if in a classroom or a church. The women wear black dresses, the
men black suits, white shirts, black ties, everyone attired for mourning. Each actor
raises an arm, pointer and middle finger lifted together. Are they trying to answer a
question asked by an invisible teacher? Are they making the Polish sign for victory?
Are they waving goodbye? They rise, moving backward and out, silent, silent, until
only Kantor and a man still as a puppet—his expression an uncanny mask—remain.
Then another man returns to retrieve his strange companion. Then the sound of a
waltz. There’s dancing with dummies the size of children. Everyone sits again. And
finally someone, an instructor, speaks. What do we know about King Solomon?

Splitting the baby. Polish history is full of partitions and divisions, and later what
Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer terms “choiceless choices.” What do we know
about King Solomon, the actor asks.

A few minutes later, when the cast begins to chant the first letter of the Hebrew
alphabet like a nursery rhyme, aleph aleph aleph, it becomes clear that The Dead
Class is concerned not with the dead in general but with the particularities of the
Polish dead—which is to say, also Polish Jews, the friends and neighbors Kantor
remembered so well from his early years in Wielopole, where more than half of the
town’s population was once Jewish. “It was a typical eastern small town or shtetl,”
Kantor once said, “with a large market square and a few miserable lanes. In the square stood a chapel, with some sort of saint for the Catholic faithful. In the same square was a well near which Jewish weddings were held, primarily when the moon was full. On one side stood the church, the rectory, and the Catholic cemetery, and on the other the synagogue, the narrow Jewish lanes, and another cemetery, somewhat different.”

What do we know about King Solomon?

I am eleven or twelve when I begin to realize that we are Jews. There is almost no religion in our household. So, the gradual recognition of our Jewishness has nothing to do with prayers read from a certain book or rules about consuming meat and milk or a parchment scroll affixed to a doorway. Instead, I realize that the party we attend one winter—where all the children receive presents and we eat potato pancakes with applesauce—is to celebrate not Christmas but Chanukah. There is an earlier memory of a long dinner that included a story of leaving one land for another. A platter holding a bone. Some bitter herbs. We dip our fingers into glasses of wine, tapping red drops on the edge of our plates.

At the American School of Warsaw, my classmates—who come from all over the world—are starting to tell me that I’m a Jew. Kike, they say sometimes, or Żyd. Sometimes, they indicate that the problem is my hair, not only the dark curls that fall across my face but also the fuzz on my arms and legs. In eighth grade, the other students leave in my locker a note signed by everyone in the class. Monster, it says, you’re disgusting. It’s a notice of expulsion.

The loneliness of the dead. How they are isolated by what they know about themselves and about us.

This is what I see when I look at Kantor in his self-portrait. Although the eyes appear almost shut in the drawing, the face is pointed with intensity. The artist seems to have visualized himself dying in a moment of concentration, thought. Sitting in my parents’ living room after a cocktail party, I consider the knowledge held in that still face. The closer I lean into the drawing, the more I see it’s not merely a composition of black ink on off-white paper. There are smudges of brown on his forehead and shoulders, the corpse already touched by dirt. And, around the jaw, some dark lines have been erased with white paint, so that the body is both a place of presence and disappearance.

Mrs. P, my history teacher, has decided that the eighth-grade field trip to Kraków will not include the customary excursion to Auschwitz this year, although it’s only an hour’s drive from the city. She’s an anti-Semite, my favorite teacher, Mrs. H, tells me as we eat lunch together in her classroom.

As far as I know, Mrs. H and I are the only Jews in school. I often sit with her during recess and free periods, reading while she grades papers. Or else we talk about
books. Mrs. H is everyone’s favorite teacher. Given how bullied I am, how much my classmates enjoy whispering you’re hideous and you stink, Mrs. H’s popularity is miraculous to me; that she can make her strangeness so appealing to others is like the wonder of a tiny cup of oil lasting eight days when there is only enough to burn for one night. Small and rounded, with wine-red lips and a thick bob of dark hair, she is always draped in a woven shawl, gesturing at the blackboard, her movements theatrical, her voice carrying to the back row of desks. In my memory, she never speaks sternly. Instead, she is laughing. Although a woman in her mid-forties, she announces I’m twenty-nine, darling, no matter how many times the boys ask but how old are you really. Mrs. H seems to me a figure of joyful comedy and good humor. One time, she gives me a taste of dried yak curd; it’s a gift from another student. And when I bite into the small, yellowed lump of cheese, it turns to sour chalk in my throat. Hacking and spitting the mouthful into a trashcan, I turn to Mrs. H. How delicious, I say, laughing and laughing.

On the field trip to Kraków, I cry when Mrs. P makes me share a room with my greatest tormenter, a huge Australian girl—easily a foot taller than I am—who loves to bump against me in the hallways and who mocks my name. John—isn’t that a boy’s name, aren’t you really a boy?

Years later, I live for two months in the small town of Oświęcim, or Auschwitz, as it’s called in German. On weekends, I take a rattling bus to Kraków, where, I’m amazed to learn, Mrs. H now lives. Although she is going to be away for most of my visit, she gives me her key so that I can stay in her apartment, only a short walk from the beautiful square at the center of the city.

Afternoons, I sit outside at a café. The woven backs of the chairs—“harp-shaped”—are just as Robert Pinsky describes them in “The Unseen.” But unlike the characters in Pinsky’s Holocaust poem, I am not making up my mind “to tour the death camp.” I have already been touring them, almost compulsively; these Saturdays and Sundays in Kraków are my break from walking the grounds of Auschwitz I and II, where I watch the tourists touch the concrete dividers of the barbed-wire fences, no longer electrified, this place of preserved horror with its rooms full of shoes and shorn hair, what Pinsky calls “the whole unswallowable / Menu of immensities.”

In Kraków, I eat a piece of the apple cake known as szarlotka, licking caramelized juices and powdered sugar from my fingers. Every hour on the hour, there’s a sound from the church spire nearby. A trumpeter plays a five-note melody, the hejnał. Always the music ends halfway through, the tune suddenly stopping. The most famous explanation for this ritual is a Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. Spotting the intruders at the gate, a sentry tried to trumpet a warning to the city. But before he could finish the song, an arrow punctured his throat.

Shortly after Kantor’s death, Cricot 2 performed The Dead Class in the United States. In a review of the production, Mel Gussow writes that “the dead return to life in
order to evoke a tragic vision of the past. These are autobiographical and historical memories about the lifeline that brought him through the twentieth century.” In a place like Poland, it is impossible to say that the personal and the historical do not sit beside one another, sharing the same hard seat on a small wooden bench. A classmate pulls my hair on the playground, the bully’s fingers catching in my curls, and I know that we are part of some larger theater, both of us stock characters in a play about old hatreds.

And later, Gussow writes, “a cadre of ghosts returns to a classroom. The specters take their place amid mannequins representing themselves in childhood. Puppets are lifelike while actors can seem like sculptural objects.” This is sometimes the challenge of making art. Objects can become more solid than people, weightier in the hand, easier to render. I remember the letter that my classmates wrote to me more clearly than I recall the students who held the pen or folded the piece of paper, sliding the note through the slats of my locker. What was his name? Jeff Monroe? Geoff? And hers? Kara Johnson? Cara? And the Finnish girl with the nose that sloped upwards like the sharp veering of a cliff? Marie? Mari Something. My classmates are a mist that settles on the Vistula in early winter.

Is this why I love Kantor’s death mask—that this object has more power than does even the memory of a cruel eighth grader thirty years ago? Kantor continues forever on the paper. And, when my mother sends me a digital photograph of the self-portrait, I open the file on my computer screen. There’s still something new to study here. Today, it is the slope of his eyelashes. Despite the rushed lines of the self-portrait, each hair seems precise and careful. Did Kantor’s hand, perhaps, slow down when it came time to choose whether his eyes would remain open or whether they would be permitted to close?

I am thirteen or fourteen when I learn that the American vice president is scheduled to tour Poland. The advance team has arrived, and plans are already underway: what stone landmarks the visitors will see, where they will place ceremonial wreaths, with whom they will dine and in which gilded palaces. At home one night, my parents worry about the latest idea: the United States is planning to return several pieces of Judaica, artifacts of the Shoah. Wouldn’t it be wonderful, the vice president’s office suggests, if the objects were given back to the Polish government on the grounds of Auschwitz itself? I imagine canapés, sparkling beverages served from gleaming platters. I imagine the displays of eyeglasses piled high, the thousands of toothbrushes, the mounds of shoes, the suitcases.

