

HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

Five Dials



NUMBER 29

Weight to Lift

RICHARD FORD *On freezing notebooks*

DAVID BEZMOZGIS *The life of a strong man*

DEBORAH EISENBERG *Short fiction*

LEO TOLSTOY *Drinking leads to military service*

CÉSAR AIRA *But don't look back*

... Plus: Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Zimbabweans in London, new poetry from Jack Underwood and Jonny Reid, the children's literature of Northern Ireland, and reflections on both the Evening Standard and Nabokov's breakfast choices.

Also: Éric Reinhardt and some 'mythical perversity'.



CONTRIBUTORS

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On Swedes and Open Letters

I went to Sweden a few years ago – we get around – and during my visit to the city of Malmö I got talking to a local politician who was exceedingly blunt about the social make-up of the town. Malmö houses, among others, newcomers from Iraq, Serbia, Montenegro, Lebanon and Iran. In all of Sweden, it boasts the highest proportion of residents with migrant backgrounds. This infusion, the politician noted, has generated acrimony: Malmö’s mosque, the largest in Scandinavia, was set on fire in 2004. The man spoke with Swedish matter-of-factness about the struggles of integration. It’s rare that a municipal politician looks you in the eye within minutes of being introduced and says, in effect: *Hallo, we’re struggling. I can’t quote the guy – my hands were full and I wasn’t there to take notes – but it did make me curious about what is happening in Sweden, especially since, as we were putting together this issue, Sweden decided to offer all Syrian refugees in the country permanent residency. According to the domestic news agency TT, it was the first country in the EU to do so.*

Not long after my trip to Malmö, I met a Swedish writer named Jonas Hassen Khemiri. At first we kept our conversations light and discussed the importance of breakfast. (At this particular writer’s retreat, he was impressed with the *Five Dials* porridge-making technique. I’d like to think he’s gone on to make his porridge at low heat, which is the key.) Then, back in issue 21, we published three of Jonas’s short stories. His work grapples with the Sweden described by the politician from Malmö, but when I say ‘grapple’, he is not squaring up to issues of identity and race with resignation. Yes, the subjects are important: the definition of ‘Swedishness’ needs to be updated. Khemiri does not

approach them in a dour Greco-Roman style. He is in another league altogether. His novels have the flare of a Mexican wrestler coming off the top rope at speed, wearing one of those glittering masks.

Khemiri is the author of three novels: *One Eye Red*, *Montecore* and *I Call My Brothers*. He won a playwriting Obie in 2011 for his play *Invasion!*, which examines the identity of that curious species, the ‘Arab male’ and scrutinizes the idea of racial profiling. The play recently finished



a run in Chicago at the Silk Road Rising theatre. In the *Chicago Sun-Times*, a reviewer named Hedy Weiss mentioned that though the play is ‘full of punch’ she doesn’t ‘buy’ the work’s arguments against racial profiling. An editor’s note at the bottom of the text warns readers: ‘A previous version of this review contained language about racial profiling that may have been perceived as expressing a political opinion. This is an updated ver-

sion of that review.’ No matter: with a little digging, any curious reader can find the excised passage. In it, Weiss writes: ‘But despite Khemiri’s passion, those still thinking of the horrific terrorist attacks at the Boston Marathon might well be tempted to ask: What practical alternative to profiling would you suggest?’

If the restored review does make its way to Sweden sometime soon, you may hear the sound of Khemiri letting out a long sigh. Recently he has spent plenty of time and energy dealing with coded (and not so coded) defences of racial profiling, especially those of the ‘If not this, then what?’ variety.

Back in March, Jonas published an open letter to Beatrice Ask, Sweden’s Minister for Justice, after she brushed off concerns over racial profiling on a Swedish radio programme. The letter quickly became the most shared article ever in Sweden’s social networking circles. As background, let me quote an introduction to the letter written by translator Rachel Willson-Broyles.

‘In 2009, the Swedish government,’ Willson-Broyles writes, ‘along with law enforcement and the Swedish Migration Board, implemented Project REVA, a programme meant to expedite cases dealing with people who are in Sweden illegally.’ This programme was implemented in Stockholm, where police checked IDs of anyone who they suspected didn’t have proper papers. ‘Despite the fact that police are not to ask for ID solely on the basis of appearance, many say they have been questioned because they don’t “look Swedish”, raising concerns that police are practising racial profiling in an attempt to increase deportations.’

Jonas’s open letter asked Beatrice to step out of her own body, if only for a while, so she could feel what it was like to know the blunt edge of REVA. We’ve printed it on page 29 because we like it so much. Also, Jonas has promised us more short stories and we want to make sure we get first pick.

‘The letter was published in the culture

section of a Swedish newspaper,' Jonas told me a few days ago via email. 'A lot of people posted it and reposted it during the next twenty-four hours. Many Swedes are fed up with the right-wing government's lack of solidarity and have similar and worse experiences. Both Beatrice Ask and our prime minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, were confronted with the letter and forced to answer questions about racial profiling.'

A hashtag was created – #bästabeatrice, which means #dearbeatrice. Twitter was flooded with testimonies of racial discrimination like this account from a man named Arman Maroufkhani: 'When mum, who's worked in the Swedish pharmaceuticals industry longer than I've been alive, looks for work and is asked if she can take a language test #BästaBeatrice.'

Khemiri's letter went on to enjoy an illustrious life. It was translated into around fifteen languages, including recent publication in Japan. 'Some of the rage that the letter provoked in Swedish racist

groups was actually quite surprising,' he writes. 'I think they were scared by the fact that so many people linked to the text, since they have the self-image of representing a silent angry majority.'

As a result, the REVA project was criticized and Swedish police stopped controlling IDs in the subway. But it is important to remember, Khemiri points out, that the same kind of racial profiling continues in poorer areas outside the city centre. 'Sweden,' he says, 'is, like many countries, in a position where we need to revisit and re-examine our national identity. It's only natural that this creates a sense of fear in some people. Hopefully discussions like the one created surrounding the REVA project will help us to update our self-image and create a new, more dynamic myth about ourselves.' A dynamic myth that would include, we suppose, Swedes who don't resemble Beatrice Ask.

Khemiri has begun a writing workshop for people who are living or have experi-

enced living as undocumented migrants in Sweden. If we can work on our Swedish translation, we'll be publishing more from the far north in future issues.

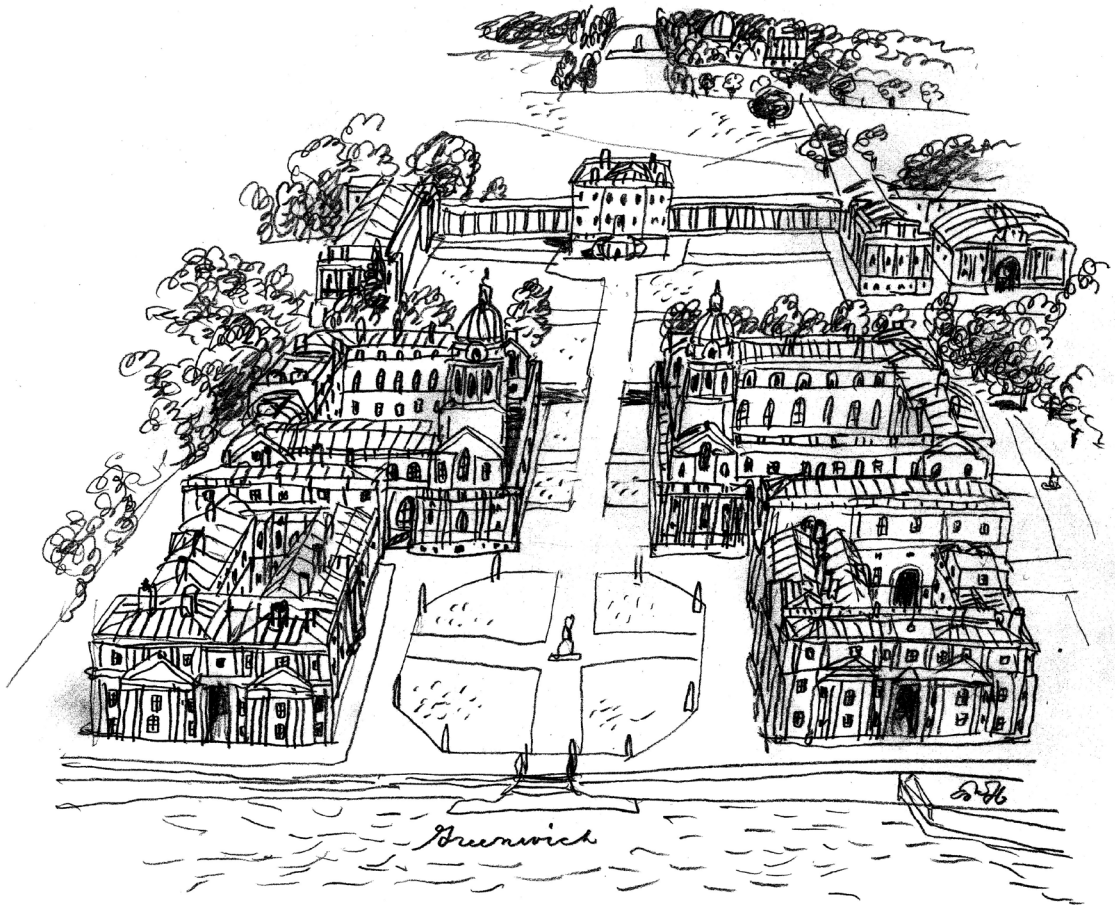
Speaking of strong men (there was mention of wrestlers in paragraph two), we've got one of our favourites, David Bezmozgis, writing in the issue about one of the great Jewish weightlifters of all time. We've got helpful fiction tips from César Aira and Richard Ford, the latter demonstrating the resilience of strong images, even if they're kept for years in the deep freeze. We've got articles on the children's literature of Northern Ireland, the breakfast choices of Nabokov, and for those who live in London, or even those who have walked its pavements at around 5 p.m. on a weekday, an essay on the *Evening Standard* newspaper. There's poetry by Jonny Reid and Jack Underwood, and we've decided to include a short story at the back by Deborah Eisenberg. It's a bonus, a reward.

—CRAIG TAYLOR

Our Town

'In London, Man is the most secret animal on earth'

Laurie Lee, *I Can't Stay Long*



Place: Greenwich

Date: October 1, 2013

Time: 4:10 pm

This issue's itinerary:

The only noise at Green Park; my first bedsit in Streatham; Princess Eugenie;
ornate birthmarks; an Act of God; my Zimbabwe; the library

Daniel Sherbrooke reads the *Evening Standard*

At around dusk, on 12 October 2009, the *Evening Standard* became a free newspaper. The previous evening, copies had been sold for 50p, and now, at the same points across London, at the mouths of Piccadilly Circus and Holborn tube stations and many others, the free paper was handed out by people wearing, I seem to recall, some sort of windbreaker, or, as they call them here, ‘windcheater’, with the words ‘Evening Standard’ stencilled neatly on the back. Another group of people stood nearby in the dusk, handing out *London Lite*, another freebie. It used to be that if you wanted to fill a bag with free evening papers, no one could stop you. You used to see bins stuffed full of copies of *thelondonpaper*, and even old *Metros* from earlier in the day. Pages torn from the newspapers wafted up above the pavement outside Liverpool Street station, where the cool air from the street mixed with the warmth rising from the concourse. It was garbage central, rubbish central. Up to that day in October, the *Standard* had been coveted. You’d spent money on it, after all. *London Lite* ended just over a month later, on Friday 13 November. *Thelondonpaper* was put out of its misery back on 18 September 2009.

A few commuters were confused on that October evening. They refused to believe the *Standard* was free. They set stacks of 20p coins on the blue metal of the distribution boxes, expecting a 10p coin to be slid back to them, making that metal-on-metal sound. Some of them were used to an honour system, giving three coins and taking 10p from a nearby stack. They knew the rhythm of the transaction, the feel of the evening. The sound of the voices changed, too. The man who shouted ‘HANDED’ on Endell Street was replaced by a man who said ‘Tandid’, and the guy who just yelled ‘DID’ disappeared entirely; at least, I didn’t see him again. The Tandid man didn’t call out the word, which is what I was used to. His was a conversational sound, almost a question. I think all of us, everyone walking past, would have preferred the old aggressiveness. ‘You want this,’ the previous voice had said. ‘I want this,’ I’d reply.

At some drop-off points the distributors said nothing. They stood there, cradling a stack of newspapers in their left arms, one copy folded in their right hands and held out as a offering. In some places a stack of free papers was deposited on the pavement, and we obediently bent down to retrieve one. The only noise at Green Park, one of those drop-off points, was the man nearby trying to sell a magazine, calling out, ‘Gissue. Gissue.’

I usually bought my copy of the *Big Issue* from a vendor down in south London with whom I’d cultivated a relationship over the years. I always bought it from him in the hope he would remark on how long our relationship was stretching out, issue after gissue. I don’t know why he wandered around Clapham North station, kicking the bike racks, fingering the plastic *Big Issue* credential badge that hung around his neck. I suppose he wasn’t allowed to leave his patch. I once bought a copy of the *Big Issue* from the vendor who appears each morning on the Strand

and stands in an archway, dancing from foot to foot. I wanted to see if she’d stop dancing while she handed me my change. Handed me. Handid.

According to the weather reports you can find online, 12 October 2009 was mostly clear, and when you speak to some of the people at the *Standard* – and by that I mean the people they palm you off with when you call – they say that the switch to free distribution was a success, no hitches. Personally, I remember light rain that evening. A change had been ushered in. It was a time when some of us thought about how much we hated change and its consequences. The paper could justify moving to its free format because under the previous owner it had been losing millions. In a city of 8 million, it had been selling only 100,000 copies a day. Now, circulation has trebled, or ‘tripled’, as I used to say. The *Standard* has won awards. *Time Out* magazine went free not so long ago. Music went free about a decade ago – it all feels connected. I remember downloading songs, upstairs in my first bedsit in Streatham, peering at my big monitor as it threw out heat and, I’m sure, radiation of the deadliest sort, watching the percentages of the download grow on-screen, the lengthening of the purple horizontal line – let’s call it a deep-lilac-coloured line – creeping from 75 to 81 to 95 per cent. At the end of the process you’d have one of those old Napster MP3s with its distorted sound. If you listened hard through headphones, it sounded like someone was jangling keys somewhere at the edge of the song. I remember Metallica and their lawsuit against the downloaders, against stuff becoming free, those photos of them with their lawyer and their receding hairlines. That was surprising – Metallica had receding hairlines. I saw photos of them recently with wobbly skin, veiny hands, their faces moisturized, ardently moisturized. They were ageing, dying . . . And Justice For All.

‘Tandid,’ said that guy near Piccadilly. One man we used to see when we visited the Chinese health place near Leicester Square said, ‘Noose-paper.’ Noose. Paper. He was absolutely determined to saw that word in half. He wasn’t from another country; it wasn’t due to an accent. He was just cutting that word in half, time after time.

After it went free, I started noticing that the *Standards* left behind on public transport were treated differently. People on the tube began tipping them on to the floor; they’d let a copy slide from their laps as they stood for their stops, without a second thought. People began tucking them behind their heads on the tube – copies they were eager to get rid of before switching lines – and you’d notice someone across the carriage eyeing a copy, claiming it. And the person who stuck it behind would see them eyeing the copy and you could see them saying with their eyes: it’s mine until I get up. It may be behind my head, but it’s mine.

I started wiping my foot on them. On the floor of the night buses they were there, wet with lager, ripped and dependent on

that single staple on the spine for structural integrity. There was no investment, no ownership; you didn't have to be protective. They were shared between strangers. My flatmate Gordon said to me once that when the *Standard* went free people just started jizzing them everywhere; it was social intercourse, you know. I said to him, 'Why do you have to make everything as disgusting as possible?' He said that it was just one more thing passed between strangers in London: suspicious glances, the occasional knowing look, now *Tandids*. 'I meant,' he said, 'jizzing in the best possible way. I'm allowed to describe things how I describe things.'

I sometimes picked an *Evening Standard* off a bus seat and came across someone's half-filled crossword puzzle, which rarely happened before October 2009. I'd usually look through the clues and think, 'What sort of person scratches out 27 down, 'insult deliberately'? At what point did someone think, 'Fuck this, and give up? You'd look through the clues and notice they didn't get 'Bulgarian capital'. A few people living in London, out in Ealing, in a flat with five others, would know the answer these days. People give up at the most interesting points. Their stops, maybe.

The *Evening Standard* has been in colour since I arrived here. Mostly the colour behaves, but every so often I'll find a copy

BRIXTON, SW9

A life away from the asylum

By *Hasani*

Up here by the window, Brixton library, daydreaming. Before me an accounting textbook, open at another difficult chapter: 'Accounting for Overheads'. I can only see little squiggles on white paper. I cannot concentrate because my mind is back home, in another era. An era when the whole country was like one huge asylum, and everything was going wrong. When we lived in darkness, and just switching on an electric light required an Act of God

From here, I can see some school kids in rows with their teachers at the traffic light, waiting for the green man so they can cross Effra Road. They are coming from the Ritzy cinema just next door, maybe having watched Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, with the sad story of Jean Valjean stamped on their memories. The orderly crocodile! It reminds me of the queues. It takes me home again, to the asylum. Queues of people snaking for miles, and not neatly like the children down there. Those kids have their teachers to keep them in line. In the asylum we did not have such orderly queues to buy a packet of sugar, or bread, or to withdraw useless paper which we called money from the ATMs.