My father, in his work as the public affairs officer at the American embassy, goes often to Auschwitz. Congressmen and senators frequently include the death camp on their itineraries. But he never takes me there. I do not think it is because, like Mrs. P, he wishes to rub away the traces of atrocity. I suspect that he cannot imagine what
he might say or do, if we were to stand together beneath the iron archway, *Arbeit macht frei* curving above our heads. Instead, we go only so far as Kraków, where we visit Wierzynek, a restaurant that has been open since the Middle Ages. Even in the early 1980s—what my family calls the bad old days—when there is nothing on the shelves and every waiter in every café and bar answers *nie ma* (we’re out), Wierzynek remains a place of plenty. In a room where the walls are covered in dense tapestries and the chandeliers glitter so brightly we can almost hear the whisper of crystal, my father and I eat a classic Polish meal. A deep red, peppered broth of beets, tiny dumplings shaped like human ears. Herring with pickled onions and sour cream. Larger dumplings formed to look like crescent moons that are filled with wild mushrooms and sauerkraut. And, finally, a layered cake of puff pastry and custard, its surface dusted with a faint snow of powdered sugar.

Nearly a decade later, in graduate school, I learn to think as a scholar might about the traumatized landscape of eastern Europe. The class is called “The Ethics of Representation and the Literature of the Holocaust,” taught by a young professor whose surname means “stag” in Polish. We study Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*, Binjamin Wilkomirski’s fraudulent memoir, *Fragments*, poems by Paul Celan and Dan Pagis, and hybrid texts like W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, David Grossman’s *See: Under Love*, and D.M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel*. We discuss the theorists who have helped to define this field. James Young. Berel Lang. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub.

Several of the students speak Yiddish or Hebrew. There are many French speakers, some German and Russian too. I am the only one who knows Polish. Of all the American Jews in the room, I am the only one who grew up overseas. When we watch Claude Lanzmann’s nine-hour documentary, *Shoah*, I recognize the Polish farmer who speaks about the murder of Jews off-handedly, as if he’s discussing the slaughter of a cow or pig. To the other students, he’s a caricature of anti-Semitism. But, to me, he resembles all the old men from whom I used to buy paper bags full of cherries at the local market in Warsaw. When I thanked them, *dziękuję bardzo*, they would have smiled and called me *kochana*, or dear.

Pani Basia—who looks after me whenever my parents miss the curfew and are forced to stay overnight at the US Embassy—is a tiny woman, barely five feet tall, her arms strong from decades of cleaning the houses of American diplomats. I learn most of my Polish from her, following her around the kitchen, beginning with the words for different ingredients—*mleko, cukier, mąka*—then moving to the verbs used in cooking and baking, the adjectives to describe the taste of things, their texture and scent. She shows me how to spoon batter into a pan to make the translucent crepes called *naleśniki*, how to lift them gently from the heat onto a blue plate. We fill them with chocolate ganache and candied orange peel or the more traditional mixture of ricotta and raisins. For dinner, she serves me my favorite, that most treyf of dishes,
kotlet schabowy, a breaded pork cutlet. She always offers it to me in the diminutive form—kotletcik—which I understand, intuitively, is a way of expressing what we have come to feel for one another, just as when she tucks me in at night, she wishes me sweet dreams, kolorowych snów, before kissing my forehead and tugging the blanket up to my chin.

One time, while Pani Basia is flipping through cookbooks with my mother, she stops on a page that shows a recipe for gefilte fish. She explains that in Polish, this dish is known as karp po żydowsku, carp in the Jewish style. She can make all of these things, she says, because her own mother, a farmer, hid Jews during the war. And Pani Basia’s father, she goes on, was a Jew himself—picked up by the Nazis in a roundup, what’s called an akeja. When I ask my mother what happened to Pani Basia’s father—if he returned after the war—my mother shakes her head. She isn’t sure. That was the only time Pani Basia talked about her parents.

Scholar Magda Romanska characterizes the work of Kantor as “post-traumatic,” which she argues “denotes a rupture between drama and theatre (text and performance).” I think of the Poland of my childhood, and I can’t say that I feel toward it a violent rupture, although I recognize its betrayals. In February 2018, when the current Polish president signs into a law a new bill “making it illegal to accuse ‘the Polish nation’ of complicity in the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities,” I think of Kantor training his actors to shout, Aleph aleph aleph. What do we know about King Solomon? Poland keeps reading from the same script, although there was once a Wielopole where the church stood across the square from the synagogue. Polish pickles have the same sourness as kosher dills. And a carp that swims in the bathtub will soon be ground up with eggs and onion, transformed into gray patties that taste of herbs and salt. Polish Jews will eat this dish on Passover, Polish Catholics on Christmas Eve.

In Andrzej Wajda’s filmed version of The Dead Class, the camera does something that the eye cannot, often darting in to frame the angles of Kantor’s face, his profile—the distinctive ridge of his nose—already so familiar to me from staring at his self-portrait. The drawing offers me a perspective of Kantor that I would not get if I were in the audience watching a live performance of the play. The drawing too is a close-up, a camera of pen and ink. The movie takes in Kantor’s gestures, the way he conducts the bodies and voices of his actors, their lips pursed or puckered like comic fish.

What is a séance but a gathering in which we attempt to communicate with the departed? In The Dead Class, Kantor is the intermediary, introducing the audience to a cast of ghosts, spirits trapped in the limbo of Polish history. In the self-portrait that hangs on my parents’ wall, Kantor is both medium and specter, the lines he sketched on paper like the planchette moving across a Ouija board. “Thus,” critic Michał Kobiałka posits, “a painting could be a metamorphosis, a collage, a décollage, l’art informel, a figurative art, an object, or an abstraction.” I stare at the lines Kantor...
THE DEAD CLASS

has rendered on paper and appreciate how an artist can make use of the imagination: to anticipate grief, to transform the terrifying into the familiar and containable. Loss can fit inside a black frame. It can fit on a stage. The sharp teeth can be pulled from the mouth of history, each tooth held between finger and thumb like a small, white piece of chalk.

Sources for this essay include: Mel Gussow, “Tadeusz Kantor’s Troupe Carries On”; Tadeusz Kantor, A Journey through Other Spaces and The Dead Class (Cricot 2’s filmed production, viewable on YouTube); Michał Kobiałka, “A Requiem for Tadeusz Kantor”; Robert Pinsky, The Figured Wheel; Magda Romanska, interview with Anthem Press; Marc Santora, “Poland’s President Supports Making Some Holocaust Statements a Crime”; “Tadeusz Kantor, 75, Polish Theater Director,” unsigned obituary in the New York Times; and Noel Witts, Tadeusz Kantor.
Tonight, I Travel Back to Allston Street

When my father turned nineteen
his father died and no one told him
the truth of dying:

the ocean is for sale today
and you cannot buy it.

In their corner store, Kosher for Passover
labels arrived unaccompanied
by rabbis’ actual prayers

duplicity sticking to each can
of mandarins, each vessel of sour pickles.

The silences could drown a boy,
could slay him
down to a slip of breath—

language drifting between Yiddish and English—
Shabbat candles the only brightness

he could rely on. Stay bright,

stay bright, he might have prayed
but probably not.

Perhaps his mind played the periodic tables
or bicycled down tenement avenues.

Here is what he learned:
to perfect invisibility, to become a statue—
an “American” like Buffalo Bill

or the Kennedys. I think of the tides
that grew him—a man with a talent
for happiness and his wife alive in misery.
The plush and spin of their marriage; the green tongue
never watered enough. Angel wing begonias

my father grew in pots of vermiculite—no dirt
allowed in my mother’s house, no ants. What made

him do it? Every year as winter dust tempered
the sun porch he transplanted the starts upstairs,
and attic bound they rested, dormant. Today,

my father, dead twenty years, would be ninety-three. It’s hard
to believe it. Were you his favorite? my father’s best friend

asked as the funeral broke up. And so I took it in
the same way I overheard a student on campus
pleading with his friend, Do I smell of pancake batter?

asking as if he really needed to know. So little
it takes to swim beyond the small talk and investigate

the oceanic floor. The coral reefs and lost sunglasses,
the obscured treasures of feeling and forms
of intimacy. Only once did my father tell me

I love you. That human line of language, three
syllables and eight letters with two spaces in between.

It’s the in-between where I live now. The
middle of middle age where I paint my house
the dove blue-gray of Allston Street, to invite back

the person who fathered me, the branched
tributaries in blossom on his birthday, May 20,
where I will return to him beyond language.