Instead of teachers, we had soldiers, the police, and the militia, which we called green bombers. They used the excuse of keeping order but were in fact jumping the queue to buy the same basics, no luxuries. Sometimes we did not know what we queued for. We always made it a point to join any queue and ask later what it was for, and most of the time, halfway through, sugar queues would turn into rice queues or ice cream queues

folded up and left behind, and notice a severe bleed. The young Londoners in the 'Londoner's Diary' section sometimes look like they were born with ornate birthmarks. I think I once saw Princess Eugenie staring out with a pink rash creeping up her neck, like one of the photos you might see stuck to the window of the Chinese health place near Leicester Square. They purport to cure rBs, insomnia, migraines, depression and creeping rash, Eugenie rash.

I remember one copy of the *Evening Standard* had printed a photo of Prince Harry coming out of a club late at night. What had happened to his skin? Something had gone wrong with the colour and he was given a blurred second face, escaping to the left of his first face. I remember sitting on the bus and showing the photo to Gordon. 'It's like he's saying, "I can't be king,"' said Gordon. "'I'm leaving here. I'm leaving myself.'"

I've got the *Evening Standard*'s colour image parameters in front of me right now. Total ink weight = 240 per cent. Min dot = 3 per cent. Max dot = 90 per cent. It's worth paying attention, as failure to meet the following specification may delay your submission. Colour: CMYK. Pantone with appropriate CMYK Mapping is accepted but not recommended. I don't know exactly what it means, but it also says, 'Black starts at 40 per cent.' ◇

or towel queues. It was worth staying, if only for the chance to barter what you eventually got for what you actually needed. A race to rid oneself of the useless paper we called money before it turned into toilet paper. Most of the time supermarkets would be so empty you might have thought they sold shelves.

The kids are now crossing Effra Road. Thank God they have road rules here and electricity. I can see cars behind the bold white lines waiting for the kids to cross . . . and red buses. I can only remember one red bus in the asylum, which was confiscated by the authorities during the election campaign period. One aspiring candidate was using it for campaigning, and it attracted a lot of people. The red bus enraged the authorities like the matador's cloak enrages the Spanish bull, and they impounded it for good. There are no more red buses in the asylum, only small vans. The vans were designed to carry fifteen people, but in the asylum they carry twenty or more. The vans are just like the churches, which always have room for one more, or London pubs, which don't close their doors to anybody. In the asylum those vans do not wait for kids to cross the road at the zebra crossing or at traffic lights. The traffic lights are useless poles because there is no electricity for them. The kids there wait for the vans to pass or they will get run over.

A siren wails down the road towards them. London is full of sirens. They're busy rounding up those of us who escaped from the asylum, only to find ourselves asylum seekers – along with all the other 'illegal immigrants' I read about; people without papers, just like Jean Valjean.

Maybe it's the Metropolitan police racing down Brixton Road to arrest an illegal immigrant, or an ambulance taking an illegal immigrant to an NHS hospital, maybe King's College, or the fire brigade rushing to put out a fire caused by an illegal immigrant. The immigrants have been in the news of late, their number 'three times more than the population of Newcastle!', according to one newspaper headline.

In the asylum, if you hear a siren you'd better behave else you'll be in the soup. Don't wave at a motorcade, lest you be arrested 'for undermining the president'. The only siren in the asylum is that of the presidential motorcade. The presidential car is like a queen bee in flight, protected by stern-faced men with

dark glasses, ready to start a war with poor civilians queueing for anything. Ambulances are long gone, and you carry your sick in wheelbarrows if you can't afford to hire a taxi. As for the fire engines . . . if their water tanks are as porous as sieves, I doubt their sirens work.

'So, Blair, keep your England and let me keep my Zimbabwe,' said Robert one day at an international environment conference. Blair managed to keep his England for ten years and Bob has kept his Zimbabwe for thirty-three years. Is that not the reason I left the asylum and find myself seeking asylum in this cold country? Sitting up here in the library with this accounting textbook before me, I can see why I am just an overhead. ◇

A LIST

'If a little bird enters into the café . . .'

Five essentials you'll never learn on a creative writing course.

By César Aira

1.
'Irony is a courtesy, a secondary effect of good manners. It involves distancing yourself, opening up a space for ideas or positions other than your own. I've never taken myself very seriously, which has given me permission not to take anything or anyone very seriously. Ultimately, irony toes the dangerous line of disdain. I guess it depends on the person using it. I think my irony is tinged with kindness, it's more humorous than acid, a smiling acceptance of the world just as it is.'

2.
'I use gaps in memory as a way to make jumps in time, give my stories a less linear rhythm, and create surprise. It's also a very plausible technique; it's quite realistic, because our lives are made up more by what we forget than what we remember. Generally speaking, I'd say I'm a fan of forgetting; it's liberating, and usually errs on the side of happiness, while memory is a burden. It's an ally of remorse, resentment, nostalgia, and other sad emotions.'

3.
'I don't like books that, like a prostitute, offer themselves to the reader.'

4.
'I follow my whims; I follow the spontaneous decisions made in the moment. For serious deliberation and sensible decision-making there's real life, where I conduct myself like the most proper middle-class family man. Writing is my freedom, where I receive orders from no one, not even from myself.'

5.
'If a little bird enters into the café where I'm writing – it did happen once – it also enters into what I'm writing. Even if a priori it doesn't relate to anything, a posteriori I make it relate . . . In spite of all my admiration for Surrealism and Dadaism I never liked the mere accumulation of incongruous things. For me, everything has to be sewn together in a very conventional fashion. I always think of something. And what I think of also changes the course of the plot. Since the next day something different will happen at the café, the plot continues to change accordingly. That sinuous thread in my novels is more interesting to me, more writable, than a linear plot.'

Sources: 1. *Ox and Pigeon* interview; 2. *BOMB Magazine*; 3. Louisiana Channel; 4. *Kill Your Darlings*; 5. *BOMB Magazine*

Compiled by Remi Graves

By Jonny Reid

Spinal Tap Feedback

they turn the sublime to eleven
el-ev-en
the number of stiff-white
slices of bread
surrounding a mallard
who tries to eat everything at once
in this hiss of canada geese
snapping free / his curly tail-feather
a dark comma of drake /
floating away in the noise / away along the wet morning grass , cut

The Road

after Lorca

Las Vegas

the last	oasis
our black Mustang with greenbacks	honeymoon in a bag
though it'll run out	we're en route before Las Vegas
through dust black Mustang	plains drift harvest moon
death from the towers	blinks of Las Vegas
O O O	snake yellow line hungry Mustang Death Valley
can wait a while before we make it	Las Vegas

Grigory Novak

David Bezmozgis on the trials of the first Soviet weightlifting champion

My father, born in 1935, was a professional sportsman. This was not so unusual for a Soviet Jew of his generation. He played hockey for his hometown of Daugavpils. During his army service, he was chosen for the soccer team. But the core of his life was devoted to weightlifting. He attended the Institute of Physical Education in Riga, where he concentrated on the sport. In his group of eight were three other Jews, Lusik Gutterman, Fima Kaufman and Senya Shlick. In other groups – for hockey, soccer, boxing, wrestling – were more Jews. By the time I was born, in the 1970s, my father was working as an administrator for Riga Dynamo, organizing competitions and overseeing athletes. He had also attained his certification as an Olympic-grade weightlifting judge. And, on the side, he ran a bodybuilding class, particularly popular with young Riga Jews. I grew up surrounded by sportsmen – burly, vital men, with cauliflower ears, flattened noses, Russians, Latvians and Jews. I grew up also with stories of famous Soviet athletes, many of whom my father knew personally. Victor Tikhonov, the saturnine, legendary coach of the Soviet hockey team, was my father's friend. Before he was summoned to Moscow to take charge of the Red Army hockey squad, Tikhonov coached for Riga Dynamo. My father trained his hockey players. My father also knew the great world champion Gennady Ivanchenko, a Riga Dynamo lifter, the first man in his weight class to press, snatch, and clean a combined 500kg. My earliest conceptions of manhood stemmed from this world and they were reinforced over the years by my father's stories – which he told and retold, often at my bidding. The greatest of these, or at least the ones nearest to his heart, concerned Grigory Novak, my father's own boyhood hero.

Grigory Novak was the first Soviet world champion. He accomplished this feat in Paris in October 1946 at the first world championships held after the war. Until then, the Soviet Union had

refused to participate in any competitions sponsored by the capitalist countries, including the Olympics. Instead, they devised their own version of the Olympics, called the Spartakiad, for socialist athletes from around the globe. But any records Soviet athletes set at these competitions weren't recognized in the West. So, after the Allied victory over the Axis powers, and in light of the Soviet Union's more integrated role in world affairs, Stalin finally allowed Soviet athletes to face their capitalist opponents. The intent was to show the world the superiority of the Soviet man. That this important task fell to the Soviet weightlifters wasn't incidental – then, as later, the Soviets valued feats of physical strength. And at the time, some of the Soviet Union's most accomplished athletes were weightlifters, among them several Jews. On the team that went to Paris were three Jews, Yefim Khotimsky, Moisey Kasyanik and the 26-year-old Grigory Novak. But it was Novak who caused a sensation, setting two world records and beating his Western opponents by a wide margin to become world champion.

It's difficult, I think, to convey the significance of this event today, but at the time, Novak was the most celebrated athlete in the Soviet Union. Accounts of his triumph were printed in all the Soviet papers. *Pravda* ran a massive headline that proclaimed, 'Grigory Novak – Russian Hero.' That Novak was not Russian, but a Ukrainian Jew, wasn't something the articles mentioned. Ethnicity, or nationality as it was more commonly referred to in the Soviet Union, was a charged issue, always more charged for Jews, and never as charged as it was during the post-war years when Stalin was launching his anti-Semitic campaigns. It isn't hard to imagine how galling it must have been for Stalin and other Soviet anti-Semites that their magnificent strongman was a Jew. But as galling as it must have been for Soviet anti-Semites, for Soviet Jews, it couldn't have been

more thrilling. In the Soviet Union, as elsewhere, Jews were subject to the same stereotype: feeble, bookish, cowardly. A Russian-Jewish librarian at Harvard, where I did my research on Novak, asked me if I knew the shortest Soviet joke. 'No,' I said. 'Jewish athlete,' she said. For an entire generation of Soviet Jews, my father's generation, Novak was the refutation of that joke.

The lives of athletes are inherently dramatic and often colourful, but even by these standards Novak's life was extraordinary. He was born in Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1920. His mother died when he was three. As a boy he became enamoured of the circus and performed as an acrobat. In the early 1930s his father moved the family to Kiev. When he was eleven, Novak went to work with his father, digging foundations for buildings. Even at this young age he displayed preternatural strength. In contests between builders and carters, Novak outwrestled and outlifted grown men. In 1937 he joined the wrestling club at Dynamo Kiev and immediately demolished his competition. There, he caught the eye of the weightlifting coach and by 1939 he had set his first Soviet record, which exceeded the world record. By the summer of 1941, when the war began, Novak was middleweight champion of the USSR, a married man with a young son. Because of his stature, the Soviets quickly evacuated him to Novosibirsk, and allowed him to bring his wife and son. His own father managed to flee Kiev just ahead of the Germans. His wife's family remained behind; her mother and sister were murdered at Babi Yar.

In Novosibirsk, Novak was made a lieutenant in the Red Army and tasked with training Nordic ski troops. His repeated requests to be sent to the front were denied. A member of the military Soviet of Novosibirsk called him in for a meeting. They had the following exchange.

- Lieutenant Novak, you remember that on June 22nd 1941 you were supposed to perform in Kiev at the opening of the new stadium.
- That's correct.
- And not simply to perform, but to break Soviet and world records.
- That's correct, Novak replied, I was

supposed to break Soviet and world records ...

—And could you not now, here in Novosibirsk, demonstrate such results?

—If you will forgive me: who needs these records now — isn't there a war on?

—Comrade Lieutenant, clearly there is much you don't comprehend. Particularly here and now are such records needed! Do you understand your mission?

—Yes.

—Then fulfil it.

—I will, Novak replied.

In Novosibirsk, despite not having trained properly, Lieutenant Novak set two Soviet records, again exceeding the world marks.

From there he continued on the path that ultimately led him to Paris, a path that had strong overtones of the picaresque. For instance, there is this detail: in 1944, when he moved to Moscow, he was assigned living quarters in what was formerly the women's dressing room of the Palace of Sport 'Soviet Wings'. The room was unheated and infested with rats. Novak trained in the corridor. When the electricity went out, his wife stood beside him with a candle.

Even though he competed mostly at light heavyweight and heavyweight, Novak stood no more than five foot three inches tall. He had typically Jewish features and a shock of dark hair. In publicity photos his hair is styled in a pompadour, but during competitions it was often unruly. When he bounded on to the stage in Paris, the audience greeted him with laughter. Novak didn't understand why. The next morning he saw a caricature of himself in the French press: a sphere with stumpy arms and legs and a little blobby head. The caption read: 'Novak rolled on to the stage like a ball, banged out his 125 kilos, and rolled out.'

Back in the Soviet Union, despite his renown, he sometimes encountered

anti-Semites. He responded with his fists. Among Jews, these exploits also entered the popular lore. Novak was the most visible exemplar of how a Jew could be: strong, tough, unintimidated. I saw this in my father and his friends. If challenged, they snapped shut, coiled and glowered. A man didn't tolerate insults; a man didn't let himself be pushed around.

Novak's career as a weightlifter came to a close in 1952. That year he com-



peted in the Helsinki games, the first Olympics for the Soviet Union. He went to the games nursing injuries. He was also thirty-two, the twilight years for a weightlifter. Nevertheless, he won a silver medal. After the games he returned to a Soviet Union that was reaching the peak of Stalin's anti-Semitic mania. This was the period of the Rootless Cosmopolitans campaign and the Doctors' Plot. Jews were being purged from Soviet society. Novak wasn't exempt. A case was prepared against him. In Paris, in 1946, he had been approached by an older Jewish man. It turned out that the

man was his long-lost uncle, his father's brother, now a wealthy industrialist. The uncle had lavished Novak with presents. This was a black mark against Novak. What's more, there was the problem of Novak's records. He'd set a record of setting records. By some counts he'd set as many as one hundred Soviet and world records. In the Soviet Union, athletes were financially rewarded for every record they set. Nobody stood to benefit

from this arrangement quite like weightlifters. Even if a man could beat a prevailing record by five kilos, he would do so incrementally, half a kilo at a time, accumulating ten times the records and rewards. Novak wasn't the only weightlifter to do this. Decades later, the great Vasily Alexeev, whom my father also knew, did the same thing. And then, in another version of the story, Novak isn't censured for his capitalist relations or his avarice but for hooliganism. In this version, a drunken Novak nearly kills a hotel porter when he throws him down a flight of stairs.

Novak was famously unrestrained. He liked a drink. Could this have happened? Was it simply a drunken rage? As I contemplate this, I am visited by a hazy memory of a story my father told: a Jewish weightlifter throws a man down the stairs after he calls him a *zhid*.

Whatever the reason, Novak was publicly denounced, stripped of his ceremonial titles, cut from the Soviet team and refused some significant sum of money owed to him for his records. In short, he was humiliated. The experience must have been traumatic, as it was for many Jews of the period, but Novak responded with unusual resilience, returning to his first love: Novak joined the circus. Already in 1952 he began appearing to great acclaim across the Soviet Union. His early routines featured acrobatics and juggling with weights. In one famous number he pressed a barbell with two massive globes over his head, then lowered it

and released from within the globes a stream of trained dogs. The authorities, seeing how little chastened Novak was, launched a second campaign against him. The newspaper *Trud* printed an article accusing him of stealing a towel and a water glass from a provincial hotel. These were nasty times, but by 1953 Stalin was dead and Novak was on his way to his second incarnation of stardom. He spent the next three decades in the circus. Khrushchev rehabilitated him, and to his title of Honoured Master of Sport was added Honoured Performer of the Russian Soviet Republic.

In time, Novak brought his two sons, Arkady and Roman, into his act. A grainy Internet video shows them doing extraordinary things with barbells: they stand on one another's shoulders and, with impeccable balance, lift the heavy weights above their heads. The same video captures them performing Novak's signature spectacle: the elder Novak lies on his back and supports with his legs a shiny metal track upon which his sons ride around on motorcycles. As always, incredible stories proliferated about him. Not a few involved bears. In one, a bear on roller skates breaks free of his minder and barges into the dress-

ing room of a female acrobat. In a flash, Novak pounces on the bear and wrestles it into submission. In another encounter, Novak gets the better of a fearsome Himalayan Bear.

In his later years, Novak performed in variety shows as a raconteur. He also wrote poems. In 1980 he was hired to choreograph part of the opening ceremonies of the Moscow Olympics. But one week before the games, Novak suffered a heart attack. One source claims it was his tenth. It was perhaps another, grimmer, kind of record. This time, he didn't recover.

In my search for him, Novak proved elusive. Very little had been written about him in English. The Soviet press was compromised. Other Russian-language accounts were anecdotal. And then there were my memories of my father's memories. But one day, trolling the Internet, I chanced upon a weightlifting site that had a little digitized newsreel showing Novak executing the press – his best event, the one that demanded the most raw strength. On the discussion board, in response to someone's question, a woman from Hartford had written: *Novak is my uncle!! If u have any questions, let me know, my father can*

give you all info about him. Facebook led me to her. Her father, Novak's nephew, lived in Boston; I was in Cambridge. It seemed outrageously propitious. What cosmic forces had had to align to bring about such a coincidence, that I should find the world's greatest authority on Grigory Novak on the other side of the Charles River? I was given his phone number. He also had a Facebook page. It identified him as a graduate of the Kiev University School of Journalism. He listed among his interests poetry, music, and art. And he had composed some lines about himself in imperfect English espousing his love for the sun, the rain, flowers and his family, and also declaring that he was a better person than others believed him to be.