My ghost self and his finally speaking.
When age-old buildings or long-loved images are destroyed, we often feel pain and grief. Where once there was beauty and presence, now there is only debris.

As the roof of Notre Dame burned, people watched in tears. CNN called it “a stab in our collective soul.” When ISIS militants’ sledgehammers pulverized ancient sculptures in Iraq’s Mosul Museum, across the world there was outrage, anger, a sense of irreversible loss. A local professor of archaeology put it this way: “With the destruction of these artifacts, we can no longer be proud of Mosul’s civilization.”

On the one hand, breaking expensive and treasured things can provide a cheap, vandalistic thrill. Yet throughout history, destruction has often been carried out with a strong whiff of virtuousness, something far more meaning-laden than mere vandalism. Moral obligation would drive people to pick up axes, knives, torches—whatever came to hand—to slash, burn, and smash.

Sometimes, they would destroy with the methodic calm of artisans; at other times they would run wild, a heady mix of alcohol and rebellion veiling their fear. But whether they were carrying out their wrecking legally or surreptitiously, they did more than just take away visual splendor. As the clouds and smoke dissolved like a magic trick—poof!—these great disappearing acts created their own kind of wonder.

Beacons of Righteousness

Why would you attack a beautiful work of art or building? In most cases, the clue is an urge to purify—a physical and spiritual decluttering beyond Marie Kondo’s wildest dreams. Take Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, the tremendous and often incendiary late fifteenth-century preacher. Attracting a large following in Florence, he attacked everything and everyone, from the powerful Medici family to the pope, pointing out the corruption festering in church and society. Although he adhered
to strict notions of an honest, pure life, Savonarola didn’t shy away from the grand gesture. His sermons were apparently so powerful that decadent attendees, wracked with guilt, would rip the jewels from their throats while crying, singing, and even fainting.

But Savonarola had more in mind than humbling a bunch of wealthy citizens. He was preparing for the swiftly approaching apocalypse, declaring “the hour of fulfillment is near.” Thus, on Shrove Tuesday 1497, during the carnival, Savonarola organized an enormous eradication of the tools of decadence, setting fire to a giant pyramid layered with false beards, mirrors, perfumes (“lascivious odors”), books, costumes, as well as many works of art. Not only “obscene” images were burned, but also depictions of profane or heretical subjects, possibly including (though historians disagree) some canvases willingly surrendered by Sandro Botticelli.

Accounts differ as to whether people gave up these objects eagerly to a throng of children who weaved through the streets encouraging them to absolve themselves, or whether the items were gruffly collected by armed guards. So valuable were the works of art that a Venetian dealer offered to buy them for a hefty sum. (Needless to say, he was rejected.) Crowning the pyre was an effigy of Satan, possibly with the facial features of said dealer.

This occurrence was not simply an elimination of images. It was also a dazzling performance. Trumpets sounded, and crowds ritualistically danced and chanted around the flames. The pyramid was divided into stepped levels and covered in pitch and gunpowder, so that the crowd waited in suspense for the flames to reach each new level. The moment the flames touched the gunpowder, thundering explosions drew gasps from the audience.

However briefly, the mound of luxuries became a blazing beacon of righteousness, burning away the sins of the population in a cathartic blaze. Audience participation was an essential component of Savonarola’s approach: the public provided the kindling for and became the spectators of the fire, turning it into a tremendous event. Little did Savonarola know that just over a year later, his own execution would provide a similar spectacle, when he himself would provide the tinder for a large pyre in the same spot.

Seductive Sculptures

Destruction can be just as dramatic when it takes place out of sight. The Swiss theologian and Protestant reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) had much in common with Savonarola. Another outstanding preacher who rapidly attracted a large following, he too saw certain images as symptoms of immorality—but where Savonarola had attacked images that were not religious enough, Zwingli condemned those that were too religious.

For Zwingli, praying before a sculpture of the Virgin or standing in awe of a
particularly well-executed altarpiece was not true piety; devotion aimed at a man-made object rather than directly at the heavens was idolatry. Zwingli believed that the lure of beauty was irresistible: any viewer would be seduced into admiring a sculpture or painting rather than what it represented. And so, it became a fundamental part of his church reforms to make them disappear.

Still, how to go about this? These sculptures, paintings, and carvings had until recently been among the most treasured possessions of his community. Congregants had contributed financially to their creation, and they had long and often personal histories: that spot on a sculpture’s head or foot made shiny by touch might have been where your great-grandparents always placed their hands.

Unlike Savonarola, Zwingli did not want to sweep up the population in a euphoric purge of previously beloved objects. There was to be no singing, clapping, or fainting. In fact, there was to be no watching. Instead, a professional demolition squad of seventeen men, including a stonemason and carpenter, went into the churches, closed the doors behind them, and set out to dispassionately smash, burn, and whitewash. Once loved religious images had become dirt to be professionally pressure-cleaned out.

Still, when the doors were finally opened to the public, the sight must have been overwhelming. Churches were not simply emptied; they were turned into shining, open spaces. Where previously you may not have been able to look further than a few

Destruction of Icons. Zurich, 1524.
SPECTACULAR DESTRUCTION

feet before your eye hit a screen, curtain, or sculpture, now the beautiful bare bones of the church were visible, full of air and light. The very absence of images made for a dazzling sight. The silence—choir books had also been cleared away—must have been deafening.

And Zwingli made sure to leave some traces of the previous destruction as another poignant visual statement: out of the ripped-out altar stones of Zürich’s churches, a preaching tower was constructed in Grossmünster Cathedral. Standing at its very top, a victor on his pedestal of subjugated debris, Zwingli inaugurated the structure. He, like Savonarola, must have been aware that stacks of reviled objects make excellent moral pillars.

Explosive Riots

Although the official removal of religious images in Zürich had been cool, calm, and collected, riots did occur during the Reformation. In Zürich and other cities, adherents of Protestant reforms would break into churches, chapels, and monasteries and attack religious images, sometimes quietly, sometimes in mob scenes. These events must have provided an electrifying sight.

Iconoclasts could turn the destruction of images into a rowdy show. They would hold “interrogations” of sculptures and subsequently “execute” them, hanging them from gallows or throwing them in the water to see if they would float, like witches. That, or they would simply be burned. Once, an iconoclast in Neufchâtel filled a statue with gunpowder as a prank. The explosion apparently so terrified his comrade that he immediately converted back to Catholicism.

And though the whole idea behind iconoclasm was that religious images were devoid of holy powers, legends circulated among Protestants of statues joining the iconoclasts in solidarity, marching alongside them and throwing themselves into the flames.

Illogical Temples of Reason

Both the raucous and orderly aspects of attacks on religious images would come together puzzlingly during the French Revolution. During the Terror, the attitude towards religion was erratic: the church was one of the revolutionaries’ principal enemies, yet some embraced the idea (dating back to early Christianity) that Jesus Christ was “the first sans-culotte” or plebeian revolutionary. Confusingly, you could land under the guillotine for being either an atheist or a priest—all while the revolutionaries proudly declared freedom of religion.

Meanwhile, the revolutionaries instated their own belief systems in Reason and the Supreme Being, mixing spirituality with the veneration of rationality and liberty. Rather than starting a new cult from scratch, it could be said that the revolutionaries wanted to have their cake and eat it. They didn’t so much want to eradicate Christianity as to claim its symbolism and power for their own. And so there were civic baptisms,
processions in which the people carried models of the Bastille or busts of republican martyrs. Once, shops had to be closed as the bust of Marat was passing, and “altars to the fatherland” popped up in parks and before town halls. The sheer scale and speed of this transformation of France’s visual landscape was itself a spectacle.

Many churches and cathedrals, including Notre Dame, were converted into so-called “temples of Reason.” Busts of republican heroes replaced images of saints. Or, even more efficiently, a revolutionary red bonnet might be placed on the head of the Virgin Mary. And of course there were the straightforward destructions: the burning of Christian and aristocratic symbols was a regular highlight of revolutionary fêtes. A pyre would be lit, and the citoyens would celebrate, the desecration of one worldview providing the pyrotechnics for the celebration of a competing ideology.

**Upcycling the Foundations**

You could accuse the revolutionaries of plagiarism, but perhaps they were simply frugal. Rather than getting rid of all traces of Christianity and starting from scratch with a new visual and ritualistic system, why not upcycle the old one? Why throw out everything indiscriminately when you can harness the power of a centuries-old tradition?

Leaving a few traces of destroyed structures is also a powerful visual statement of your victory. Keeping some of your enemy’s imagery and merging it with your own
SPECTACULAR DESTRUCTION
can be like putting a snarling lion’s head on your wall: like a hunting trophy, it signals both the power of your opponents and their utter subjugation. In this manner, some iconoclasts would scratch out the eyes of paintings of the Virgin Mary or break off the noses of sculptures of saints. The maimed images served as gruesome memorials to their own destruction, an admonition, like a head on a pike.

In a similar vein, even after you raze a structure, you can still make it meaningful: when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in Cuzco, Peru, in the sixteenth century, they broke down Coricancha, the Incan sun temple, then built their own cathedral on the foundations, although they did leave a few walls which they integrated into the design. In Mexico, Spanish invaders forced indigenous people to break down their own Aztec Templo Mayor, then used the debris to construct their cathedral. They could have chosen any location, but again they reused the foundations and materials of the revered buildings of their enemies. They also captured the hallowed aura of the place, breaking down what was once sacred to literally and figuratively bolster their own sacrality.

It is a strategy that has been used again and again, all over the world and across religions—from the maimed Shiva and Buddha statues at Angkor Wat to the transformation of a Christian palace into the Khanqah Mosque in Jerusalem. Such ruination hardly ever means simply wiping the old things away and starting over with a clean slate. Instead, the destruction is a fundamental ingredient in the creation not just of new ideologies but also new imaginaries: a profound visual and spiritual experience made out of the broken-down world of your enemies.

**Burn Your Darlings**

Perhaps the most self-contradictory kind of spectacular destruction is used within works of art themselves. So far we have looked at works of art that have been attacked by outsiders, but in a number of cases, the artist himself is creator and destroyer rolled into one. Russian artist Nikolai Polissky was certainly not the first to destroy his own work in the name of art, but his *Flaming Gothic* caused such a controversy in 2018 that he felt compelled to beg both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches for forgiveness.

For several years, he worked on a large structure to be burned at the end of a festival at Nikola-Lenivets, an artists’ community 140 miles south of Moscow that he co-founded. The hundred-foot structure, painstakingly constructed of twigs and debris, was burned—and it looked an awful lot like a cathedral. The action went viral. The artist was attacked from all sides of the ideological spectrum, accused of both fascism and blasphemy, among other things. Though Polissky denied that his building had anything to do with religion, calling it “simply a bonfire built in the style of a Gothic building,” his explanation was made less plausible by the presence during the burning of masked figures in priest-like robes. Nevertheless, the artist said—remorsefully—that if representatives of the churches found “anything sacrilegious”
in his work, he would “relegate this project into oblivion to the extent that this is possible in the modern world.”

It’s hard to tell whether this statement was authentic or made under duress—or was simply based in a canny knowledge that the internet never forgets. What we do know is that the burning became a spectacle—both in person and online. And not a short one. The viral video shows a destruction that goes on, hypnotically, for hours: a drawn-out performance of obliteration. Many of the bystanders are smiling, their clothes colorful against the backdrop of snow. Even after centuries of destruction, we are still in awe at the sight of something beautiful, something made with attention and care, being engulfed in flames. And because Polissky’s action was captured in a deftly edited video that also includes spectacular drone shots from above the burning structure, it is an erasure that, at least in digital form, will live on forever.

Polissky is certainly not the only artist aware of the visual magnetism of destruction. Many have gone before him, particularly in the 1960s: In 1960 Jean Tinguely put a machine called Homage to New York in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art that was basically a sculpture that destroyed itself. Niki de Saint Phalle would shoot a gun at bags full of paint—hidden by layers of pristine white plaster—for her Shooting Pictures. The results of this carnage—gooey, colorful explosions—are arguably more interesting than the intact pieces. On London’s South Bank in 1961, Gustav Metzger painted on nylon sheets with acid: bystanders could see how the very act of painting ate away the canvas, only leaving a few shreds.

Today, destruction continues to fascinate audiences and artists alike: during his 2017 TED talk, “Can Art Amend History?” Titus Kaphar painted over a reproduction of a seventeenth-century group portrait, erasing everyone except a young black boy. In 2018 at a Sotheby’s auction, a work by Banksy shredded itself just after it was sold for 1.4 million dollars—an action that may have doubled its market value. There is not only aesthetic value in destruction, but also, if you play your cards right, lots of money.

Whether part of a religious battle or simply artistic whimsy, the obliteration of images can be mesmerizing, beautiful, and sometimes—confusingly—preserved for ever. Obliteration can still enthrall us, at times perhaps more than the original objects ever could.
J. M. JORDAN

Scene

O spent saint finished, haloed by a spider web of shattered glass,
a semicircle spatter pattern auraed on the sidewalk,
and casings like last bits of gold in a mosaic picked by thieves.

What angel will descend this night, will light this wire-strung alley
to draw the fallen upward?
This thing far too destitute
to pay each aerial tollhouse, to climb concentric circles toward
that mystery that makes the streetlights flicker on at night?

The wailing sisters spit and kick against the facts,
trailing their mute offspring.
The centurions hold them back.
Nocturne

It’s three a.m., that empty hour
when the noisy last-call jetsam of the bars
has leaked away into the city’s substructure

or parceled off for fare in gliding hansoms,
leaving the rat’s hackled moment there
in the blacker shapes that shift around the square.

It’s three a.m., that empty hour
when gangs of theologians prowl the streets
looking for some stray angel to accost.

And the rails have ceased their humming,
and the watchmen end their rounds
nodding on stools in darkened corners.
The pigeons have found their minarets,
and the blocks of roll-downs rest
blank and heavy, locking all the shadows
along the way in their dream stations.

It’s three a.m., that empty hour
when the moon dips below a jagged roofline
like the coin an old thief drops into

the alms box in a vacant nave
before slipping, with a strangled prayer,
back into the night to do his work.
God Alone
Divine Absence in Horror Films

The Exorcist opened in theaters the day after Christmas, 1973. Critics were divided. Vincent Canby, the longtime critic for the New York Times, called it “occultist claptrap.” Stanley Kauffmann of The New Republic was skeptical at first but concluded that the point of the film was “to cut through everything we’ve learned and cultivated, to get down to the talent for fright that we are virtually born with.” An unsigned review in the Wall Street Journal warned that “lasting art is rarely designed to appeal to baser instincts and emotions.” The film was profane, gory, despairing—a sign, some more puritan critics worried, that Hollywood was ready to embrace the unspeakable.

Audiences couldn’t get enough. In Beverly Hills, lines spanned blocks for an eight a.m. showing—and hundreds had to be turned away. Crowds in New York City lit bonfires and scuffled in the streets. Tickets were being scalped. Security guards were bribed. One showing was canceled when the impatient crowd “stormed” the theater. “All kinds of people,” Time magazine reported, “have been infected by Exorcist fever”—including “Teenage girls on triple-tier” wedges, “pin-striped businessmen,” soldiers, old women, and immigrant Catholics.

Kauffmann said those in the crowded theater with him were “entertained by horror; they giggled after most of the possession scenes (after, not during), a sure sign that they had been shaken and had to right themselves.” Others didn’t recover so easily. Some filmgoers worried that they were themselves possessed. The film triggered nightmares, paranoia, hallucinations, and depression. The manager of a Los Angeles theater said “each performance exacts an audience toll of four blackouts, half-a-dozen bouts of vomiting, and multiple spontaneous exits.” University of Connecticut psychiatrist James Bozzuto wrote a study for the Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease about four cases he treated of “cinematic neurosis”—somatic responses to the film.

The Exorcist helped to resurrect American cinema. It contributed to a twenty percent jump in ticket sales—it was an experience to be had live, with others, in a dark room. Those long lines were a pilgrimage. You had to see The Exorcist to believe; you had to believe in order to be afraid.

When The Exorcist was released, more than half of American Catholics still attended weekly mass. The numbers were declining from the mid-1950s, when three-quarters of Catholics went, but were still well above today’s thin attendance. The Exorcist played to an audience for whom God was real—or at least real as a memory, like the surge of nostalgia we feel on returning to our childhood home.

James Baldwin ends his seminal work of film criticism, The Devil Finds Work, with his take on the film. He saw it first with a friend, and then returned alone. Baldwin thought about his own lost faith after watching The Exorcist, the memory of his “adolescent holy-roller terrors,” a time that “marked me forever.” His words are prescient: “In some measure I encountered the abyss of my own soul, the labyrinth of my destiny: these could never be escaped, to challenge these imponderables being, precisely, the heavy, tattered glory of the gift of God.”