One evening, I called him. He asked me to explain what I wanted. After I told him, a brief silence followed. He then said: 'I don't believe in altruism. If there is one word I despise, it is altruism. Tell me, what's in this for me? I am a writer and a journalist. I have written hundreds of articles and many plays, poems, and songs. Nobody knows as much about Novak as I do. But why should I give away this valuable information to you? I have researched you. I see you make movies. Maybe you can turn one of my plays into a movie? Or you could help me stage one of my plays? Or, if you won't do this, I would be willing to collaborate with you on this article. This way I will also get credit. Such things are often done. I have done it before. Or, at the very least, you can pay me for my information. Nobody in the world knows as much about Novak as I do. Not even his son, Roman. Everything others have written is full of errors and lies. You have probably read Evgeny Geller's book. He doesn't know what he's talking about. He simply repeats the same old myths. People don't even know where or when Novak was born. I know. I knew Novak personally and for many years I collected my mother's stories. I know remarkable things about the family. For instance, there was an ancestor who married a gypsy. But I won't simply give away these things for free. Why should I? And without me you will never know the truth.'

He wouldn't budge. Neither would I.◊



Éric Reinhardt

The French author discusses with Anna Kelly the varied palette of his latest book and the message at its core: 'The human, the particular, feeling, poetry and love have got to count as much as money.'

5D: *The Victoria System* is an incredibly ambitious novel, incorporating numerous strands and ideas and fusing different genres. What was your inspiration?

ER: I see myself not just as a writer but as a contemporary creator – the artists I think of when I'm working are visual artists, choreographers, theatre directors, film-makers and architects. On these grounds I'm constantly thinking about how to develop the art of the novel. It's taken for granted that visual artists and architects, for example, should be preoccupied with contributing to the renewal of their artistic discipline, but not so much for writers, who don't feel as obliged to develop innovative forms. Why would a writer in 2013 write in the same way that a writer in the nineteenth century did? Would we construct buildings today in the same way that we would have in 1880? It's important, I think, that as well as telling stories, novels also reflect on the art of the novel, and bring something new, something different, which hasn't yet been seen – but without necessarily being experimental. At any rate, this is an ambition which I can work towards, with the absolute fantasy being to one day have a radically new or unbelievably 'true' idea, which would initiate a new paradigm.

This being said, I think that after a twentieth century which was rich in the avant-garde, we're now actually living in a time which is more about synthesis than it is about revolution. With the form of my previous novel, *Cendrillon* [*Cinderella*], I refused to choose between different literary genres or methods. With *The Victoria System* I've continued this desire to reunite in one book what could seem irreconcilable, disharmonious. I wanted it to be at the same time formal investigation and entertainment, a book about the inner self and about the outside world, the intimate and the technical, the novel-

istic and the autobiographical, slowness and urgency, about the timeless and the ultra-contemporary. *The Victoria System* developed as a mix of references and of palettes as diverse as Euripides, Michael Mann, Gérard de Nerval, opera, the *Financial Times*, Marivaux, the construction site of a skyscraper, and a sort of pornographic display – with the hope that from it would result particular sensations, an impact, pleasure, a insight into our world, and, especially, an aesthetic.

5D: *The Victoria System* progresses through various revelations of crucial information which change our opinion of the characters at each turn. How do you decide when to reveal and when to withhold information?

ER: The initial idea was the character of a powerful woman, ultraliberal in her politics, about whom the reader would never really know where exactly she is, what she thinks and what her true intentions are. Victoria is always moving, hurrying, fragmenting and compartmentalizing, which allows her to be permanently adjusting to changes in circumstances so that she can perform to as high a level as possible. Lying is not quite lying, in a way, if someone is never in the same place; if the day after a meeting she doesn't see the face of a person discovering that what she told them the previous day was not, in fact, the whole truth. Victoria is not cynical though. She is always sincere in the moments when she's engaging with something or taking something on; she just knows perfectly well that truth is only ever relative and time-specific (especially in an era when events and circumstances move at a stupefying speed), hence her ability to change her position without ever feeling guilty or that she is betraying herself. Victoria wants to live life completely and get to where she wants to be by the shortest possible route. She is

always one step ahead, she has mastered the art of massaging the information reality offers, and this is what I wanted the reader to feel, through the view of the narrator – a man of the left who is idealistic and a little rigid, slightly didactic, who will never manage to know who this woman really is, all the more so because new facets of her life and personality continue to reveal themselves with the flow of the novel, creating the dizzying sense of the floors of a building falling through.

By a certain point David himself has become uncertain: he is no longer as squeaky clean or blameless as it might seem at the beginning of the novel. From the beginning I wanted to write a novel structured like a series of successive doors which each, when pushed, open on to an entirely new reality. The book doesn't contain certainties; it's a piece of reality on which the perspective is constantly shifting. I wanted it to be like a hall of mirrors, with the reader never knowing what the truth is: David and Victoria take it in turns to undermine and support their own world views, they seem alternately believable and discredited in a continual reversal of perspectives, right up to the last page. This is one of the things I worked on most when I was writing this book.

5D: Some of the French reviews describe Victoria as a symbol of capitalism and David's conflicted obsession with her as a symbol of most of Western society's attachment to it. How far does this analogy work for you?

ER: The analogy works, but David's attachment to Victoria is very critical, very ambivalent. What fascinates him is her power, her freedom, her prosperity and her passion for life. The peculiarity of what she makes him experience appeals to him enormously, as does the luxury of the hotel rooms she invites him

to, the bottles of champagne she offers him, the audacity of her sexuality and her existential ultraliberalism. But at the same time she inspires in him feelings of rejection and rebellion, to say nothing of envy and jealousy. David accuses Victoria of being centred on herself and of profiting personally from globalization without ever thinking about the meaning of what she's doing, about the common good, about the future of our planet. He accuses her of having only a very short-term view, of being preoccupied solely with the immediate satisfaction of her personal pleasures, be they financial or physical, sensory, sexual – even if Victoria allows him to profit from them himself. Seen in this way, this passionate relationship throws light on the friction or dilemma in which old Europe finds itself in the face of globalization: what challenges the two lovers are two world views, one progressive and ultraliberal, and one more social but paradoxically more conservative. In the same way, either Europe can abandon itself unreservedly to this general trend without being afraid of

the future, can focus even on how it can profit from it in the short term, or it can withdraw into itself by trying to preserve its rights and its way of being at whatever cost. My book probably suggests a third way: concerned for the common good but sensitive to ultraliberalism's energy and taste for risk – a more social-democratic attitude.

5D: Is that the moral message to be drawn from the book?

ER: Whether in economics, ideology or personal life, when people don't fix any limits and their only objective is to earn as much money as possible or feel as much pleasure as possible, things can only end badly. It's what happened with Dominique Strauss-Kahn, it's what happens in my novel with Victoria, it's probably what's currently happening in our economy. Financial capitalism isn't a bad thing in itself; it's the industry's structural inability to control itself, to regulate itself (exactly like Victoria in the novel), which makes it potentially so

noxious, deleterious, destructive. As we saw in 2008, we can't really trust those in the world of finance; just as a sex addict will dismiss everything standing in the way of their quest for fresh flesh and new sensation, so the bankers completely set aside reality and the consequences of their actions as long as they're able to satiate their need for more money. The crisis we're going through shows the weakness of a system based purely on the quest for profit: we have to put the human back at the centre of our priorities. The human, the particular, feeling, poetry and love have got to count as much as money. For me, Victoria doesn't die because of her unrestrained sexuality (which I find wonderful) but because of her inability to stop, to find a happy medium, to know her limits. Victoria is destroyed by her ultraliberalism and by the blind rush forwards which she is trapped in, and which allows her to forget that her life rests on a void, on delusions and illusions. If there has to be one, that would be the moral of my novel.

5D: Would you describe yourself as a political writer?

ER : Yes, absolutely. There is a political dimension to every one of my books. It's not the only dimension, but it's undoubtedly there. I've always felt the desire to talk about the world in which we live through the prism of the particular and subjective experiences of my characters. I'm interested in individuals, in individuals grappling with a social reality, with power, with the forces which get the better of them, which debase them, which distance them from themselves. As for ultraliberalism and financial capitalism, how better to take stock of how our world charges madly and blindly ahead than by bringing this to life for readers through characters who charge madly and blindly ahead – and who



concentrate in themselves and in their actions certain positions of our era? I like sowing discord when I write; it's by doing this that we can try to throw off balance the usual perceptions of our contemporaries and lead them to see things differently.

5D: How do you begin work on a new novel?

ER: I always let a book ripen in me while I'm still writing the previous one. I always have one or two books in my head, even if, for many months, the idea has to remain quite a vague feeling, an urge to begin, a place, a character, a theme. Thinking about the next book makes the one I'm in the middle of writing more desirable to me, allows me to write it in a surge of energy or urgency. For me, nothing would be worse than knowing that there wasn't another book waiting.

Once I've finished a book and decided to write the next, I go over everything I've already got. I prolong this work of letting the material mature by documenting everything, I take notes to clarify my ideas, I enter into a sort of reverie around my characters and the elements of the narration I've been able to assemble – and then one fine day I decide to confront the terror that writing inspires in me and I create a Word document with the name of my new novel followed by '.doc'.

5D: Once you start actually writing, how much do you know about what the finished book will be?

ER: Before launching into the writing proper, I'll have an idea of the form of the book. The form is the truth of a book, its deep necessity. Each book I've written adheres to a form which is specific to it and without which it would have remained simply a book idea in one of my notebooks: form is what allows a book to come to life. Once the form has imposed itself on me, I don't need to make a plan, I work by instinct; the scenery of my book reveals itself as the writing goes along, as do the routes it must take to reach its final destination. I know exactly where I'm going, I know the final scene and some of the stages

through which the narration will have to pass, I have a strong sense of what my novel is, but I never know in advance how it's going to unfurl – I can only see a few days ahead. My thoughts are a little like the headlights of a car, which illuminate only a few dozen metres of the road in front of me, but then again I know exactly where the road is leading. It's worth remembering that a book is also a life experience and that life is never decided in advance. There are things we can predict and anticipate, but on the whole it remains for us to invent it, at the same time that we are discovering it and living it. Writing a book like this requires intense concentration: you have to keep in your head, all the time, all the information in the book, all the narrative threads, in order to be able to identify the moment where each one comes into play or comes to the fore or is intertwined with the others. In *The Victoria System* there are so many of these strands that arranging them did cause me quite a lot of stress!

5D: Your very first play is scheduled for performance in Paris this November.

ER: I love theatre and I've always wanted to write a play – but I was waiting for a director to ask me to, because my interest in it is so closely linked to the direction, and I had no desire to sit in my room writing something that might never be staged. And then Frédéric Fisbach, a well-known French director I admire enormously, asked me to write for him. His last play, *Mademoiselle Julie*, with Juliette Binoche, was put on at the Barbican in London last year.

5D: How is writing theatre different from writing prose?

ER: Writing this play came quite naturally because my novels have always proceeded through scene and scenarios. This is how my narratives always unfold, by following the characters through their actions; at each point in my books we are in the present which a character is living, and we follow it to the end of the scene he is living, in real time, as if it were happening in front of our eyes. So from novel to novel I've learnt to construct narratives which proceed in

this way, through successive revelations in a particular time and place, often in dialogue. Nothing happens apart from what you see. And theatre doesn't work so differently, so I felt in my element as soon as I began writing the play.

The true difference between a novel and a play is of course that the latter consists solely of dialogue, the rest being condensed in stage directions written without literary intentions. And yet what demands most work in the writing of a novel is the filling out of its flesh, that is, everything which helps the narrative to progress, or which is the intimate and marvellous stuff the narrative is made from, and an end in itself: the descriptions, the setting out of the situations and themes, the digressions and meanderings, the psychological analyses, the many different observations – within all of which, of course, the dialogue can take place. With a play, there is only dialogue, there are only the nerves; it's the narrative reduced to the essential, to what is the most vivid: the sentences the characters exchange.

I'd add something else important. While with my novels I progress in the writing by instinct, before launching myself into the play I had to write a synopsis of it, which was more than forty pages long. I felt I needed to tell the story to myself, to know its route before I lived it through the writing of it, to know in advance every tiniest detail, right up to the end. Why? Because theatrical expression doesn't afford any approximation: each sentence, each word, governs the direction of the narration. As the author one has to know at every moment where one is, where the characters are in relation to the others and where a particular scene is meant to be taking us. You can't find your way as you go, in contrast to what a novel to a certain extent allows; every word has to be immediately right – right in itself and right in terms of the direction it takes the play in. Like watchmaking or clockmaking, theatre is an art of great precision, where each word, each gesture, each sentence, counts. So I wrote a synopsis of the whole play before I'd even begun, so that I could treat the sentences as though they were darts, knowing as I wrote each one exactly where I was going to throw it. ◇

Mark Beldan

Can the history of a setting be obscured? What is ‘unlikely colour’ and ‘mythical perversity’? The Canadian artist introduces five paintings.

What will we be looking at over the next few pages?

I tend to paint everyday scenes. I choose places I’m familiar with, but I like to reference unfamiliar or uncomfortable narratives about those towns or neighbourhoods. This might include crime, mental illness, sexual eccentricity or unexplained events.

Recently I’ve been thinking about something you might call ‘speculative deviance’ or ‘mythical perversity’. An exact definition is difficult: the phrase would need to describe sites and situations where the imagined problems have overtaken any actual goings-on.

Can you think of any particular places?

One is City Park in Kingston, Ontario, known locally as Pervert Park. I used to walk home across it when I was an art student. It’s a flat, open, sparsely treed park between the university campus and a wealthy lake-front neighbourhood. Because of its physical layout, it seems difficult to imagine much going on.

Apparently it was once a densely forested and well-known gay cruising spot until Dutch elm disease prompted a large-scale clearance. Forty years later, the name still clings, although there are wildly varying accounts of exactly who is lurking in the bushes these days.

I’m fascinated by the names. ‘City Park’ is so generic it almost demands a nickname. And then the word ‘pervert’ is so open, it can encompass anything you disapprove of or fear.

Does a crime actually have to be committed in a locale to make it interesting?

There was a recent case in the town where I grew up, which is located just outside Toronto. The case was known, informally, as ‘The Pickering Confinement Room’. A man broke into an abandoned farmhouse and built a cell in the basement. The room was discovered before he managed to imprison anyone, and the house burned down while he was awaiting trial. There was wild speculation about his intentions, but his only crime was breaking and entering.

He eventually admitted he had intended to imprison one woman, his wife’s best friend. He was going through a messy divorce and his wife had moved in with this friend. The man worked as a building contractor. His motives were hard to unpick. Would he have been capable of kidnapping? Or was it a way of working through his problems? Did he have to confess in detail so that he couldn’t be accused of planning something even worse?

It’s a rather minor detail, but I’m obsessed with the fact he took the time to paint the inside walls white. There’s a

roller and paint tray in the police photos. It seems like an aesthetic rather than a practical decision – or a point of professional pride as a builder.

Why do your colours nearly wash out the subject matter on the canvases?

I went through a period of making quite dark paintings. It was a good way of working around minimal source material, and if I wanted to focus on one area or object in the painting, I could reduce everything else to silhouettes. Colour crept back gradually. I looked at Hammershoi, who sometimes used yellow grounds under grey paintings, and Whistler, who often used a decorative colour scheme, rather than any sort of naturalistic palette.

In a way, the colour relationships between three shades of dark grey and three shades of lemon yellow are the same. It seems better to introduce unlikely colour into the paintings, even if it risks being frivolous or inspid.

I don’t want to make too direct a connection between the obscuring of history and the washing-out of the image, although I suppose that is part of it. I also think of it as an overload, or a burning-out, the result of having too much information. Other people’s take on it can be better than my own. Someone once told me it was like looking at the world through net curtains. ◇



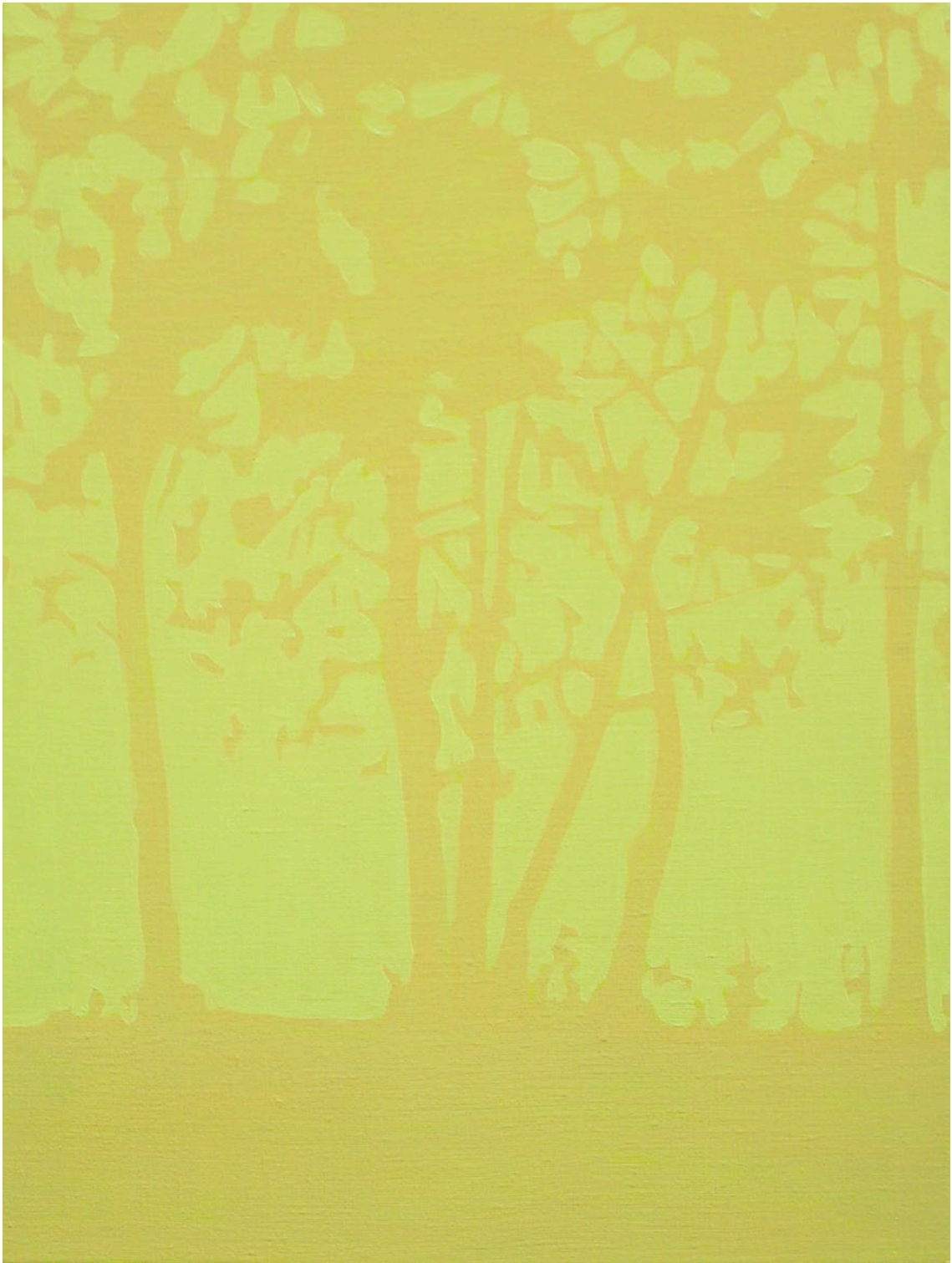
Cottage, 2009, Oil on canvas



Row, 2010, Oil on canvas



City Park, 2012, Oil on canvas



Camp, 2013, Oil on canvas



Basement, 2013, Oil on canvas

My Sister

by Jack Underwood

Two summers ago when I was going nuts
I thought my sister's ghost lived in our garden.
My shoulders felt warm, and I confided.
Let me say she was real, then, as a tongue
you can bite. Let me say I knew she was
very good at hockey, and fun as a tent.
She painted roughly, but well, liked boys
with beards but not sex with boys with beards.
Her hands were the same size as mine.
Her voice seemed unaffected by gravity
and she would often discover herself
holding a table's attention. She told me
her ideal man was Picasso, and that her
biggest regret was not putting her name
firmly on to living, slipping beneath it
before she was born. And I regret it
in the garden with the dead fireworks,
my face going wet, everything crashed
on this wall, another summer coming on.

LET US GET SOME ACTION FROM...

The Five Dials Back Section



This Particular Back Section May Include The Following Elements:

- ☑ A Single Book
 - The Best Bit
- ☑ How It Gets Done
- ☑ How To Write a Letter
- ☑ From The Archive
 - On Something
- ☑ Food and Drink
 - I Knew Nothing
 - The Serial
 - Five Minutes to Midnight

PLUS OUR SPECIAL BONUS SECTION: A SHORT STORY FROM THE ONE AND ONLY DEBORAH EISENBERG.

The Twelfth Day of July by Joan Lingard

Patrick Loughran on the hope and tragedy of Northern Ireland's children's lit

When I was eleven, my mother gave me an old copy of the novel *The Twelfth Day of July*. I knew what the date in the book's title meant in the calendar of Belfast life, especially for a Catholic family like ours. We were middle class. We didn't go in for any of the nasty business that troubled our little country, but we lived in an area of long avenues lined with adamant plane trees, less than half a mile from two working-class Protestant estates. One of these estates stood like a guard-post over a major road junction on our way home. Each time we drove past, a shotgun was pointed at us by a thirty-foot man painted on the side of a tower block. He wore a black balaclava and watched us with rigid eyes. He stood ready to peel himself from the wall. It was an aggressive gesture, that mural, and we seemed to be the message's core audience. We ignored it all year round: turned our heads, or turned up the radio. We became experts at not seeing that shotgun.

The build-up to the twelfth of July was less easy to ignore. In late May, on certain patches of local waste ground, people laid out stacks of scrap wood. Over the weeks, each stack grew from a jumble of sticks to a peak. The city seemed to change shape around the contours of these suddenly erected mountains. Roads we used every day were suddenly closed, and to get home from school, the supermarket or the swimming pool, we took unfamiliar detours in our car, often through neighbourhoods I hadn't yet encountered. When the start of the actual week of 'the Glorious Twelfth' arrived, we left Belfast and headed north-west on the M1 motorway to Derry. We drove for hours, and eventually, after what felt like the transition between different dreams, we crossed over the border into Donegal. Here, nobody rioted or marched, and for a few days we could stroll down any country lane we wanted and breathe in the atmosphere of greenest Celtic tranquillity. We ate fresh mussels

with dinner almost every night; possible in Belfast too, but in Donegal the mussels didn't have to be bought. At low tide, my dad showed me rocks crowded with them. We moved around the outcrops, drifting further from each other, and filled our white plastic bags until they bulged dark and wet. At times, I wandered several hundred feet from the nearest fellow forager, down among the rocks, out of sight of the shore, alone among all this hushed life.

By the end of the following week, refreshed after our break, we returned home to Belfast. As we came back into the city, the middle of many streets were scarred and warped where the Protestants had lit their bonfires. I remember burns so severe that to avoid damaging our tyres my father traced slow circles around them in our car, as if the black Saab were a vulnerable animal cautiously skirting a swamp. Glassy debris sparkled in the street; the world felt ritually cleansed.

For my mother, the novel *The Twelfth Day of July* was part of a hopeful counter-ritual. The physical copy of the book she gave me was indispensable to this rite. She passed the copy to each of her children – my brother in the late 1970s, my sister in the mid 1980s, and finally me in the mid 1990s – as we reached a certain age when distinctions started to matter in new and important ways: boy or girl, pass or fail, Taig or Hun. She gave it to me on a sluggish day in early summer.

From how worn the book was, I guessed that it had been handed down through the family. 'Your brother and sister both read it when they were even younger than you, you know,' my mother said, once again hoping despite prior evidence to the contrary that setting me up in competition with my siblings would spur me to read more widely. I imagined my brother and sister each reading the book when they had been my age. The pair of them loomed in my mind like figures far greater than I, without flaws, Greek sculptures aged

in the sunlight. The tattered cover of the book was a stark contrast to this ideal. It showed policemen chasing rascally kids wearing improbably colourful seventies clothes. The book is in even worse condition today: it sits in my parents' house on a shelf that receives full exposure to the afternoon sun in summer. Unwanted books end up here. Even with the infrequent sunshine of Belfast, covers wither after a few summers. When I'd given in to her pleas to disregard the title and finally read it, I suppose my mother moved the book to this shelf. After it had done its work on the youngest, it could be retired. (She claims not to remember having given much thought to moving it at all.)

Even back when I read it, the novel's naive hopefulness and its fable-like plot of reconciliation in Northern Ireland were already beginning to seem unlikely material for fiction – if only because they seemed like the new reality. Who needed the story of Kevin and Sadie, a Catholic boy and Protestant girl, who start out as enemies and end up with a powerful bond of understanding between them (the first shoots of love, maybe?), when Bill Clinton had just stormed Belfast like a crusading rock star? My parents took us to see Clinton speak to a crowd of tens of thousands outside Belfast City Hall, when he declared the permanent end to the conflict was breathtakingly close. People near us in the throng shinned up lamp posts to get a better look, and hung above us in the air throughout the whole speech. Maybe they had to see the words coming from the American president's lips to believe them. At the end, before he left the stage, Bill asked us to join him in welcoming Belfast's own Van Morrison, who jogged on to the full fanfare of his big band and gave a free concert. Only the pleas of his Secret Service stopped Bubba Clinton from getting out his saxophone and jamming live on-stage with Van the Man. Or so the rumour goes.

The Northern Ireland Office (the UK

government in NI) must have considered Clinton's visit golden material, because they chose Morrison's song 'Days Like This' as the theme music for the advert that was soon all over our TV screens

promoting the ceasefire.

Before the peace process, the British government's television adverts addressed to the people of Northern Ireland had focused on the awful consequences of terrorism rather than the desirability of peace, and had used images of the most graphic violence to dissuade potential paramilitaries. One of the most memorable adverts, from 1992, used American folk-rock singer Harry Chapin's melancholic 1974 US number-one hit song about father-son separation, 'Cat's in the Cradle', as its

soundtrack. The visuals show a young boy and his father in Belfast. The father is a paramilitary driver, and one day he drives a man to a pub. The man walks inside, takes out an automatic weapon and mows down several people in cold blood. The father is subsequently caught and sent to prison. The young boy grows up without a father and becomes a terrorist gunman himself. The advert ends with the grown son shooting another man dead in front of that man's young

son. We are invited to conclude after this two-minute, thirty-second lesson that the cycle of violence will continue. (This advertisement, if it's accurate to call it that, was shown on prime-time TV for



several years. It's how I came to know Chapin's song.) A voiceover always ended these adverts, offering the telephone number of the confidential anti-terrorist hotline, and urging people to call if they had any information.

By contrast, the post-ceasefire, 'Days Like This' advert showed kids running under a sunset along a beach of rolling dunes to Van's soothing tones. Instead of the nudging encouragement to call the confidential hotline, the final frame

offered the words of a gentle proposition for the viewer to consider: 'Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time?' The ad was undeniably effective: everywhere you went in Belfast, you heard

people humming or singing Van Morrison. Suddenly he was all the rage again, like in 1968 when he released *Astral Weeks*. It was as if Northern Ireland had paused the cultural tape at the end of the sixties as the Troubles mounted, and then pressed play after the ceasefires and let the tape run from where it had left off. In those days, when the ceasefire was still fresh, the atmosphere seemed infused with the spirit of the Age of Aquarius. It was all beginning to seem real and lasting. One day, some government agency, I now don't have a clue which one, even gave free hot-air balloon rides in the centre of the city. It's still the only time I've been in a hot-air balloon.

That was almost twenty years ago. I miss those days. I miss them partly because I haven't lived in Northern Ireland for over a decade. I also miss the feeling of weightlessness as the

conflict neared its end, the great relief, like the receding of a fever. But there's also a strange nostalgia at work, and not just when I think of that battered paperback novel; it is nostalgia for the proximity of the conflict itself, at least as long as it remained out at the fringes of my being, threatening, but never quite real. A bomb scare is so close in my mind to a first kiss, the frisson of each shudders against the other. ◇

Richard Ford

On the wide open prairie, the short American novel and how to freeze a notebook.

A while ago I met up with Richard Ford in a hotel in Bloomsbury. We sat in what could be described as the hotel's conservatory, a room that housed a few pieces of wicker furniture. It was deserted save for a few people who wandered through on their way back from breakfast.

*Ford was born in 1944 in Jackson, Mississippi. After writing two novels that fell out of print, he worked for a sports magazine, Inside Sports, until 1982. If the magazine hadn't folded, he told the Telegraph back in 2011, 'I'd still be there and that would be just fine.' Four years after leaving, he published *The Sportswriter*, the first of his Frank Bascombe trilogy, which also includes *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*.*

*During our morning meeting, Ford spoke with a drawl, a reminder that even though his latest novel is called *Canada*, his voice is Southern American. We'd agreed to talk about the novel, but it became evident Ford also wanted to talk about the country of the same name. I mentioned my relatives in Saskatchewan and he asked me what sort of animals roamed their land. Were there a few Hungarian partridges? Were there a few sharp-tailed grouse?*

People often talk to me about moving to Canada. Ford was no different, though he'd been gravitating towards the place for years, drawn to the idea of the north, so I thought I'd start with the question asked of most potential emigrants. No, he replied.

RF: The winter doesn't bother me at all. Well, I've never experienced a winter up there. I've experienced a winter in Great Falls. I've experienced a winter in Chinook, Montana, which is east of Havre. I know it would be colder, but I don't care. The winter is what it is.

5D: Have you laid claim to the Canadian prairies?

RF: I took a little proprietary interest in it. I know it. Because I thought as a novelist you're always looking for something you can be the world's greatest expert on. Not really, but at least in the terms you frame. It's easier than being an expert on the South. There really wasn't anything I could

do in the South. There was a way in which Eudora Welty and Faulkner had reported on things that they knew. Everything I grew up knowing I either knew directly from them or it was information that had circulated around to me. Southerners are great mythologizers about the South. And that's mostly what I heard. You know about its eccentricity, about its dynamism, all these things which may or may not be true, but I learned it from people who had already been on that ground. I had nothing new. I couldn't think of anything new to say.

5D: Did the prairie seem like unknown space?

RF: Yes. It's very hard though, you know, because of people's conventional notions of the prairie. Whenever I talk to people about the book, in Britain and Germany, they say, 'Well it's really about alienation, isn't it? It's really about these vast empty spaces.' And I say, well, the prairie is vast but it's not empty. And to be on that prairie and to feel alone is not necessarily to feel alienated.

It's very hard to rethread people's received ideas and translate your experience into a vocabulary that's persuasive to them. Because their sense of that whole area – of course they've never been there – but the whole sense of that area makes it quite forbidding.

*From my bag I bring out an old copy of a William Maxwell book, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, which features on its cover a quote from Ford. He picks up the book, recognizes it, tests its heft.*

5D: In this quote, you talk about how it would be great to write a short novel, how it's like bottling the wind, but . . .

RF: Didn't work out, did it . . . *(He reads the blurb on the back of the book)* I used to be pretty good at writing those things.

5D: Why is it so difficult? Why is it like bottling the wind?

RF: The metaphor of bottling the wind pertains to containment of a large thing in a small thing. I've just been finding it very difficult to economize with what I think is important in a way that is sufficient to fit it all into a small novel. Too many things seem interesting to me; too many things seem important to me. I'm probably more interested in words than I used to be. I'm probably slightly less frightened than I used to be as a writer, less frightened about failure than I used to be. And I don't think it's necessarily a good thing. So I would love to be able to write another Frank Bascombe novel, because it's one of the few truly joyous things I've ever got to do as a writer. But I have come to believe I either cannot do it, because it would be long, or that I have to find a way to make it about as long as that.

(He holds up the Maxwell book)

5D: That would be one way of solving it.

RF: People have told me that they loved *The Lay of the Land*, but I came away from that experience thinking it was too long. [The critic] Elizabeth Hardwick said that *Independence Day* might be judged to be longer than it should be. But for whom?

I have a sense of some innate propriety about the length of a book, and how much I can expect of the reader, and so it all works out. I would like to write a book about that length, let's see how long this book is . . .

(He flicks through)

. . . a hundred and thirty pages. Boy, that would be crazy. I think the great American novel is the great American short novel. That's what I think. It's not, you know, *The Adventures of Augie March*. It's *The Great Gatsby*, *So Long, See you Tomorrow*, or a couple of Salter's short novels.

Aesthetically or intellectually it wouldn't be a problem for me to write another book, at whatever length it turned out to be. Physically I don't want to do it. And we're just talking about my sense of lived life, and what I have to do to write a long book. I just don't want to do that again. I haven't really truthfully wanted to do it for about ten years. But I don't seem to be able to carry it off.

5D: You haven't been able to refrain from writing a book?

RF: I haven't wanted to write a long novel for a long time. But it hasn't worked out for me. But now, aged sixty-eight going on sixty-nine in a couple of months, I have to discipline myself if I'm gonna do something short. I mean, I've done it before. *Wildlife* isn't very long, but when I read it now, I think to myself, Shit, why didn't you write another sentence there? Why didn't you account for that? Why didn't you say something more there? I remember when I was writing *Wildlife* – and this is one of the reasons why *Canada* is the kind of book it is – the character who narrates *Wildlife* is in a slightly similar situation. He's going off to school, and I wanted to be able to account for what he was doing at school. I actually say in that book that he wanted to throw the javelin in school, and I don't know, that seemed interesting to me. But I couldn't get it in, in any potent way. I just couldn't make it plausible. I used to love that book and I look at it now, and I think, Well, this book's kind of broken in a way because it doesn't follow through on enough of the things that it needed to follow through on.

5D: Can you identify those points in a novel?

RF: Yes, I can. So in the need I felt to follow through on things that *Wildlife* did not follow through on, comes then *Canada*, which follows through on everything.

5D: Was it important to separate *Canada* into three parts?

RF: There's a way in which Part Two of *Canada* ends that is valedictory. In my mind I knew what I wanted to do with Part Three. So I never really thought, I can't have Part Three. When I got to the end of Part One, I was already a year late with the book, and I showed it to my editor. I said, 'Look, this is an unexpected thought, but would you like to publish this by itself, just Part One, and then I'll write Part Two and you can publish it, you can publish these things serially.' I was feeling kind of desperate about meeting my publishing deadlines. Fortunately for me, he said no. He hadn't at that point read anything of Part Two because I probably hadn't written it, but he said, 'No, let's don't do that. Let's don't do that.

We'll just wait you out on this.'

5D: It seems the narrator is an indeterminate age in the first two sections, but in the third part the narrator seems to be older. His voice seems to carry the weight of knowledge and the sadness that can only come at a certain age.