Baldwin thought the devil we know—“in the eyes of the cop and the sheriff and the deputy, the landlord, the housewife, the football player, the eyes of some governors, presidents, wardens, in the eyes of some orphans, and in the eyes of my father, and in my mirror”—was more terrifying than cinematic evil. Yet the only way he could honestly receive the film was to consider it in the context of his spiritual markings. When he saw it for the second time, he wrote, “I was most concerned with the audience. I wondered what they were seeing, and what it meant to them.” For scores of people, The Exorcist was a subversive liturgy.

If we are to be entertained by horror, we must open ourselves up to being marked by that horror. Baldwin didn’t love the film—but he appreciated how The Exorcist shook him. For years, horror films have needed God. What does it look like, then, if God is absent from horror? The answer might be found by considering the genre’s route from a 1962 low-budget film, A Carnival of Souls, to Midsommar, a new release from a provocative director.

In the early 1960s, Herk Harvey made industrial and educational films for the Centron Corporation in Lawrence, Kansas. Following his service in the navy during World War II, he earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in film at the nearby University of Kansas. A skilled director, he helped devise a method to simplify and speed up special-effects production. Harvey punched well above his cinematic weight and longed to direct a feature film. After a few local investors created a modest fund, he released A Carnival of Souls in 1962.

The film was a financial bust because of mismanaged distribution. For years, it was relegated to late-night television, which Harvey actually thought was the right
place for it: “there are a lot of people, at that particular time of night, who can relax and sort of let themselves get in the mood.” He called Carnival of Souls “a film that you have to go out to in order to get something from.” Its strangeness requires our openness; we must meet the story. Carnival of Souls is a story of grief, despair, and loneliness—a distant ancestor of Midsommar.

The film starts with an impromptu drag race—first on roads, then continuing onto the shaky and narrow Lecompton Bridge. A car containing three women crashes through the railing and into the Kansas River. One of the passengers was Mary Henry (Candace Hilligoss), a church organist who didn’t want any part of the chase. She was merely a passenger, silent and not in control. The film’s quick beginning—with no establishing characterization or set-up—is disorienting.

Disorienting, but not amateurish. Harvey’s film is many things—melancholic, odd, full of cardboard characters with expressions that range from exaggerated to deadpan—but it is effective. Carnival of Souls feels like falling asleep; we’ve entered some other world mid-moment.

Miraculously, Mary climbs out of the water and onto the sand. As she stumbles

Carnival of Souls. Directed by Herk Harvey, 1962.
forward, her rebirth is watched by townspeople looking down from the bridge. Dizzy and dirty, she looks like a phantom. In fact, Mary never quite looks right in the film; she’s always lost in her thoughts, or tired, or paranoid. Hilligoss never makes Mary pathetic—she’s a talented organist who has accepted work at a church in Utah. Yet she’s agnostic, describing her church work as simply a job. “I’m not taking the vows,” she says. “I’m only going to play the organ.”

On her drive out West, Mary sees a mysterious, pale man. He haunts her throughout the film, as does an abandoned pavilion that she passes in Salt Lake City. Years earlier, Harvey, returning from making a Centron film in California, saw the Saltair building at sunset, describing it as “Russian, Arabesque.” Constructed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1893, the resort was rebuilt in 1925 but struggled to stay open. Over the years, the Great Salt Lake has both flooded and receded from the site—leaving it like an abandoned desert warehouse. For Mary, though, the pavilion is her secular church.

Her new job is at one of the few non-Mormon churches in the area, an Episcopalian parish whose minister is initially impressed with her talent: “We have an organist capable of stirring the soul.” After Mary finishes playing, the minister notices that she is staring at one of the stained-glass windows. He asks her what she sees, and she appropriately says, “Oh, nothing, nothing at all.”

She doesn’t last long at the church. During a later practice, she becomes ecstatic, descending into a cacophonous performance. Wind rustles vestments hanging in the other room. Flashes of the strange man and errant corpses interrupt the scene. The minister stops her. “I feel sorry for you,” he says, “and your lack of soul.”

Mary will never find comfort in the church because she doesn’t believe. Her soul belongs to the pavilion—a dry place bereft of the living. In one scene, when the minister drives her to the abandoned property but refuses to go inside with her, we see the apparition looking at Mary with a longing gaze, and then look down. Mary does the same.

Like him, she is in purgatory—trapped in this world but not truly here. Mary’s gestures toward God—her music, the pavilion, her mixture of longing and fear for the apparition—are ultimately empty because she cannot conceive that God could be real. *Carnival of Souls* relies on the possibility of belief to create its horror; Mary is surrounded by those with faith, and yet they cannot comfort her.

Comfort is what Rosemary Woodhouse seeks in *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968)—a film as aesthetically different from *Carnival of Souls* as one could imagine, but sharing its existential fear of an absent God. Nebraska-born and raised, Rosemary (Mia Farrow) is unsure of New York City.

She and her husband Guy (John Cassavetes) are shown an apartment whose previous tenant had died just a few days earlier. Their current landlord informs them that the building has a bad reputation—cannibalism, devil conjuring—but they get the place
anyway. They eat on the floor their first night, the room lit by a lamp in the center. It is September 1965. Pope Paul VI is set to visit the city in a few weeks—the first time a pope would visit America.

The Woodhouses hear late-night chanting from the adjoining apartment. They don’t seem very concerned. Guy is a television and theater actor and does his best to take nothing else seriously—and it has rubbed off on quiet Rosemary. Later they meet Roman and Minnie Castavet, an old couple whose houseguest—a woman they’d picked up off the street—jumped from their apartment window to her death.

Much like Mary, Rosemary is prone to strange dreams. Catholic-schooled in Omaha, she feels out of place among Guy’s secular crowd. She dreams of Sister Agnes, the nun from her grade school. The nun is first speaking in Minnie Castavet’s distinctive, sharp voice—and saying her words: “I told you not to tell her in advance; I told you that she wouldn’t be open-minded.” Terry, the young suicide, appears to have been Catholic like Rosemary, and suspicious of the Castavets’ cultic ways.

The next day, Rosemary and Guy have dinner with the Castavets. Roman says “no pope ever visits a city where the newspapers are on strike,” referencing the Newspaper Guild strike that sidelined the New York Times and other city papers. Minnie says that she hears he’s going to postpone until the strike is over. Guy quips: “That’s showbiz.” The Castavets laugh. Rosemary smiles, then looks back down at her food.

Roman continues his diatribe: “That’s exactly what it is. All the costumes, the rituals, all religions.” “Costumes” is a telling choice here; a Catholic, believer or not, wouldn’t use such a word, but Roman is clearly focusing on the style and sensibility of Catholic belief. Minnie notices that Rosemary is uncomfortable and quiet. “You’re not religious, my dear, are you?” Roman asks.

“I was brought up a Catholic. Now I don’t know,” she responds. “He is the pope,” she adds. Though Rosemary demurs, she affirms her cultural Catholic identity. Her faith remains her moral compass, and that from which she pivots—here she is quite different from Mary Henry, for whom faith was ornamentation and artifice. Rosemary’s defense of the church is institutional and nostalgic.

Her Catholicism is most acute when her identity is questioned or challenged, or during her dream states. Later, she becomes lightheaded after eating Minnie’s chocolate mousse, which had a “chalky undertaste.” While she swoons in the kitchen, Guy sits in front of the TV, watching the pope at Yankee Stadium. “Christ, what a mob,” Guy says of the audience, before adding, “That’s a great spot for my Yamaha commercial.”

Rosemary faints. Guy carries her to bed, where she dreams she is floating on a mattress in an ocean, and then on a yacht with a wealthy crowd and President John F. Kennedy in his navy uniform. The scene switches between her apartment, where Guy is taking off her dress, and the yacht, where the skipper won’t let her former landlord on the boat: “Catholics only. I wish we weren’t bound by these prejudices, but unfortunately.”

The sequence descends into one of the most infamous scenes in cinema: Rosemary
is raped by the devil himself. Brushed with blood, she is powerless as a group of nude men and women—including Guy and Minnie—surround her in cultic devotion. Afterward, she sees Pope Paul VI walk toward her, and she asks to be forgiven for not seeing him at the stadium.