RF: Well, I didn't feel so much the sadness but I understand how some reader possibly could. It's just the sadness that tended to life getting toward its end. It isn't so much a sadness about what has happened in life. Dell uses the word toward the end, 'assent', which I borrowed from Seamus. I feel like when I started writing that passage, when I just went to write it from the beginning, I felt that my heart and my mind just kind of went like 'that'.

I had been so focused down on things, so rigidly controlling everything that finally, I felt – you would almost say earned – the opportunity to write whatever I wanted to. I didn't even feel an obligation to look back to what the novel had been up till then. I just thought, Whatever I want to write I can write.

5D: It's also cultural criticism. You get a sense of modern America. It's a busy, noisy . . .

RF: . . . exigent place. It's beating on you all the time. It's not amplified beyond my experience. I just feel like America beats on you. And it just – it's other people's rights, it's other people's prerogatives. It's other people's pursuits. There's so much conflict in America. There's so much exigence in America. There's so much disgruntledness in America. And some of it's productive and a lot of it isn't, but the effect on me – I wouldn't even ever have noticed it if there wasn't a Canada in the world. Because I go across the border – and this isn't maybe an experience shared by Canadians – but when I go across the border. . . I wrote everything I thought in the book. As Dell says at the end, something lifts off of me as I go across the border, and it's something I want to lift off of me. It's that sense of leaving a fly-in-the-bottle frenzy.

5D: I read something you said about listening, about how you can go into

situations and listen to someone, and pay attention.

RF: People will say the most remarkable things to you, if you just get out of their way and let them. It's always been – I guess one of the reasons why I've been sort of identified as being a listener is that I long ago noticed that something about me made people tell me things. And I realized if I'm always yapping, which most people of course are, yapping all the time, that you don't hear as much. You know? It's made me very resentful of people who talk too much.

5D: Let's talk about Frank Bascombe. If you introduce a character like him into the world, are there always going to be people on your back asking you to bring him back?

RF: I don't think it is at all burdensome. Because if I felt like I didn't want to do it, or couldn't do it, for reasons that were mine, I wouldn't feel that I was missing an opportunity. If I never wrote anything again at all I would feel that I had done a good job doing this. But I've always kind of felt that way at the end of big projects, that everything in the whole enterprise, the whole machinery, has to kind of grind down, so that I don't just reflexively jump off into some new project, you know.

Sometimes I think about writing about Frank Bascombe again and I think about what I would have to be thinking about: Obama, the financial crisis . . . Jesus, that doesn't interest me very much – oh, but I love Obama, I voted for him, but he really profoundly doesn't interest me. You know?

5D: A friend said that your Bascombe books should be given to every woman who wants to understand men. They seem to be a guide to masculinity.

RF: I think that's a thought of yours I don't share.

5D: Really?

RF: I basically don't know anything about masculinity. I don't credit masculinity as even being a thing. I really don't. It's a received notion to me that

just doesn't have any suppleness, it doesn't have any interest. You know, when you said that your friend thought it should be a book given to every woman, I think it should be a book given to every woman too, but not so she could learn about men, so she could learn about herself. I just wouldn't write books about men. There's a line of Mavis Gallant's. She says that if we knew what went on between women and men, we wouldn't need literature. And I kinda go at it that way. I mean, I write about men because maybe I knew a little bit more about that side of the ledger than I do about women, but it's not just so men will read it. It's really so that anybody will read it. A book is about all of life, not just about masculinity.

5D: Do you read physical books? Do you write in the margins?

RF: I tear pages out. When I see something that's peculiarly offensive I tear it out and throw it away.

5D: I'd like to see some of the thinner books on your shelf.

RF: I violate books. It's what I do. They're mine, I can violate them. I hate that notion of books as sacred objects.

5D: Do you use notebooks?

RF: Absolutely.

5D: What kind of system do you have?

RF: My system is just that I write stuff down in here, and then I store these things away in the freezer in my house.

5D: In the freezer?

RF: I put things in the deep freeze. Then I eventually get 'em out. Maybe I'll have twenty of these things, thirty. I'll just sit down at the word processor and type out everything that I see in my notebooks I find still interesting, and at the end of that period I begin to see the possibilities for a book, a story or something.

It is also a way of assuring myself that I'm writing about the most important things I know. Because what I put in here are things that I thought were interesting

at a certain moment – maybe important, maybe not, but interesting. Then I have a chance to look at them all again and decide if they really are interesting and important. Sometimes they aren't, so I just ignore them. Throw them away. But it means my books are always about a whole bunch of things that I think are worth putting in a book.

Sometimes it's words that I want to see, like 'Great Falls, Montana'. I see those words on the page, or 'independence'. I wanted to see that word on the page. Sometimes it's events I want to have happen. There's a passage in *Canada* in which Remlinger is driving Dell up to Leader, Saskatchewan. There's a bunch of pheas-



ants out in the road. He just drives right through them, doesn't slow down, just keeps on and kills most of them. That's been in my notebook since 1983.

5D: It's been in the freezer that long?

RF: I've had it in there since 1983. I had a friend who died in Mississippi who was talking about her brother who was by that time dead. He became a methamphetamine addict and died. This was one of the ways which she was trying to exemplify what a wild-ass sonofabitch her brother was. Not with pheasants but with crows, I guess. Going down some long straight highway in the Mississippi Delta, and he

just ran through this bunch of crows and just massacred them. I wrote that down. I was waiting for a moment when I had a use for it.

5D: Years later, these things can be revived. They can come alive again.

RF: They never go away if you write them down. There's a line of Ruskin's that is quoted in *Canada*: composition is the arrangement of unequal things. When you forcibly fuse together, in language, bits of experience that hadn't otherwise been affiliated, you get some sort of torque, you get some sort of power. It's sort of like the energy that exists within any piece of artificial structure, a kind of energy that's created by interdependent parts – I mean, sometimes when you're looking at a piece of architecture it's an energy you can actually sense viscerally. The best analogy is just a spring: whatever is holding a spring open or closed is a certain kind of energy. Forcibly putting together such things as words and non-affiliated concepts.

5D: It illuminates character conventionally, but that particular image has a darkness to it too.

RF: When I wrote it, I was so happy to be able to use it, but I thought, I wonder if it still has the specific gravity that it used to have? It was always an image that lived in my mind, as memorable, and terrible, and I thought, I wonder if I'm not forcing this too much into this slot. I finally decided, Well, I'm not sure but I don't think so. That happens to me a lot. I think to myself, I'm not sure but I don't think so.

5D: The intuitive nature of it all has to –

RF: Has to hold sway. It does.

5D: How long does it take to defrost these notebooks? I like this image of you bringing out these frozen notebooks, bringing them into the kitchen.

RF: Their integrity does not change when you freeze them. It's not like you have to defrost them. It's not like a chicken.

Dear Beatrice

Jonas Hassen Khemiri has a proposition for Sweden's Minister of Justice

(For more explanation, best read the Editor's Letter.)

Dear Beatrice Ask,

There are a lot of things that make us different. You were born in the mid fifties; I was born in the late seventies. You are a woman; I'm a man. You're a politician; I'm an author. But there are some things we have in common. We've both studied international economics (without graduating). We have almost the same hairstyle (even if our hair colour is different).

And we're both full citizens of this country, born within its borders, joined by language, flag, history, infrastructure. We are both equal before the law.

So I was surprised last Thursday when the radio programme *P1 Morgon* asked you whether, as the Minister of Justice, you are concerned that people (citizens, taxpayers, voters) claim they have been stopped by the police and asked for ID solely because of their (dark, non-blond, black-haired) appearance, and you answered, 'One's experience of "why someone has questioned me" can of course be very personal. There are some who have been previously convicted and feel that they are always being questioned, even though you can't tell by looking at a person that they have committed a crime [. . .] In order to judge whether the police are acting in accordance with laws and rules, one has to look at the big picture.'

Interesting choice of words, 'previously convicted'. Because that's exactly what we are. All of us who are guilty until we prove otherwise. When does a personal experience become a structure of racism? When does it become discrimination, oppression, violence? And how can looking at 'the big picture' rule out so many personal experiences of citizens?

I am writing to you with a simple request, Beatrice Ask. I want us to trade our skins and our experiences. Come on. Let's just do it. You've never been averse to slightly wacky ideas (I still remember your controversial suggestion that anyone who buys sex ought to be sent a notice in a lavender envelope). For twenty-four hours

we'll borrow each other's bodies. First I'll be in your body to understand what it's like to be a woman in the patriarchal world of politics. Then you can borrow my skin to understand that when you go out into the street, down into the subway, into the shopping centre, and see the policeman standing there, with the law on his side, with the right to approach you and ask you to prove your innocence, it brings back memories. Other abuses, other uniforms, other looks. And no, we don't need to go as far back as Second World War Germany, or South Africa in the eighties. Our recent Swedish history is enough, a series of random experiences that our mutual body suddenly recalls.

Being six years old and landing at Arlanda in our common homeland. We walk towards customs with a dad who has sweaty hands, who clears his throat, who fixes his hair and shines up his shoes on top of his knees. He checks twice that his Swedish passport is in the correct inner pocket. All the pink-coloured people are let by. But our dad is stopped. And we think, maybe it was by chance. Being ten years old and seeing the same scene repeat itself. Maybe it was his accent. Being twelve and seeing the same scene. Maybe it was his holey bag with the broken zipper. Being fourteen, sixteen, eighteen.

Being seven and starting school and being given an introduction to society by a dad who was already, even then, terrified that his outsidership would be inherited by his children. He says, 'When you look like we do, you must always be a thousand times better than everyone else if you don't want to be denied.'

'Why?'

'Because everyone is a racist.'

'Are you a racist?'

'Everyone but me.'

Because that's exactly how racism works. It is never part of *our* guilt, *our* history, *our* DNA. It's always somewhere else, never here, in me, in us.

Being eight and watching action films

where dark men rape, swear gutturally, strike their women, kidnap their children, manipulate and lie and steal and abuse. Being sixteen, nineteen, twenty, thirty-two, and seeing the same one-dimensional characters being used over and over again.

Being nine and deciding to become the class's most studious nerd, the world's biggest brown-noser. Everything goes according to plan, and it's only when we have a substitute that someone automatically assumes that we're the class troublemaker.

Being ten and being chased by skinheads for the first, but not the last, time. They catch sight of our mutual body by the wine bench down by Högalidskyrkan, they roar, we run, we hide in a doorway, the taste of blood in our mouth, our common heart beating like a rabbit's all the way home.

Being eleven and reading cartoons where Orientals are mystically exotic, beautifully brown-eyed, sensual (but also deceitful).

Being twelve and going into Mega Skivakademien to listen to CDs, and every time we go there the security guards circle like sharks, talk into walkie-talkies and follow us at a distance of only a few metres. And we try to act normal, we strive to make our body language maximally non-criminal. Walk normally, Beatrice. Breathe as usual. Walk up to that shelf of CDs and reach for that Tupac album in a way that indicates you are *not* planning to steal it. But the security guards keep spying, and somewhere, way in here, deep in our mutual body, there's probably a shame-filled pleasure in getting a taste of that structure that entrapped our dad, in finding an explanation for why our dad never succeeded here, why his dream died in a sea of returned letters of application.

Being thirteen and starting to hang out at the youth centre and hearing stories. A friend's older brother who talked back to the Norrmalm police and was tossed into a police van and then dumped in Nacka with a bloody nose. A friend's cousin who was dragged into that little room on the subway platform at Slussen and knocked around by security (telephone books against his thighs so it wouldn't leave bruises). Dad's friend N who was found by a police patrol and locked up in the drunk tank because he was slurring, and the police didn't notice until the next day that something was wrong, and in the ER they

found the aneurysm, and at his funeral his girlfriend said, 'If only they had called me, I could have told them that he didn't drink alcohol.'

Being thirteen and a half and living in a city besieged by a man with a rifle and a laser sight, a person who shoots eleven black-haired men in seven months without the police stepping in. And our mutual brain starts to think that it's always the Muslims who have it worst, always those with Arabic names who have the least power (and completely represses the times when other structures were in power – like when the guy in school whom everyone called 'the Jew' was chained to a fence by his jeans, with a lock through his belt loop, and everyone just laughed when he tried to get loose; he laughed too, he tried to laugh; did we laugh?).

Being fourteen and coming out of McDonald's on Hornsgatan and being asked for ID by two police officers. Being fifteen and sitting outside an Expert store when a police van pulls up, two officers get out, ask for ID, ask what's up tonight. Then they hop back into the van.

And all the time, a fight inside. One voice says, 'They have no fucking right to prejudge us. They can't fucking cordon off the city with their uniforms. They are forbidden to make us feel insecure in our own neighbourhoods.'

But the other voice says, 'What if it was our fault? We were probably talking too loudly. We were wearing hoodies and sneakers. Our jeans were too big and had a suspicious number of pockets. We made the mistake of having a villainous hair colour. We could have chosen to have less melanin in our skin. We happened to have last names that reminded this small country that it is part of a larger world. We were young. Everything will definitely be different when we get older.'

And our mutual body grew, Beatrice Ask. We stopped hanging at the youth centre, we replaced the hoodie with a black coat, the cap with a scarf. We stopped playing basketball and started studying economics at Handelshögskolan in Stockholm. One day we were standing outside Central Station in Stockholm, jotting something down in a notebook (because even though we were studying economics we had a secret dream of becoming an author).

Suddenly someone came up on our right side, a broad man with an earpiece.

'How's it going?' He asked for ID and then he pushed our arms up in a police grip and transported us towards the police van, where we were apparently supposed to sit while waiting for him to receive confirmation that we were who we said we were. Apparently we matched a description. Apparently we looked like someone else. We sat in the police van for twenty minutes. Alone. But not really alone. Because a hundred people were walking by. And they looked in at us with a look that whispered, 'There. One more. Yet another one who is acting in complete accordance with our prejudices.'

And I wish you had been with me in the police van, Beatrice Ask. But you weren't. I sat there alone. And I met all the eyes walking by and tried to show them that I wasn't guilty, that I had just been standing in a place and looking a particular way. But it's hard to argue your innocence in the back seat of a police van.

And it's impossible to be part of a community when Power continually assumes that you are an Other.

After twenty minutes we were released from the police van, no apology, no explanation. Instead: 'You can go now.' And our adrenalin-pumping body left the place and our brain thought, 'I ought to write about this.' But our fingers knew that it wouldn't happen. Because our experiences, Beatrice Ask, are nothing in comparison with what happens to others; our body grew up on this side of customs, our mum is from Sweden, our reality is like a cosy room full of pillows in comparison with what happens to those who are truly without power, without resources, without papers. We are not threatened with deportation. We do not risk imprisonment if we return. And in the knowledge that others have it much worse, we chose silence instead of words and the years went by and much later came the introduction of REVA, 'the lawful and effective implementation project'. The police started searching through shopping centres and stood outside clinics that helped those without papers, and families with Swedish-born children were deported to countries that the children had never been to, and Swedish citizens were forced to show their passports to prove they belonged, and a certain Minister of Justice explained that this had nothing to do with racial profiling but rather 'personal experiences'. The routines of power. The practices of violence. Every-

one was just doing their job. The security guards, the police, the customs officials, the politicians, the people.

And here you interrupt me and say, 'But why is it so difficult to understand? Everyone has to follow the law.' And we answer, 'But what if the law is unlawful?'

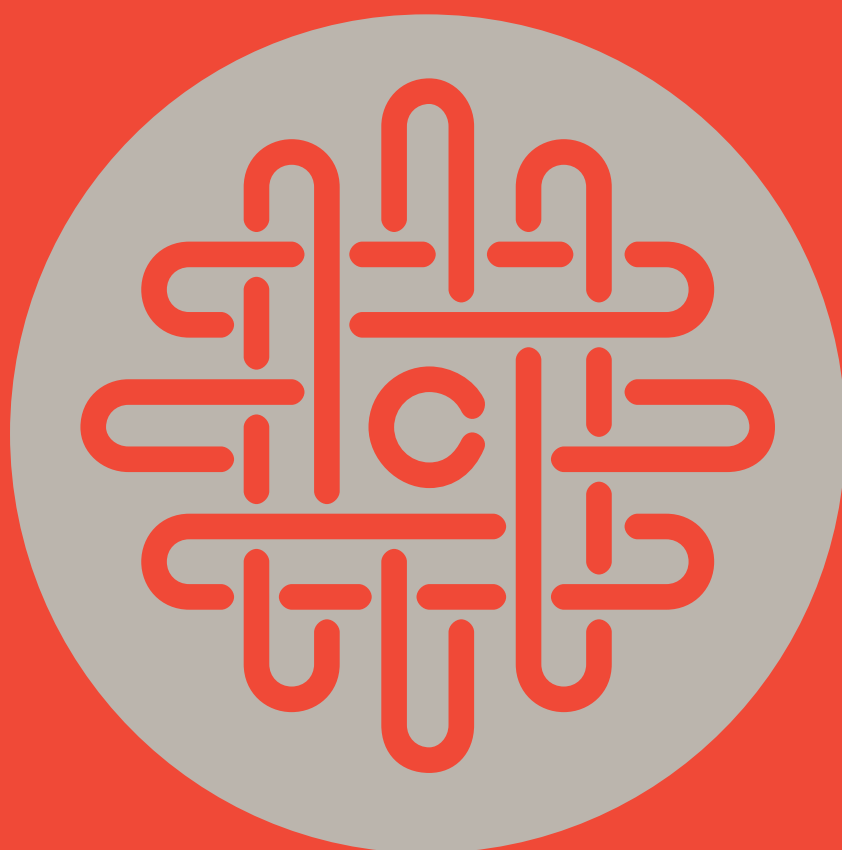
And you say, 'It's all a matter of priorities, and we just don't have infinite resources.' And we answer, 'How come there's always money when those with few resources are to be persecuted, but never money when those with few resources are to be defended?'