Rosemary has several sources of pain in the film, but its main genesis is her separation from the Catholic comfort of her youth—a world in which she was loved, however sternly. Here in the city, among Guy and the others without God, she feels terribly alone.

In *The Exorcist*, Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn) is alone. An agnostic actress, she frantically seeks the answer to her daughter Regan’s sickness. James Baldwin wrote, “Satan also plays on the guilt of Regan’s mother—her guilt concerning her failed marriage, her star status, her ambition, her relation to her daughter, her essentially empty and hypocritical and totally unanchored life; in a word, her emancipation.”

For many contemporary viewers of the film, Chris is a paradox. She is vulnerable as a mother, and as an unbeliever—she is spiritually unprepared for the evil that has come to her home. Save for an introductory scene in Iraq and a few sequences at nearby Georgetown, most of the film takes place in the MacNeil home—and in the claustrophobia of Regan’s bedroom. Despite Chris’s unbelief in God, her only hope rests in the exorcists Father Karras (Jason Miller) and Father Merrin (Max Von Sydow).

Late in the film, Karras and Merrin sit on opposing sections of a staircase in the home. “Why this girl?” Karras asks. “It makes no sense.” He’s exhausted—his face blanched by a wavering faith. An ex-boxer and now Jesuit psychiatrist, he’s wracked by guilt over not taking care of his infirm mother and the worry that his spiritual life is a lie.

Karras and Merrin are not looking at each other. We see them between the staircase rungs. Merrin shakes his head. “I think that the point is to make us despair. To see ourselves as animal and ugly. To reject the possibility that God could love us.”

For all of its visceral terror, that idea is the center of *The Exorcist*: by possessing a child, the devil defiles our innocence. He extinguishes our sense of hope.

*The Exorcist* depends on a tenuous thread of faith—its protagonists are all hurt and skeptical—yet the foundation of the exorcism rite gives the film an ironclad ritual. Since its release, the film has been a curious Catholic rite of passage. In immigrant Catholic homes like my own, *The Exorcist* was less a warning and more of a story to be appreciated: the purest mainstream Hollywood distillation of Jesuit Catholic ethos. The abstraction of the devil making its most vulgar announcement: the perversion of a young girl. This perversion did not happen on some other plane of existence, or in hell; it happened here. And this grotesque spectacle of power leaves those in the audience wondering why God has not protected us.

I use the collective pronoun when talking about these films because their directors—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, respectively—could assume certain traits of their general audience. The audience was comprised of believers, and those who were lapsed.
Even ardent atheist viewers often had a distant memory of belief. These assumptions matter because horror is a genre of borders: good and evil, real and unreal, faith and doubt. Without the tension between these borders, horror can become flimsy and hokey. 

*Midsommar*, the new film from Ari Aster, arrives without any such assumption of religious belief or practice. As with his previous film, the disturbing *Hereditary*, Aster builds his spiritual base from the ground up—and leaves his characters particularly vulnerable to despair and loneliness. Early in the film, Aster delivers the type of scene he has already become famous for—the onrush toward terror. We are in a suburban Minnesota home. The film slows. Music blares. A young woman, Terri, has killed herself and her parents by running garden hoses from the cars’ exhaust pipes into the house upstairs—into the bedroom where her parents are sleeping, and into her own mouth. It is a macabre scene, unfolded meticulously by Aster.

The deaths leave Terri’s sister Dani (Florence Pugh) miserable and alone. Her boyfriend, Christian (Jack Reynor), holds her while she sprawls on a couch. The pitch of her continuous wailing is unsettling. She is empty. Unlike Mary, Rosemary, and Chris, Dani has no God—or absent God—for solace. In such a world, the ultimate fear is utter loneliness.

At least, we think, she has Christian—but he is selfish and narrow-minded. Broken by the death of her sister and parents, Dani unfortunately clings to Christian even more, tagging along with him and his graduate-school friends to Hälsingland, Sweden. They arrive at the family farm of one friend, Pelle, for a summer festival. Folk music greets them as they walk through a sun-like structure into a clearing. A few dozen people move and frolic about. They are overjoyed to see Pelle.

A maypole, covered with shrubbery, could at first be mistaken for a cross. Men are dressed in frocks. Young girls in white dresses hold garland crowns of mugwort and vervain and sprigs of larkspur. The scene is pleasantly eccentric. Minor ceremonies and dances follow; during one, Christian joins a train of dancers, leaving Dani and Pelle alone. Pelle gives Dani a portrait sketch of her that he’s drawn for her birthday—a birthday he’s remembered, though Christian has not. Pelle is the only one who provides any measure of comfort to Dani, but she remains committed to her boyfriend.

*Midsommar*’s most recurring visual theme is disorientation. We are often given wide visual berth, but that allows Aster more latitude for disruption. The clearing is flat and open, and that allows us to see its different sections. The group walks past a caged bear, and Pelle blandly acknowledges its presence. The friends sleep in a two-story barn house, the walls covered with occasionally obscene murals. All of this unfolds in front of a contemporary audience that is confused on several levels: Is this a cult? Are they dangerous? Both are true. What at first seem like pagan eccentricities become violent.

The spirituality of *Midsommar* is foreign because religion itself is now foreign to horror audiences. *Carnival of Souls*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, and *The Exorcist*—for all their perversions and subversions—unfold in worlds where God and, by extension, religious practice exist.
There is no God in *Midsommar*.

The traditional horror film tension between belief and unbelief, between God and the devil, is disturbed in *Midsommar* because none of the characters has faith. Blank spiritual slates, they drift into the Swedish forest without any compass. Dani especially, fresh from her trauma, needs a source of meaning.

Dani is soon recruited into the festival’s dancing competition. Women surround the maypole. Musicians are at their side. Dani has just drunk some spring water with mashed-up flowers. Drugged, she dances with fervor—whirling around the maypole forward and backward. Her mood swings from joy to confusion, but she seems determined to survive on her feet. She wins the competition and is named the May Queen and given an elaborate garland crown. Pelle kisses her. Dani is led to a sun-shaped wooden plank with handles and is carried above a crowd. She is brought to a long line of tables, where she sits at the head. She is still tripping—the flowers on her crown open like eyes or mouths—but Dani also realizes that now she is the one with power.

The final quarter of *Midsommar* descends into gore and fire. The bear makes an unlikely return. A prolonged sex scene straight out of *Rosemary's Baby* nearly fractures Aster’s tone. And Dani undergoes a curious, but not surprising, transformation. Her tragic arc was inevitable: Dani’s family is gone, but she now has a new family.

Contemporary horror films like *Midsommar* are not tied to any specific denomination or theology, and yet they ubiquitously explore religious belief—thus suggesting a link between the ecstatic and the ominous. In earlier horror, domestic religious touches offered viewers a normalizing contrast. The sight of a rosary or a priest’s collar gestured toward the domesticity of faith—a wild thing itself. *Midsommar*, however devilish, has no actual devil. It is darkly spiritual, and it feels so painfully empty.

What is more frightening: that God does not exist, or that God offers us no comfort? Films like *Midsommar* offer a third option—the same one voiced on a *Time* magazine cover that Rosemary Woodhouse held in a doctor’s office nearly fifty years earlier: is God dead? It is one thing for characters in horror films—and their audiences—to doubt God while others retain belief. It is something else, something more horrifying, to consider what it means to be alone in a world without God. There are no comforts for that—especially after the films end.
What Was Promised

_The Lord is a man of war._

—Exodus 15:3

I. Jordan River, Golan Heights

I hadn’t expected it to be so green. When I pictured what lay between Dan and Beersheba, I imagined arid, caked earth, like what I later found in the Negev or at Masada. Here, instead, the Jordan slipped like a shiv between the sharp-arcing hills, and a diffuse mist lingered above the ground.

It made sense, in the end, that lushness precipitated all the violence.

_These eucalyptus trees_, the man driving me notes, _were planted as a trick. Targets for the bombs._

What was promised had to be respite from that barren ground that Cain walked, something emerald and alive. Anything deadly must have been hidden, implicit, half-buried, like dark basalt rock scattered among the green, or the gnarled trunks of the eucalyptus twisting
upward like grasping hands.
When the wind blew,

the teal leaves hissed.
Farther down the road, barbed-wire

fences sprung up like serpentine vines, hung
with yellow land-mine warning signs

that burst like daffodils
against the green.

II. *Valley of Tears*

I stand on high ground,
beside an old iron bunker and
decorative sandbags

commemorating the great
suffering that occurred to place me here.

To the left, farmland sprawls away.
They say it is
blood-seeded soil.

To the right, dissipating fog
breaks up into clouds, pierced by what

I want to call heavenly

light: violet, lavender plumes churning
slowly in the air.

Come to wash the earth clean,
I think, or purge the sun-blasted white buildings.

The clouds burgeon and sift
slowly over the landscape, right to left,
like *yad* to scripture.
Forty miles, someone tells me, and you’ll be in Damascus. Further still, Aleppo.

They could hear rockets last time they were here.

Indigo shell shock, I think. The clouds

wander out into that desert (iridescent, divine), spilling toward the wreckage.

It is easy to forget
dark horrors in the stunning azure of day.

III. Temple Mount, Sunset

A cacophony
of prayer. God’s clamor.
One man tells me, “Don’t forget: this is your home,” holding out tefillin in offering. Behind me a congregation of soldiers dreams of decomposing under rosemary. Reverence and dread make me step backward from the Wall, almost faithful in the way God has asked. To love and fear is a terrible burden. Who can live when the center is a split heart, a stony division? Even Moses, I recall, was told thou shalt not go over thither and died at the kingdom’s brink.
IV. *The Viaduct*

In America, when I see the vaulted highway that splits my city, I think of God, the kingdom of heaven: its force,
its tenebrous underpasses, its cement pillars like a barred gate.

To the north, Canaan: forsaken cottage-style homes sink and teeter, paint stripping like rotten bark from the walls.

To cross south under that ghoulish viaduct, like Dante over the terraces,

is to enter the southern Levant: the whitewash, the quietude, the still boulevards, *For the lord has chosen Zion.*

V. *In the Desert*

We had been lost so long I hardly remembered where we came from.

I had distant memories (dreams, even) of vicious seas, water streaming from rock. I remembered substance given us from the sky. In the long light of day, dry and static, I never recalled waking, as though my life was some uncertain miracle.

I had not even known that word—miracle—
when I left. Now
my beard has grown long and gray,

and I forget a life without wonder.

Once, I was given
a sword and an order.
The blood

was like a dream, a miracle.
I do not recall

what faith, like a heart, I
consumed (consumed me)
in that wandering. I wondered,

must I suffer and sin
to find my way?

And still wonder, gnawing
on this strange meat,

tugging at my white beard.

VI. Exodus (Lydda, 1948)

I imagine the long line
wending its way
out of Egypt,
and the longer one
returning, blast

by trumpet blast,

wall by

crumbling wall,

to the land that was promised.
History and language

are like a hall of mirrors. Each repetition
warp into the implacable
green depths: from

exodus to diaspora, holy to just, crusade to massacre, holocaust to al-nahkba.

And I imagine that other long line
       wending its way out of Lydda. The bodies
       in the temple. The fingers that
       followed orders (*Who is
       for the lord?*) The impossible
       return, buried
       in a history
       held up before itself,
       bared and feral.

VII. *The Golden Calf*

I wonder sometimes if these words
are like the golden calf: molten,
as in a flame, and shaped
by doubt.

If they were pulled from my fingers
and cast into
the fire like incantations,
when my sentence was lost

in the high mountains. As though
through these letters I relinquish
myself from what was promised,
step into the page

and make myself new gods.
MICHAEL BAZZETT

Things to Think about While Shaving

I killed the younger versions of myself in the mirror by living up to this present day. Growing old is a form of gloating decay where your deepest lines are written by laughter and gravity. Like Seneca told Nero, the one person you will never kill is your successor. Time is one bad mother, said Jesus right before that first nail encouraged him to rethink some choices. Or maybe that was me, ropy veins rising on these hands that hold a blade up to my own soft throat.
I Had a Little Trouble Believing in God

but the empty grave was no problem.

Belief in the honed bronze spear-tip
releasing the gush
of water followed by the thick blood
that hurried his expiration
as he hung wasted on the cross

was also easy.

I could almost see the bored centurions
craving a drink
as the shadows crept in.

And the sour tang of vinegar
they thrust at him,
the sponged wine on a stick?

Easy. Just put lemon on sun-cracked lips
and close your eyes. Imagine nails
thick as crude spikes. Feel it burn.

But the holes are what I remember
best. How you could see
a tiny glimmer of sunlight
in the center of his palm

when he raised a hand
to wave goodbye.
HEATHER BURTMAN

Chaplaincy

THE YEAR I TURNED TWENTY-FIVE, life began to seem blurry. Maybe it was that the neatness of the number twenty-five made life go fuzzy in comparison. Maybe it was that someone had told me the brain fully matures at twenty-five and I finally grasped how little everything makes sense even after you grow up. Maybe it was the latest heartache or the fact that I was working as a summer chaplain intern in oncology, where my patients were living and dying at the same time.

Or perhaps it was that in May one of my best friends was hit by a motorcycle while biking. I saw her go down in front of me. For the briefest moment an image came to my mind: her empty room, her empty bed, a stack of poetry books she would no longer read, wind whistling through hollow places. But she got up and crawled to the side of the pavement; she sat down with her hands covering her ears. My own hands shook as I sat next to her. Riding in the front of the ambulance, I felt a quiet numbness that I later understood was fear. We sat in the emergency department for the next three hours watching Friends play silently on TV, guessing at what Monica and Chandler were fighting about. No concussion, no nothing, but somehow I could not get the fact that everything was okay to sink into my own head. Where is the chaplain? I kept wondering. I was calm that night, but in my sleep I bit my lip until it bled. In the morning it looked like a bee had stung me.

Weeks later that same friend and I constructed a cucumber trellis out of bamboo poles for a garden I had planted by chance. I had scattered seeds to the wind without reading the backs of packages, and the cucumbers and squash and kale came up healthy and green and shouting into the void. I could not make sense of all the dichotomies.

It was not just that my patients were dying, but that they were dying alone. Or that they were the ones dying and leaving other people alone. Or that they were dying in pain, or that they wanted to die, or that they would have given anything not to die but did not have the right things to give or God wasn’t really in the business of bargaining.
anyways. Or their deaths were beautiful and painless. Their spirits left their bodies peacefully, and everyone sighed over the prayers I offered in commendation. So rarely.

Some days I felt happy. I took in the slight chlorine smell of the atrium fountain and the trees growing up toward the glass ceiling, the sun that came through in small parcels of light, resting on tables and chairs and happy and sad and utterly distraught faces. A pudding and Oreo parfait from the cafeteria, and how quickly the north pavilion elevators came, rising story after story in a large gold box whose doors opened onto a view of the Long Island Sound. A patient who was ecstatic to be going home after three weeks, now happily engaged in a conversation about whether the pain or boredom had been worse. Another who described the turtle-shaped urn she had picked out for her ashes before regaling me with comical stories of her dating life.

Chaplaincy was magnificent, and then suddenly it wasn’t. Fog smeared the city, a name was erased from my patient list—an unexpected death. A patient who had waited for hours in the emergency room described the feeling of bugs crawling all over her. Big and small ones, ones with furry feet, scuttling across her corneas, dissolving to dust on her tongue. Suddenly I would have the urge to stick my fingers in my ears and plead with them, with the patients and God and myself: I can’t help you anymore. I’m so sorry. I just can’t help you. The way the smell of blood bloomed in a room like some noxious flower and I felt something inside me screaming along with the patient’s son or partner or mother, No, this can’t be happening. Put the blood back. Make it stop.

After my first twenty-four-hour on-call, I fled the hospital on shaky legs, carrying a paper towel bundle of cuttings from a supervisor’s plants. The sky was pale blue, clotted with cream clouds. A line had already formed inside Dunkin’ Donuts. People were ordering lattes and egg and cheese croissants. Everything and nothing had changed. People are dying in there, I wanted to point out to people walking by on the street. I don’t know if you realized, but in the hospital right there on the corner people are dying. At home I cried on my roommate’s shoulder. She made me toast with marmalade and sent me to bed. After napping, I planted my cuttings, I walked around the house listlessly, I watched too many episodes of Jane the Virgin.

The night before, I had stood silently next to a woman as the medical team tried for half an hour to bring her husband’s heart back to life. She urged them over and over not to stop, and finally they gently explained that if the heart stops beating for too long, the brain is irreparably damaged. They were sorry. She touched her hand to her heart. She fell to her knees. The medical team shuffled out as she began to sob. She clung to my arm as she apologized to her husband’s body over and over, to his CPR-bruised chest and cracked ribs, to his tube-scraped throat. That night she went home to an empty house. She turned on the lights as usual, put her keys in the blue, ceramic bowl on the entryway table. Blue ceramic bowl. The words had a new opacity.