And you say, 'But how can we simultaneously combine a broad social safety net with welcoming everyone?' And we shuffle our feet and clear our throats, because to be completely honest we don't have a clear answer to that. But we know that a person can never be illegal and that something must be done when uniforms spread insecurity and the law turns against its own citizens, and now you've had enough, Beatrice Ask, you try to leave our body; just like the readers, you think that this has gone on too long, it's just a lot of repetition, it's not getting to the point, and you're right, there's never any end, there's no solution, no emergency exit, everything just keeps repeating, because the structures aren't going to disappear just because we vote down REVA; REVA is a logical extension of constant, low-intensity oppression, REVA lives on in our inability to reformulate our set national self-image, and tonight in a bar line near you, non-white people systematically spread themselves out so as not to be stopped by the bouncer, and tomorrow in your housing queue those with foreign names are using their partners' last names so as not to be dropped, and just now, in a job application, a completely average Swede wrote 'BORN AND RAISED IN SWEDEN' in capital letters just because she knows what will happen otherwise. Everyone knows what will happen otherwise. But no one does anything. Instead we focus on locating people who have moved here in search of the security that we're so proud of being able to offer (some of) our citizens. And I write 'we' because we are a part of this whole, this societal body, this we.

You can go now. ◇

Translated from the Swedish by Rachel Willson-Broyles

**THERE ARE
NO SECRETS
BETWEEN FRIENDS**



**COME TO
THE CIRCLE**

In a ‘Comradely’ Way

Too much vodka may lead to military service. A sizeable excerpt from Leo Tolstoy’s Childhood, Boyhood, Youth.

Childhood, Boyhood and Youth, *the three completed sections of what was to be a four-part series, follow the formative years of Nikolay Irtenyev, the son of aristocrats in eighteenth-century Russia. Nikolay’s encounters with class and love are reassuringly clumsy – the latter especially so. In one instance he falls for a girl he had spoken to ‘once, and then only with indescribable awe’. This was, he tells us, ‘the third time I fell in love that winter’. One ‘affected conversation about the merits of classical music’ later, and his love, ‘no matter how hard I tried to sustain it, was gone the following week’. Most Five Dials readers will feel distanced from the roots of the story by time, geography and, for most of us, wealth but we can still offer Nikolay counsel. We know, young man, how you feel.*

While the trilogy follows Irtenyev’s journey towards adulthood, it also reflects the early development of Tolstoy’s own social conscience. Between 1843 and 1847 Tolstoy fumbled his way through four years at university in Kazan, first studying Oriental languages and then law, before returning home without a degree. Likewise, in Youth, Irtenyev flunks his first year at university. But in doing so he befriends a group of poorer students from whom he develops an awareness of – and admiration for – the ‘wild’ and ‘generous’ lives of those outside of his wealthy family’s estate.

—PAUL TUCKER

NEW COMRADES

The winter had passed imperceptibly, the thaw had come and the examination schedule had already been posted, when I suddenly remembered that I would have to answer about the eighteen subjects for which I had gone to lectures without listening, taking notes or preparing a single one. It’s strange that a question as obvious as how I would pass my examinations never occurred to me. But I was in such a fog that whole winter from my delight at being grown up and *comme il faut* that when the question of how I would pass finally did occur to me, I compared myself to my classmates and thought, ‘Well, they’ll have to take examinations,

too, and most of them aren’t *comme il faut*, which means that I’ll have another advantage over them and will certainly pass.’ The only reason I even attended the lectures was because I had got used to it, and Papa ordered me out of the house. I also had many acquaintances at the university and often enjoyed myself there. I liked the noise and talk and laughter in the lecture halls, and sitting on the rear bench during lectures and daydreaming and observing my classmates with the drone of the professor’s voice in the background, or running off from time to time to Materne’s for vodka and a snack with someone, and then, aware that I could be rebuked for it, entering the lecture after the professor with a cautious squeak of the door. I also liked taking part in pranks as one boisterous class after another filled the hallways. It was all great fun.

When everyone started coming to lectures more regularly, and the physics professor had concluded his course and taken leave of us until the examination, and the students had collected their copybooks and begun to study in small groups, I sensed that I, too, should be studying. Operov, with whom I remained on bowing terms, even though our relations had been very cool, not only offered to share his copybooks but also invited me to study with him and some other students, as I’ve mentioned. I expressed my thanks and agreed to do so, hoping by that honour to smooth over our earlier rift completely, and asking only that they be sure each time to come to my house, since I had good rooms.

Their answer was that we would take turns, studying first at one person’s place and then at another’s, and wherever was closer. The first time was at Zukhin’s, a little room behind a partition in a large building on Trubnoy Boulevard. I arrived late that first day after they had already begun to read. The little room was filled with smoke, and not even from decent tobacco, but from the cheap shag

Zukhin was using. On the table were a decanter of vodka, a wine glass, bread, salt and a mutton bone.

Without getting up, Zukhin invited me to help myself to some vodka and take off my frock coat.

‘You aren’t used to such fare, I think,’ he added.

They were all wearing dirty calico shirts and dickies. Trying not to show my disdain, I removed my coat and lay down on the sofa in a ‘comradely’ way. Only occasionally consulting the copybooks, Zukhin recited, while the others broke in with questions, which he answered concisely, cleverly and exactly. I started to listen and, not understanding much, since I didn’t know what had preceded it, I asked a question.

‘You shouldn’t listen, old man, if you don’t know that,’ Zukhin said. ‘I’ll give you the copybooks and you can go over it for tomorrow; otherwise, there’s no use explaining.’

I started to feel ashamed of my ignorance, but feeling, too, that Zukhin’s comment was fair, I stopped listening and occupied myself with observing those new comrades. In the subdivision of people into *comme il faut* and not *comme il faut* they belonged, obviously, to the second category, and as a result provoked not only disdain to me, but also a certain resentment, since even though they weren’t *comme il faut*, they still seemed to regard me as an equal and even to patronize me in a good-natured way. The disdain was in reaction to their feet and dirty hands and chewed fingernails, the long nail Operov had let grow on his little finger, their pink shirts and dickies, the abuse which they affectionately directed at one another, the filthy room, Zukhin’s habit of constantly blowing his nose while pressing one nostril with his finger, but especially their speech, their way of using and stressing certain words. For instance, they would say ‘cretin’ instead of ‘fool’, ‘as though’ instead of ‘as if’, ‘magnificent’ instead of ‘excellent’, ‘propulsive’ instead of ‘driving’, and the like, which seemed uncouth and bookish to me. But that *comme il faut* resentment was provoked even more by the stress they gave to certain Russian and especially foreign words; they said ‘*máchine*’ and not ‘*machine*’, ‘*enterprising*’ and not ‘*enterprising*’, ‘*intentionally*’ and not

‘intentionally’, ‘fireplace’ and not ‘fire-place’, ‘Shakespeare’ and not ‘Shakespeare’, and so on and so forth.

However, despite their insurmountably repellent appearance for me then, I did have a sense of something good in those people and, envying the merry camaraderie that united them, I was drawn to them and wanted to be closer to them, as hard as it was for me. The meek, honest Operov I already knew, but I now took an extraordinary liking to the lively, exceptionally clever Zukhin, who was evidently the leader of the circle. He was a short, stocky brunet with a slightly plump and always shiny but extraordinarily clever, animated and independent face, whose expression came mainly from the not high but prominent brow that extended over his deep-set dark eyes, his short bristly hair and his heavy dark beard, which always looked unshaven. He appeared not to think about himself (which I’ve always especially liked in people), but it was clear that his mind was always engaged. He had one of those expressive faces that a few hours after you’ve first seen them will all of a sudden take on a completely different cast. That happened to me with Zukhin towards the end of the evening. New lines appeared in his face, his eyes sank deeper, his smile changed and his whole aspect was so altered that it was hard for me to recognize him as the same person.

After we had finished reading, Zukhin, the other students and I each drank a glass of vodka in proof of our wish to become comrades and almost completely emptied the decanter. Zukhin asked if anyone had a twenty-five kopek piece, so the old woman who looked after him could go out for more. I offered my own money, but Zukhin, as if not hearing me, turned to Operov, who got out a beaded coin purse and gave him the required sum.

‘Watch out you don’t start drinking,’ said Operov, who hadn’t drunk anything himself.

‘Have no fear,’ Zukhin answered, sucking the marrow from the mutton bone. I remember thinking then, ‘The reason he’s so clever is that he eats lots of marrow.’ ‘Have no fear,’ Zukhin said again with a little smile, and his smile was the kind that you involuntarily notice and are grateful for, ‘although if I should, it won’t be a disaster. But now we’ll see, brother, who gets the better of whom, he or I. It’s all in here,

brother,’ he added, boastfully tapping himself on the forehead. ‘Semyonov’s the one who ought to worry, since he’s been drinking pretty hard.’

It was, in fact, the same Semyonov with the grey hair who had cheered me at the first examination by looking worse than I did, and who had been ranked second in the entrance examinations. In the first month of his studenthood he had faithfully come to all the lectures, but then just before the beginning of the review period he had started to drink, and by the end of the term he was no longer to be seen at the university at all.

‘Where is he?’ someone asked.

‘I’ve lost track,’ Zukhin replied. ‘The last I saw of him was when he and I tore up the Lisbon together. That was a magnificent thing! And then there was some incident, apparently. What a brain! What fire in the fellow! What an intellect! It will be a pity if he fails. But fail he certainly will, since with his urges he’s not the kind to stick around the university.’

After talking a while longer and agreeing to meet the following days at Zukhin’s, since his place was the closest for everyone, we went our separate ways. When we were outside, it embarrassed me a little that the rest of them were walking, while I alone had a droschky, so I sheepishly offered Operov a ride. Zukhin had come outside with us and, after borrowing a silver rouble from Operov, went off somewhere by himself to spend the night. As we were driving, Operov told me a lot about Zukhin’s character and way of life, and after I got home I lay awake a long time thinking about my new acquaintances. Before falling asleep, I wavered a long time between, on the one hand, the respect to which their knowledge, simplicity, honesty and the poetry of their youth and daring inclined me, and on the other, their uncouth appearance, which repelled me. For all my desire to do so, it was at the time simply impossible for me to be close to them. We had a completely different understanding of things. There were numerous nuances that constituted the whole charm and meaning of life for me, but that were completely unintelligible to them and vice versa. The main reason for the impossibility of intimacy, however, was the twenty-rouble cloth of my frock coat, my droschky and my fine linen shirt. That reason was especially

important to me: it seemed to me that I was involuntarily insulting them with the signs of my wealth. I felt guilty around them and, first abasing myself and then chafing at the unfairness of it and shifting to arrogance, I couldn’t in any way enter into equal, sincere relations with them. And the rough, profligate side of Zukhin’s character was at the time so muffled for me by the strong poetry of daring I sensed in him that it didn’t affect me unpleasantly at all.

For the next two weeks I went almost every evening to Zukhin’s to study with them. I studied very little, because, as I’ve already said, I had fallen behind and, not having the strength to work by myself to catch up with them, I only pretended to listen to and understand what they were reading. I think they saw through my dissembling, since I noticed that they often left out the parts they themselves already knew and never asked me any questions.

Drawn into their way of life and finding so much in it that was poetic, I became more tolerant of the uncouthness of that circle with each passing day. Only my word of honour to Dmitry not to go drinking with them kept me from taking part in their pleasures.

Once I wanted to boast to them of my knowledge of literature, especially French literature, and started a conversation on the topic. To my surprise, it turned out that although they used the Russian titles of the foreign works, they had read a great deal more than I had, and knew and appreciated English and even Spanish authors and Lesage, whom I hadn’t even heard of before that. Pushkin and Zhukovsky were literature for them and not, as they were for me, books in yellow bindings read and learned in childhood. They held Dumas, Sue and Féval in equally low regard, and judged literature much better and more clearly than I did, especially Zukhin, as I couldn’t help admitting. I had no advantage over them in my knowledge of music, either. To my even greater surprise, Operov played the violin, another student studying with us played the cello and the piano, and both of them were members of the university orchestra and had a respectable knowledge and appreciation of good music. In a word, except for my pronunciation of French and German, everything that I had intended to boast to them about they

knew better than I, and weren't conceited about it at all. I might have boasted of my position in society, but unlike Volodya I had none. So what was the pinnacle from which I regarded them? My acquaintance with Prince Ivan Ivanych? My pronunciation of French? My droshky? My fine linen shirt? My fingernails? Wasn't it all just rubbish? Or so it dimly began to seem to me under the influence of my envy of the camaraderie and good-natured youthful merriment I saw before me. They were all on familiar terms. The simplicity of their treatment of each other verged on rudeness, yet always apparent beneath that rough exterior was a fear of offending each other even a little. 'Scoundrel' or 'swine', although used by them in an affectionate way, only grated on me and gave me a pretext for inward scoffing, but the words didn't offend them or keep them from being on the friendliest and most sincere footing. They were very tactful and circumspect in their treatment of each other, as only happens with the very poor and the very young. But the main thing was the sense I had of something generous and wild in Zukhin's character, and in his adventures at the Lisbon. I had an intimation that those bouts had been quite different from the humbug with the flaming rum and champagne that I had witnessed at Baron Z.'s.

ZUKHIN AND SEMYONOV

[. . .] At the beginning of the year there had been eight or so in Zukhin's band of revellers. Among them were Ikonin and Semyonov, but the first withdrew because he couldn't tolerate the frantic revelry to which they devoted themselves, while the second left because it seemed insufficient to him. Everyone regarded them with something like awe and told each other stories about their escapades.

The escapades' main heroes were Zukhin and, towards the end of the year, Semyonov. Everyone eventually came to look on the latter even with a kind of horror, and when he turned up at the lectures, which happened infrequently enough, there was excitement in the room.

Semyonov ended his drinking career just before the examinations in a most energetic and original way, as I myself witnessed, thanks to my acquaintance with Zukhin. Here's what happened.

One evening just after we had all gathered at Zukhin's, and Operov had placed a tallow candle in a bottle next to himself to go with one already there in a candlestick, and then lowered his head over the minuscule handwriting in his physics copybook and begun to read in his little thin voice, the landlady came in to tell Zukhin that someone was there with a message for him.

Zukhin went out and quickly returned with a thoughtful expression on his face and two ten-ruble notes in his hand, along with the opened message written on grey wrapping paper.

'Gentlemen! An extraordinary event!' he said, raising his head and looking at us with something like a triumphantly serious gaze.

'Did you get some tutoring money?' Operov asked as he leafed through his copybook.

'Let's get on with the reading,' someone else said.

'No, gentlemen! No more reading for me,' Zukhin continued in the same tone. 'I tell you, it's an inconceivable event! Semyonov has sent a soldier with twenty roubles he borrowed from me once, and written that if I want to see him, I had better come to the barracks. Do you realize what this means?' he added, looking at each of us in turn. We were all silent. 'I'm going over to see him right now,' Zukhin continued. 'Anyone who wants to can come along.'

We immediately put our frock coats back on and got ready to visit Semyonov.

'Won't it be awkward,' Operov asked in his thin little voice, 'if we all barge in and stare at him like some curiosity?'

I completely agreed with Operov's observation, especially as it concerned me, since I was barely associated with Semyonov, but it was a pleasure to know that I was taking part in a shared comradesly activity, and I so wanted to see Semyonov himself that I didn't say anything.

'Rubbish!' Zukhin said. 'What's so awkward about going to say goodbye to a comrade, wherever he might be? It's nothing. Anyone who wants can come.'

We hired cabs, put the soldier in with us and set off. The duty non-commissioned officer didn't want to let us in, but somehow Zukhin persuaded him, and the soldier who had brought the message led us to a large room, dark except

for the faint illumination of a few bright lamps, with bunks along either side on which new recruits with shaven foreheads were sitting or lying in grey overcoats. I had been struck on entering the barracks by a particularly oppressive smell and by the sound of several hundred men snoring, and, as we crossed the room between the bunks behind our guide and Zukhin, who with a firm stride went on ahead, I peered anxiously at each recruit, applying what remained in my memory of the hardy, solidly built figure of Semyonov with his long, almost grey hair, white teeth and sombre, gleaming eyes. In the furthest corner of the barracks near the last little clay pot filled with oil in which a charred and twisted wick dimly smoked, Zukhin quickened his pace and then suddenly stopped.

'Hello, Semyonov,' he said to a recruit with a shaven forehead like the others, who was sitting in heavy soldier's long underwear with a grey overcoat over his shoulders and his feet on the bunk, while talking to another recruit and eating something. It was *him* with his hair cropped short and his forehead shaved blue, yet with the same sombre, energetic expression that his face always had. Afraid that my staring might offend him, I looked away. Operov, seeming to share my opinion, stood behind everyone else, but the sound of Semyonov's voice and of his customary clipped speech as he greeted Zukhin and the others put us completely at ease, and we hurried forward to extend – I my hand, and Operov his 'little board', but as we were doing that, Semyonov reached out with his own large, dark hand, thereby sparing us the unpleasant feeling of seeming to do him an honour. He spoke reluctantly and calmly, as always.

'Hello, Zukhin. Thanks for coming. Sit down, gentlemen! Let them, Kudryashka,' he said to the recruit with whom he had been having supper and talking. 'You and I will finish our conversation later. Go ahead and sit down. So, you were surprised Zukhin? Eh?'

'Nothing you've ever done has surprised me,' Zukhin answered, sitting beside him on the bunk with an expression rather like that of a doctor sitting down on the bed of a patient, 'although I would have been if you had turned up for the examinations – that I can say. Well,

tell us where you went off to, and how this all came about.'

'Where did I go off to?' Semyonov answered in his deep, strong voice. 'I went off to the taverns, pot-houses and inns, for the most part. Sit down, gentlemen, all of you, there's plenty of room. Pull your legs up there, you!' he yelled commandingly, revealing his white teeth for an instant, at a recruit who was lying on the bunk to his left and watching us with idle curiosity, his hands behind his head. 'Well, I was on a spree. A bad one. But good,' he continued, each clipped sentence changing the expression on his energetic face. 'You know about the incident with the merchant. The rascal died. They wanted to kick me out. What little money I had, I squandered. But all that would have been nothing. A huge pile of debts remained – and nasty ones. I had no way to pay them. Well, that's it.'

'How did you ever come up with such an idea?' Zukhin asked.

'This way: I was on a spree at the Yaro-

slavl, you know, on Stozhenka, with some merchant gent. He was a recruit supplier. I said, "Give me a thousand roubles and I'll go." And I did.'

'But how could that be? You're a nobleman,' Zukhin said.

'That was nothing! Kirill Ivanov made the arrangements.'

'Who's Kirill Ivanov?'

'The one who brought me,' he said with a strange, amused, mocking glint in his eyes, and what looked like a smile. 'They got permission from the Senate. I had another spree, paid off my debts and went. That's all there is to it. After all, they can't flog me . . . I've got five roubles left . . . Perhaps there'll be a war . . .'

And then with a sombre gleam in his eyes and a constantly changing expression on his energetic face, he started to tell Zukhin about his strange, incomprehensible adventures.

When they wouldn't let us stay in the barracks any longer, we began to say our goodbyes. He shook all our hands with a

firm grip, and without getting up to see us out he said, 'Come again sometime, gentlemen. They say they won't move us out until next month,' he added, once more seeming to smile.

Zukhin moved a few steps away, then turned back. Wanting to see their parting, I stopped, too, and saw Zukhin take some money out of his pocket and offer it, but Semyonov pushed his hand away. Then I saw them embrace and heard Zukhin say quite loudly as he came back towards us, 'Farewell, Wizard! It's certain I won't finish the year, but you'll be an officer.'

Semyonov, who never laughed, responded with loud, ringing laughter that struck me extraordinarily painfully. We left.

The whole way home, which we walked, Zukhin remained silent and kept lightly blowing his nose, putting his finger first to one nostril and then to the other. When we arrived at his place he immediately left us, and drank from that day until the examinations began. ◇

FOOD AND DRINK

Breakfast with Nabokov

(The Most Delicious Meal Known to Man)

By Richard Godwin

Anyone who reads Vladimir Nabokov's 1928 novel *Invitation of a Small Guest*, *Queen, Knave* on an empty stomach finds their hunger pangs most acute in chapter four. The novel, which Nabokov wrote in his native Russian as *Korol' Dama Valet*, is about a love triangle involving a bourgeois couple, Dreyer and Martha, and a myopic young man called Franz. 'Of all my novels, this bright brute shines the gayest,' Nabokov wrote upon translating it into English in 1968 – and one detail shines gayest of all.

'In the morning, as Dreyer was hurriedly enjoying a soft-boiled with buttered toast (the most delicious meal known to man), before dashing off to the emporium, Frieda informed him that the repaired car was waiting at the door.' Frieda is the maid, by the way, and the car has been damaged in the previous

chapter. Not that the reader is thinking about these irrelevances! Not when we have, in front of us, 'the most delicious meal known to man', or, to be precise, '(the most delicious meal known to man)'. Nabokov repeatedly told his students to 'cherish the details' after all.

To cherish – and to question. Is a soft-boiled egg with buttered toast indeed worthy of this accolade? Which authority is making this remarkable claim? And, actually, why? Is this a form of *style indirect libre* – the author filtering his narration through the mind of his character? Which is to ask: is this Dreyer thinking to himself: 'Yum! I'd take a humble boiled egg and toast over anything a fancy chef could cook up, any day of the week!' And if so, what does this tell us about Dreyer? Or is this Nabokov himself, addressing the reader directly, making a little aper-

ture in the fourth wall with his parentheses to make the not-uncontroversial claim that there is in fact no better meal than a soft-boiled egg on buttered toast?

The use of parentheses (brackets) is of course one of the most characteristic features of Nabokov's prose. Certainly, it is among the most imitated. As Craig Raine once noted in an admiring essay on the subject, Nabokov used the device 'to contain an explosion of observation, a detonation of descriptive assets, an extra intense transaction of linguistic energy'. The classic instance occurs in *Lolita* (1955), where the paedophile narrator Humbert Humbert informs us: 'My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three.' Relating such a momentous event as the violent death of a mother in such a casual way is, here, a masterful flourish of

black humour. And yet Nabokov just as readily used his parentheses to delight, as in *Laughter in the Dark* (1933): 'Irma playing with glass marbles (a rainbow in every one)'. He was still using the technique in his last novel, the unfinished – barely started – *The Original of Laura* (published posthumously in 2009): 'First of all she dismissed Cora with the strelitzias (hateful blooms, regalized bananas, really)'.

With a writer as controlled and controlling as Nabokov, it feels as if these are pieces of information he simply had to impart – a word he had to define, qualify or modulate, a detail he had to admire, distort or interpret. Raine suggests that Nabokov writes the details into these slim crescents ecstatically, even erotically, comparing him to a singer who has learned to use his adrenalin to augment his performance. These are eruptions of descriptive passion – the writer's equivalent of the bluesman's 'Ah! A-hum! Oh yeah!' – artfully harmonized with the whole.

That suggests that the *King, Queen, Knave* outburst is spontaneous – perhaps Nabokov was simply feeling peckish between the pencil strokes? That does not fully account for the godly certainty with which he makes the claim, the teasing hint that there are other, more delicious meals, but they are unknown to mere men. Moreover, this is not the only egg-based parentheses in his work. In 1969, Nabokov submitted to answer a few questions posed by *Vogue* magazine, posting back his answers. 'As a human specimen, I present no particular fascination,' he wrote. 'My habits are simple, my tastes banal. I would not exchange my favorite fare (bacon and eggs, beer) for the most misspelt menu in the world.' This repeated plugging of breakfast foods begins to look systematic, almost a form of propaganda (*prop-egg-anda?*). But despite these clues, the vital significance of breakfast to Nabokov and to his fiction seems to have eluded his scholars.

Meanwhile, back in Berlin, Dreyer gulps down his coffee and goes out to look at the car. 'He sipped up the last, sweet drop, threw his napkin on the table and hurried out; the napkin slowly crept off the table and fell limply to the floor.' The hungry reader might be forgiven for dwelling on the abandoned breakfast. Was Dreyer's bread white, brown, or even

some sort of pumpernickel, given the German setting? Was it cut into soldiers? How runny was the egg? Did Dreyer season it with salt and pepper? Poor Dreyer having to abandon this humble feast! It is an irresistible prompt to get up and boil a compensatory egg of one's own, leaving the novel to slowly creep off the table and fall limply to the floor.

Nabokov is waiting in the kitchen. It should scarcely surprise us that Nabokov was very particular about his eggs, and left us his own recipe for them. A charming addition to the small canon of recipes written by great writers, 'Eggs à la Nabocoque' was composed on 18 November 1972, meaning it falls between *Transparent Things* (1972) and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) in the oeuvre. The prose is, of course, laden with parentheses and a little rough – 'Hold [the eggs] under the hot tap water to make them ready for what awaits them,' he advises – though it is likely that he did not revise his recipe quite so assiduously as he did his novels. I also posit that 'Eggs à la Nabokoef' would have been a better pun. Still, his advice is sound. He underlines the fundamental importance of buying fresh eggs; he specifies two per person; he recommends 200–240 seconds of boiling time; and he provides an answer (parenthetically!) to the *King, Queen, Knave* bread riddle: 'Have some salt and buttered bread (white) ready. Eat.' He even finds room for a delightful little simile. A cracked egg, he warns, will 'disgorge a cloud of white stuff like a medium in an old-fashioned [sic] séance.'

In the 200–240 seconds that it takes for the egg to boil, the reader may wish to range among Nabokov's other fiction for his other references to breakfast. He or she will find a tantalizing one in the short story, 'The Potato Elf' (1929), in which not only eggs but also bacon plays a fleeting but essential role. The tale is unique among Nabokov's fiction in having an exclusively English setting. Having fled Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Nabokov family lived as émigrés in England between 1919 and 1922, before moving to Prague and then Berlin. During this time, young Vladimir studied Slavonic Languages at Cambridge. Mourning the homeland to which he would never return, he did not much warm to the new setting. In his memoir,

Speak, Memory, he evokes the misery of icy mornings in college where water would freeze in his sink, while in his novel *Glory* he considers English nature as having a 'tame greenhouse quality' where 'unimaginative autumns faded away in geometrical gardens under a drizzly sky'. Disappointing, to an English reader. Still, he did take two things from his English years. He liked to play football – he kept goal for his college – and he did like the English breakfast. Might we hope that it was here he began his lifelong romance with bacon, which is not common in Russia?

'The Potato Elf' would suggest so. A cruel and melancholy tale, it centres on a performing dwarf named Fred, who is kept in the semi-abusive employ of a conjuror named Shock. When Fred is injured one day, Shock takes him home for the night, where Fred is nursed to bed by Shock's kindly wife, Nora. I would like to think it is with an olfactory fondness for a certain kind of English morning that Nabokov describes Fred waking up, happy to have received such kindness from Nora the night before. 'Around half-past seven the flat came to life. With an abstract smile Mr Shock left for an unknown destination. From the dining room came the delicious smell of bacon and eggs. (It is worth dwelling for a moment on the masculine/feminine symbolism of this famous food coupling, bacon the salty bridegroom, eggs the oozing bride.) With her hair done anyhow, wearing a kimono embroidered with sunflowers, appeared Mrs Shock.'

Again the reader is tempted to throw down the book and make himself some bacon and eggs – but this time, it is worth reading on to discover the erotic connotations of the repast. After he has finished his breakfast, Fred is offered a 'perfumed cigarette with a red petaled tip' by Nora Shock. There follows the happiest event in Fred's life: Nora seduces him. 'Every separate day in the year is a gift presented to only one man – the happiest one; all other people use his day, to enjoy the sunshine or berate the rain, never knowing, however, to whom that day really belongs; and its fortunate owner is pleased and amused by their ignorance.' For Fred, the happiest day of his life began with the smell of bacon and eggs.

Even if successive generations of schol-

ars have blundered past these clues, the film director Stanley Kubrick seems to have been alive to them. In his film version of *Lolita*, made in 1962, he clearly responded to the erotic bacon theme. At the height of their mutual flirtation, Lolita, played by Sue Lyon, brings James Mason's Humbert his breakfast tray. She eats the bacon from his plate. 'Don't tell mother I ate your bacon,' she says. Humbert, entranced, does not. Nabokov singled out this scene when he praised Sue Lyon's performance. How could he not?

Even if the scene does not appear in the novel – nor in Nabokov's original film script – it does have its shadow. After Humbert has resigned himself to marrying Lolita's despised mother Charlotte Haze, to be close to her daughter,

he finds that one of his marital duties is to bring Charlotte breakfast in bed. Charlotte is not a consumer of bacon or even eggs in the morning. Instead Humbert derisively delivers 'that economically halved grapefruit, that sugarless breakfast'. This drab meal is reprised even more ridiculously in the campus comedy, *Pnin* (1957): 'Over a frugal breakfast of oranges and lemons Laurence, blondish, baldish, and unwholesomely fat, was criticizing the head of the French Department . . .' In both cases, it is both an indictment and a punishment. For who eats citrus fruit for breakfast, but joyless, fat people? Charlotte's economical and sugarless grapefruit underlines how she has closed herself off from quotidian sensual pleasure. Lolita, meanwhile,

is already stealing it. At what time of day do she and Humbert consummate their relationship? First thing in the morning, of course.

There is time, before the egg turns hard boiled, to repeat the *King, Queen, Knave* passage. 'In the morning, as Dreyer was hurriedly enjoying a soft-boiled with buttered toast' . . . The clue lies in that 'hurriedly'. Dreyer's thoughts are dashing towards his day. He is failing to give sufficient attention to his eggs. He is failing to give sufficient attention to his wife, too. Cherish the details, Nabokov says. But while the reader cherishes the eggs, Dreyer is guilty of negligence. By the time that Martha and Franz are plotting his murder (boating lake, oar), we have learned to cherish our eggs. ◇

BONUS FICTION

Twilight of the Superheroes

by Deborah Eisenberg

NATHANIEL RECALLS THE MIRACLE

The grandchildren approach.

Nathaniel can make them out dimly in the shadows. When it's time, he'll tell them about the miracle.

It was the dawn of the new millennium, he'll say. I was living in the Midwest back then, but my friends from college persuaded me to come to New York.

I arrived a few days ahead of the amazing occasion, and all over the city there was an atmosphere of feverish anticipation. The year two thousand! The new millennium! Some people thought it was sure to be the end of the world. Others thought we were at the threshold of something completely new and better. The tabloids carried wild predictions from celebrity clairvoyants, and even people who scoffed and said that the date was an arbitrary and meaningless one were secretly agitated. In short, we were suddenly aware of ourselves standing there, staring at the future blindfolded.

I suppose, looking back on it, that all the commotion seems comical and ridiculous. And perhaps you're thinking that we churned it up to entertain ourselves because we were bored or because our lives felt too easy – trivial and mundane. But consider: ceremonial occasions, even

purely personal ones like birthdays or anniversaries, remind us that the world is full of terrifying surprises and no one knows what even the very next second will bring!

Well, shortly before the momentous day, a strange news item appeared: experts were saying that a little mistake had been made – just one tiny mistake, a little detail in the way computers everywhere had been programmed. But the consequences of this detail, the experts said, were potentially disastrous; tiny as it was, the detail might affect everybody, and in a very big way!

You see, if history has anything to teach us, it's that – despite all our efforts, despite our best (or worst) intentions, despite our touchingly indestructible faith in our own foresight – we poor humans cannot actually think ahead; there are just too many variables. And so, when it comes down to it, it always turns out that no one is in charge of the things that really matter.

It must be hard for you to imagine – it's even hard for me to remember – but people hadn't been using computers for very long. As far as I know, my mother (your great-grandmother) never even touched one! And no one had thought to inform the computers that one day the universe would pass from the years of the one thousands into the years of the two thousands. So the machines, as these experts suddenly real-

ized, were not equipped to understand that at the conclusion of 1999 time would not start over from 1900, time would keep going. People all over America – all over the world! – began to speak of 'a crisis of major proportions' (which was a phrase we used to use back then). Because, all the routine operations that we'd so blithely delegated to computers, the operations we all took for granted and depended on – how would they proceed?

Might one be fatally trapped in an elevator? Would we have to huddle together for warmth and scuffle frantically through our pockets for a pack of fancy restaurant matches so we could set our stacks of old New York Reviews ablaze? Would all the food rot in heaps out there on the highways, leaving us to pounce on fat old street rats and grill them over the flames? What was going to happen to our bank accounts – would they vaporize? And what about air traffic control? On 31 December when the second hand moved from 11:59:59 to midnight, would all the aeroplanes in the sky collide?

Everyone was thinking of more and more alarming possibilities. Some people committed their last night on this earth to partying, and others rushed around buying freeze-dried provisions and cases of water and flashlights and radios and heavy blankets in the event that the

disastrous problem might somehow eventually be solved.

And then, as the clock ticked its way through the enormous gatherings in celebration of the era that was due to begin in a matter of hours, then minutes, then seconds, we waited to learn the terrible consequences of the tiny oversight. Khartoum, Budapest, Paris – we watched on television, our hearts fluttering, as midnight, first just a tiny speck in the east, unfurled gently, darkening the sky and moving towards us over the globe.

But the amazing thing, Nathaniel will tell his grandchildren, was that nothing happened! We held our breath . . . And there was nothing! It was a miracle. Over the face of the earth, from east to west and back again, nothing catastrophic happened at all.

Oh, well. Frankly, by the time he or any of his friends get around to producing a grandchild (or even a child, come to think of it) they might well have to explain what computers had been. And freeze-dried food. And celebrity clairvoyants and aeroplanes and New York and America and even cities, and heaven only knows what.

FROGBOIL

Lucien watches absently as his assistant, Sharmila, prepares to close up the gallery for the evening; something keeps tugging at his attention . . .

Oh, yes. It's the phrase Yoshi Matsumoto used this morning when he called from Tokyo. *Back to normal . . . Back to normal . . .*

What's that famous, revolting, sadistic experiment? Something like, you drop the frog into a pot of boiling water and it jumps out. But if you drop it into a pot of cold water and slowly bring the water to a boil, the frog stays put and gets boiled.

Itami Systems is reopening its New York branch, was what Matsumoto called to tell Lucien; he'll be returning to the city soon. Lucien pictured his old friend's mournful, ironic expression as he added, 'They tell me they're "exploring additional avenues of development now that New York is back to normal".'

Lucien had made an inadvertent squawk-like sound. He shook his head, then he shook his head again.

'Hello?' Matsumoto said.

'I'm here,' Lucien said. 'Well, it'll be good to see you again. But steel yourself for a wait at customs; they're fingerprinting.'

VIEW

Mr Matsumoto's loft is a jungle of big rubbery trees, under which crouch sleek items of chrome and leather. Spindly electronic devices blink or warble amid the foliage, and here and there one comes upon an immense flat-screen TV – the first of their kind that Nathaniel ever handled.