There was also the man who shot himself in the chest. I know I stood there for too long after his death had been called. His chin was tilted back, his long hair falling from
the table. There was blood everywhere, pooling on the table and the floor, smeared across the team’s blue gowns, but all I could think was that he was very young and good looking and he didn’t really look dead. He had a story, but I did not know it. The fluorescent lights took on a shocking blaze, illuminating: a stained gray T-shirt, cut in half, a nurse tracking bloody footprints down the hall.

When I was younger, I thought that even if something terrible happened, we would have some supernatural sense of peace, or angels would come to us in our dreams and tell us that so and so was okay. Or, if that did not happen, we would look up and see a small white bird perched on a tree branch, or we would look down and see a flower. I did not consider that there might come a moment when life was not redeemed, not in the small picture and not in the big picture.

Maybe the problem is that my garden is not doing well. It has been a hot, dry summer, and the garden has not had enough water. I left for a few weeks, and when I returned, I found my beans crawling with fuzzy yellow bugs. I got a pair of clippers out of the shed; I tore the bean plants down and threw them into a black bucket, along with a dozen rotting tomatoes and a squash plant that had died just as it began to flower. I could not understand, though it was I who had not watered it, why this small thing which I’d loved so much had been taken from me. When I came back a week later, two flowers had come up alongside my withered tomato plants: a single sunflower and a single stem of pink blooms that looked something like a hollyhock. The sunflower had pink and yellow petals, a hybrid I had never seen before. I could not understand them, where they had come from or why. I considered the sky. I shrugged and walked away. I came back and took a picture to send to my mother.

One recent morning in that small enigma of a moment that lies directly between waking and sleeping, I saw an image of an apple. I felt the heart-drenched way one feels when weeping, though I wasn’t. Couldn’t you have had more grace for us? I found myself saying. Couldn’t you have loved us more? Even if none of those things in Genesis ever happened, why did we have to tell ourselves a story in which God turns us away over a piece of fruit?

A patient with schizophrenia once told me that he had terrifying dreams, that the devil spoke to him and told him to do terrible things and that demons lingered in his apartment. Perhaps he was just out of high school. There was an unparalleled earnestness with which he sorted through the tangles in his brain to ask me how I thought he could go about distinguishing the voice of God. The room we were sitting in was small, the stiff pleather chairs almost knocking knees. The door was ajar so that the security guard at the front door could see was happening. The patient leaned slightly forward. Do you think God is here with us now?

This issue is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (www.arts.gov).
Apocryphon

1.

In the virgin’s garden a ladder is kept
for angels to step up & down.
It’s quiet. A plague in reverse.

No quicksand’s yet crept under the fence—
the angels don’t ramble or discourse.
They arrive & depart on time.

In the virgin’s garden each clod is turquoise.
No weathervane to abrade the skies; the weather’s
always perfect to rehearse
subtle possibilities. The many unborn in the one.

In a rush of flattery the serpent tells her
Adam’s still asleep. Seraphim wave palm fronds & sunbeams.
Soon the wilting orchid will open to the soft rot of smell
& Cain will appear.

2.

Anxious, Eve sends ships to plead
beggar ships that collapse in their bones at his shin.
Sleepwalking to the beach
her robes give birth to marble.

Here at the edge
she wakes long enough to whisper
“It’s only a dream” & lets herself fall.

Her temperate zones breathe exaggeration.
She cages the stars with poplars
& forgets them (trapped there)
for the pinks in the water.
Drowning the sea with snakes
she bites the apple hoping, believing
this will be her last mistake.

3.

Suddenly Adam awakes. His name has been called.
Framed in a light bulb, new colors emerge.
It’s the temperature. Maybe the walls.

Bruised fruit, crinkled leaf—whole kingdoms hatched in red—
the angelic trumpet falls from his ear
the longitude of greatest splendor dissolves in a blotch.

Only the regrettable If
knows where the fool goes in the tarot deck
survives the intestines of cause & effect.
“Because is everywhere,” sighs God.

Again Adam stands before the inevitable gates
with a desert, a fatal face.
“Where are You?” echoes “Who’s asking?”
The wheel is on fire & creation, insistent, awaits.

4.

Overhead the angels watched themselves fly—
only feathers over thin voices, they pointed & whispered.
Each time one dove for a closer look
Adam called out a name till he finally named them all.

Common as sparrows twittering at the dawn
they covered the ground
regretting their labor in the mines of our moon
digging for the fool’s gold of redemption.

In murky water grown with hair
he was shown long ears
& a donkey tail.
Envious of his immortal frame
the angels intoxicated Adam
with reflection & shame.

[ 1 1 7 ]
5.

Walk straight
make schedules
gravitate to the mean—

drawn & quartered, cooking in your sauce.
Working at cross purposes, ill tempered
hostile to your aims...

Complain if you will
that you were pulled from a magician’s hat
his the trump card.
Convince yourself there’s better yet.

The garlics are sweeter ahead—
you’ll praise them with your pen.
Even the cicadas can’t sing as beautifully, as pure
as the skies demolishing the arguments of Cain.

6.

Adam had no trouble naming the dog—
tongue hanging over his teeth, saliva dripping from his jaw.
Much as Adam dug for God’s bones
the sentimental dog digs for Adam’s bones.

Acquaints himself with metaphysics
at the butcher’s window, plucked chickens, fresh killed.
These he studies to know their crime.

Though he can differentiate
between closely related shades of gray
answers evade the dog.

He rearranges his thoughts the way women rearrange furniture
but nothing makes sense.
He’s comforted that his master understands.
He imagines that his master’s catechism is his.
The Givenness of the Oak Leaves

*It was the importance of the trees outdoors,*
*The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much*
*That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked.*
*It was everything being more real…*

—Wallace Stevens

When I say green, I mean a particular green that seemed universal where I stood, surrounded by the spring;

to vibrate in each place my eyes lighted. Especially on one sapling swamp white oak, beside me in a low spot

where an ephemeral pool had left a mark by its passing recently, where early flowers had begun to fade under the new-minted shade.

The leaves of that sapling were minted, too: so what-they-were, so veined in radiant detail, that I can call them back before

the inside eye and recover now, not the gladness of the emotion I felt when I saw them—because that, you know, you never get back—

but the solid fact of the feeling, a thing that having come and gone left an apophatic, intangible monument behind. All I can do now

is recount their appearance: simple swamp white oak leaves, pear-shaped in outline, scalloped, not lobed. Coming on a sapling, they were much bigger than leaves on a full-grown tree. Never having to be, they had nevertheless arrived, aglow with presence, charged with raw being.

*for Robert Cording*
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Which came first, the body or the words? Was prayer a spontaneous act of the body to which, eventually, words were attached?

RICHARD CHESS

Harper Lee said she and Truman Capote were “bound by a common anguish.” I think it is a deeply interesting way of thinking about their lives, and any two lives, not just in the book, but in the world.

CASEY CEP WITH D.L. MAYFIELD

Our bodies act of their own accord when confronted with death, just as they do before beauty or anything ineffable.

ANNELISE JOLLEY

Terry Gilliam’s movies seemed rooted in Gospel. So it made sense that he entertained aspirations of becoming a missionary—that is, until he became convinced that neither Christians nor their God would accept his sense of humor.

JEFFREY OVERSTREET

Toni Morrison’s Beloved actively deconstructs the myth of American exceptionalism by crafting a ghost story, reminding us that ghosts don’t die.

MARY MCCAMPBELL

Good Letters

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“In art we are once again able to do all the things we have forgotten; we are able to walk on water; we speak to the angels who call us; we move, unfettered, among the stars.”
—Madeleine L’Engle,
Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art
Dal Schindell
JUNE 9, 1947 - AUGUST 6, 2019

We who are enriched by the intersection of faith and art ought to express our gratitude for those who not only tilled the soil before we did, but also planted those seeds.

The Board of Incarnation Ministries, a Christian arts ministry, mourns the loss of DAL SCHINDELL, a leader in the Christian arts movement in North America. Dal taught art and arts-ministry courses for decades, including as faculty at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. Dal also curated Regent College’s art gallery (renamed the Dal Schindell Gallery shortly before his passing). He had served as a director of CIVA and was a director of Incarnation Ministries since its inception in 2003. Dal was a mentor to many artists and those who loved the arts. His excellence, commitment, compassion and humor blessed us all.
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