Nathaniel and his friends have been subletting – thanks, obviously, to Uncle Lucien – for a ridiculously minimal rent and on Mr Matsumoto's highly tolerable conditions of catsitting and general upkeep. Nathaniel and Lyle and Amity and Madison each have something like an actual bedroom, and there are three whole bathrooms, one equipped with a Jacuzzi. The kitchen, stone and steel, has cupboards bigger than most of their friends' apartments. Art – important, soon to be important or very recently important, most of which was acquired from Uncle Lucien – hangs on the walls.

And the terrace! One has only to open the magic sliding panel to find oneself halfway to heaven. On the evening, over three years ago, when Uncle Lucien completed the arrangements for Nathaniel to sublet and showed him the place, Nathaniel stepped out on to the terrace and tears shot right up into his eyes.

There was that unearthly palace, the Chrysler Building! There was the Empire State Building, like a brilliant violet hologram! There were the vast, twinkling prairies of Brooklyn and New Jersey! And best of all, Nathaniel could make out the Statue of Liberty holding her torch aloft, as she had held it for each of his parents when they arrived as children from across the ocean – terrified, filthy and hungry – to safety.

Stars glimmered nearby; towers and spires, glowing emerald, topaz, ruby, sapphire, soared below. The avenues and bridges slung a trembling net of light across the rivers, over the buildings. Everything was spangled and dancing; the little boats glittered. The lights floated up and up like bubbles.

Back when Nathaniel moved into Mr Matsumoto's loft, shortly after his millennial arrival in New York, sitting out on

the terrace had been like looking down over the rim into a gigantic glass of champagne.

UNCLE LUCIEN'S WORDS OF ASSURANCE

So, Matsumoto is returning. And Lucien has called Nathaniel, the nephew of his adored late wife, Charlie, to break the news.

Well, of course it's hardly a catastrophe for the boy. Matsumoto's place was only a sublet in any case, and Nathaniel and his friends will all find other apartments.

But it's such an ordeal in this city. And all four of the young people, however different they might be, strike Lucien as being in some kind of holding pattern – as if they're temporizing, or muffled by unspoken reservations. Of course, he doesn't really know them. Maybe it's just the eternal, poignant weariness of youth.

The strangest thing about getting old (or one of the many strangest things) is that young people sometimes appear to Lucien – as, in fact, Sharmila does at this very moment – in a nimbus of tender light. It's as if her unrealized future were projecting outward like ectoplasm.

'Doing anything entertaining this evening?' he asks her.

She sighs. 'Time will tell,' she says.

She's a nice young woman; he'd like to give her a few words of advice, or reassurance.

But what could they possibly be? 'Don't –' he begins.

Don't worry? *HAHAHAHAHA!* Don't feel *sad*? 'Don't bother about the phones,' is what he settles down on. A new show goes up tomorrow, and it's become Lucien's custom on such evenings to linger in the stripped gallery and have a glass of wine. 'I'll take care of them.'

But how has he *gotten* so old?

SUSPENSION

So, there was the famous, strangely blank New Year's Eve, the nothing at all that happened, neither the apocalypse nor the failure of the planet's computers, nor, evidently, the dawning of a better age. Nathaniel had gone to parties with his old friends from school and was asleep before dawn; the next afternoon he awoke with only a mild hangover and an uneasy impression of something left undone.

Next thing you knew, along came

BOOKS OF THIS CENTURY

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*How, Fuelled By Fantasy and (Possibly)
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OR

FOOTNOTES

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that slump, as it was called – the general economic blight that withered the New York branch of Mr Matsumoto’s firm and clusters of jobs all over the city. There appeared to be no jobs at all, in fact, but then – somehow – Uncle Lucien unearthed one for Nathaniel in the architectural division of the subway system. It was virtually impossible to afford an apartment, but Uncle Lucien arranged for Nathaniel to sublet Mr Matsumoto’s loft.

Then Madison and his girlfriend broke up, so Madison moved into Mr Matsumoto’s, too. Not long afterwards, the brokerage house where Amity was working collapsed resoundingly, and she’d joined them. Then Lyle’s landlord jacked up his rent, so Lyle started living at Mr Matsumoto’s as well.

As the return of Mr Matsumoto to New York was contingent upon the return of a reasonable business climate, one way or another it had sort of slipped their minds that Mr Matsumoto was real. And for over three years there they’ve been, hanging in temporary splendour thirty-one floors above the pavement.

They’re all out on the terrace this evening. Madison has brought in champagne so that they can salute with an adequate flourish the end of their tenure in Mr Matsumoto’s place. And except for Amity, who takes a principled stand against thoughtful moods, and Amity’s new friend or possibly suitor, Russell, who has no history here, they’re kind of quiet.

REUNION

Now that Sharmila has gone, Lucien’s stunning, cutting-edge gallery space blurs a bit and recedes. The room, in fact, seems almost like an old snapshot from that bizarre, quaintly futuristic century, the twentieth. Lucien takes a bottle of white wine from the little fridge in the office, pours himself a glass, and from behind a door in that century, emerges Charlie.

Charlie – Oh, how long it’s been, how unbearably long! Lucien luxuriates in the little pulse of warmth just under his skin that indicates her presence. He strains for traces of her voice, but her words degrade like the words in a dream, as if they’re being rubbed through a sieve.

Yes, yes, Lucien assures her. He’ll put his mind to finding another apartment

for her nephew. And when her poor, exasperating sister and brother-in-law call frantically about Nathaniel, as they’re bound to do, he’ll do his best to calm them down.

But what a nuisance it all is! The boy is as opaque to his parents as a turnip. He was the child of their old age and he’s also, obviously, the repository of all of their baroque hopes and fears. By their own account, they throw up their hands and wring them, lecture Nathaniel about frugality, then press spending money upon him and fret when he doesn’t use it.

Between Charlie’s death and Nathaniel’s arrival in New York, Lucien heard from Rose and Isaac only at what they considered moments of emergency: Nathaniel’s grades were erratic! His friends were bizarre! Nathaniel had expressed an interest in architecture, an unreliable future! He drew, and Lucien had better sit down, *comics!*

The lamentations would pour through the phone, and then, the instant Lucien hung up, evaporate. But if he had given the matter one moment’s thought, he realizes, he would have understood from very early on that it was only a matter of time until the boy found his way to the city.

It was about four years ago now that Rose and Isaac put in an especially urgent call. Lucien held the receiver at arm’s length and gritted his teeth. ‘You’re an important man,’ Rose was shouting. ‘We understand that, we understand how busy you are, you know we’d never do this, but it’s an emergency. The boy’s in New York, and he sounds terrible. He doesn’t have a job, lord only knows what he eats – I don’t know what to think, Lucien, he drifts, he’s just drifting. Call him, promise me, that’s all I’m asking.’

‘Fine, certainly, good,’ Lucien said, already gabbling; he would have agreed to anything if Rose would only hang up. ‘But whatever you do,’ she added, ‘please, please, under no circumstances should you let him know that we asked you to call.’

Lucien looked at the receiver incredulously. ‘But how else would I have known he was in New York?’ he said. ‘How else would I have gotten his number?’

There was a silence, and then a brief, amazed laugh from Isaac on another

extension. ‘Well, I don’t know what you’ll tell him,’ Isaac said admiringly. ‘But you’re the brains of the family, you’ll think of something.’

INNOCENCE

And actually, Russell (who seems to be not only Amity’s friend and possible suitor but also her agent) has obtained for Amity a whopping big advance from some outfit that Madison refers to as Cheeseball Editions, so whatever else they might all be drinking to (or drinking about) naturally Amity’s celebrating a bit. And Russell, recently arrived from LA, cannot suppress his ecstasy about how *ur* New York, as he puts it, Mr Matsumoto’s loft is, tactless as he apparently recognizes this untimely ecstasy to be.

‘It’s *fantastic*,’ he says. ‘Who did it, do you know?’

Nathaniel nods. ‘Matthias Lehmann.’ ‘That’s what I thought, I thought so,’ Russell says. ‘It *looks* like Lehmann. Oh, wow, I can’t believe you guys have to move out – I mean, it’s just so totally amazing!’

Nathaniel and Madison nod and Lyle sniffs peevisly. Lyle is stretched out on a yoga mat that Nathaniel once bought in preparation for a romance (as yet *manqué*) with a prettily tattooed yoga teacher he runs into in the bodega on the corner. Lyle’s skin has a waxy, bluish cast; there are dark patches beneath his eyes. He looks like a child too precociously worried to sleep. His boyfriend, Jahan, has more or less relocated to London, and Lyle has been missing him frantically. Lying there so still on the yoga mat with his eyes closed, he appears to be a tomb sculpture from an as yet non-existent civilization.

‘And the view!’ Russell says. ‘This is probably the most incredible view on the planet.’

The others consider the sight of Russell’s eager face. And then Amity says, ‘More champagne, anyone?’

Well, sure, who knows where Russell had been? Who knows where he would have been on that shining, calm, perfectly blue September morning when the rest of them were here having coffee on the terrace and looked up at the annoying racket of a low-flying plane? Why should they expect Russell – now, nearly three years later – to imagine that moment out

on the terrace when Lyle spilled his coffee and said, 'Oh, shit,' and something flashed and something tore, and the cloudless sky ignited.

HOME

Rose and Isaac have elbowed their way in behind Charlie, and no matter how forcefully Lucien tries to boot them out, they're making themselves at home, airing their dreary history.

Both sailed as tiny, traumatized children with their separate families and on separate voyages right into the Statue of Liberty's open arms. Rose was almost eleven when her little sister, Charlie, came into being, along with a stainless American birth certificate.

Neither Rose and Charlie's parents nor Isaac's ever recovered from their journey to the New World, to say nothing of what had preceded it. The two sets of old folks spoke, between them, Yiddish, Polish, Russian, German, Croatian, Slovenian, Ukrainian, Ruthenian, Romanian, Latvian, Czech and Hungarian, Charlie had once told Lucien, but not one of the four ever managed to learn more English than was needed to procure a quarter pound of smoked sturgeon from the deli. They worked impossible hours, they drank a little schnapps, and then, in due course, they died.

Isaac did fairly well manufacturing vacuum cleaners. He and Rose were solid members of their temple and the community, but, according to Charlie, no matter how uneventful their lives in the United States continued to be, filling out an unfamiliar form would cause Isaac's hands to sweat and send jets of acid through his innards. When he or Rose encountered someone in uniform – a train conductor, a meter maid, a crossing guard – their hearts would leap into their throats and they would think: *Passport!*

Their three elder sons, Nathaniel's brothers, fulfilled Rose and Isaac's deepest hopes by turning out to be blindingly inconspicuous. The boys were so reliable and had so few characteristics it was hard to imagine what anyone could think up to kill them for. They were Jewish, of course, but even Rose and Isaac understood that this particular criterion was inoperative in the United States – at least for the time being.

The Old World, danger and poverty

were far in the past. Nevertheless, the family lived in their tidy, midwestern house with its two-car garage as if secret police were permanently hiding under the matching plastic-covered sofas, as if Brownshirts and Cossacks were permanently rampaging through the suburban streets.

Lucien knew precious little about vacuum cleaners and nothing at all about childhood infections or lawn fertilizers. And yet, as soon as Charlie introduced him, Isaac and Rose set about soliciting his views as if he were an authority on everything that existed on their shared continent.

His demurrals, disclaimers and protestations of ignorance were completely ineffective. Whatever guess he was finally strong-armed into hazarding was received as oracular. Oracular!

Fervent gratitude was expressed: thank God Charlie had brought Lucien into the family! How brilliant he was, how knowledgeable and subtle! And then Rose and Isaac would proceed to pick over his poor little opinion as if they were the most ruthless and highly trained lawyers, and on the opposing side.

After Charlie was diagnosed, Lucien had just enough time to understand perfectly what that was to mean. When he was exhausted enough to sleep, he slept as though under heavy anaesthetic during an amputation. The pain was not alleviated, but it had been made inscrutable. A frightful thing seemed to lie on top of him, heavy and cold. All night long he would struggle to throw it off, but when dawn delivered him to consciousness, he understood what it was, and that it would never go away.

During his waking hours, the food on his plate would abruptly lose its taste, the painting he was studying would bleach off the canvas, the friend he was talking to would turn into a stranger. And then, one day, he was living in a world all made out of paper, where the sun was a wad of old newspapers and the only sounds were the sounds of tearing paper.

He spoke with Rose and Isaac frequently during Charlie's illness, and they came to New York for her memorial service, where they sat self-consciously and miserably among Lucien and Charlie's attractive friends. He took them to the airport for their return to the Mid-

west, embraced them warmly, and as they shuffled towards the departure door with the other passengers, turning once to wave, he breathed a sigh of relief: all that, at least, was over, too.

As his senses began to revive, he felt a brief pang – he would miss, in a minor way, the heart-rending buffoonery of Charlie's sister and brother-in-law. After all, it had been part of his life with Charlie, even if it had been the only annoying part.

But Charlie's death, instead of setting him utterly, blessedly adrift in his grief, had left him anchored permanently offshore of her family like an island. After a long silence, the infuriating calls started up again. The feudal relationship was apparently inalterable.

CONTEXT

When they'd moved in, it probably *was* the best view on the planet. Then, one morning, out of a clear blue sky, it became, for a while, probably the worst.

For a long time now they've been able to hang out here on the terrace without anyone running inside to be sick or bursting into tears or diving under something at a loud noise or even just making macabre jokes or wondering what sort of debris is settling into their drinks. These days they rarely see – as for a time they invariably did – the sky igniting, the stinking smoke bursting out of it like lava, the tiny figures raining down from the shattered tower as Lyle faints.

But now it's unclear what they are, in fact, looking at.

INFORMATION

What would Charlie say about the show that's about to go up? It's work by a youngish Belgian painter who arrived, splashily, on the scene sometime after Charlie's departure. It's good work, but these days Lucien can't get terribly excited about any of the shows. The vibrancy of his brain arranging itself in response to something of someone else's making, the heart's little leap – his gift, reliable for so many years, is gone. Or mostly gone; it's flattened out into something banal and tepid. It's as if he's got some part that's simply worn out and needs replacing. Let's hope it's still available, he thinks.

How *did* he get so old? The usual stupid question. One had snickered all one's

life as the plaintive old geezers doddered about baffled, as if looking for a misplaced sock, tugging one's sleeve, asking sheepishly: *How did I get so old?*

The mere sight of one's patiently blank expression turned them vicious. *It will happen to you*, they'd raged.

Well, all right, it would. But not in the ridiculous way it had happened to *them*. And yet, here he is, he and his friends, falling like so much landfill into the dump of old age. Or at least struggling desperately to balance on the brink. Yet one second ago, running so swiftly towards it, they hadn't even seen it.

And what had happened to his youth? Unlike a misplaced sock, it isn't anywhere; it had dissolved in the making of him.

Surprising that after Charlie's death he did not take the irreversible step. He'd had no appetite to live. But the body has its own appetite, apparently – that pitiless need to continue with its living, which has so many disguises and so many rationales.

A deep embarrassment has been stalking him. Every time he lets his guard down these days, there it is. Because it's become clear: he and even the most dissolute among his friends have glided through their lives on the assumption that the sheer fact of their existence has in some way made the world a better place. As deranged as it sounds now, a better place. Not a leafy bower, maybe, but still, a somewhat better place – more tolerant, more amenable to the wonderful adventures of the human mind and the human body, more capable of outrage against injustice . . .

For shame! One has been shocked, all one's life, to learn of the blind eye turned to children covered with bruises and welts, the blind eye turned to the men who came at night for the neighbours. And yet . . . And yet one has clung to the belief that the sun shining inside one's head is evidence of sunshine elsewhere.

Not everywhere, of course. Obviously, at every moment something terrible is being done to someone somewhere – one can't really know about each instance of it!

Then again, how far away does something have to be before you have the right to not really know about it?

Sometime after Charlie's death, Lucien resumed throwing his parties. He and his friends continued to buy art and make art, to drink and reflect. They voted responsibly, they gave to charity, they read the paper assiduously. And while they were basking in their exclusive sunshine, what had happened to the planet? Lucien gazes at his glass of wine, his eyes stinging.

HOMESICK

Nathaniel was eight or nine when his aunt and uncle had come out to the Midwest to visit the family, lustrous and clever and comfortable and humorous and affectionate with one another, in their soft, stylish clothing. They'd brought books with them to read. When they talked to each other – and they habitually did – not only did they take turns, but also, what *one* said followed on what the *other* said. What world could they have come from? What was the world in which beings like his aunt and uncle could exist?

A world utterly unlike his parents', that was for sure – a world of freedom and lightness and beauty and the ardent exchange of ideas and . . . and . . . *fun*.

A great longing rose up in Nathaniel like a flower with a lovely, haunting fragrance. When he was ready, he'd thought – when he was able, when he was worthy, he'd get to the world from which his magic aunt and uncle had once briefly appeared.

The evidence, though, kept piling up that he was not worthy. Because even when he finished school, he simply didn't budge. How unfair it was – his friends had flown off so easily, as if going to New York were nothing at all.

Immediately after graduation, Madison found himself a job at a fancy New York PR firm. And it seemed that there was a place out there on the trading floor of the Stock Exchange for Amity. And Lyle had suddenly exhibited an astonishing talent for sound design and engineering, so where else would he sensibly live, either?

Yes, the fact was that only Nathaniel seemed slated to remain behind in their college town. Well, he told himself, his parents were getting on; he would worry, so far away. And he was actually employed as a part-time assistant with an actual architectural firm, whereas in New York the competition, for even the lowliest of such jobs, would be ferocious. And

also, he had plenty of time, living where he did, to work on *Passivityman*.

And that's what he told Amity, too, when she'd called one night, four years ago, urging him to take the plunge.

'It's time for you to try, Nathaniel,' she said. 'It's time to commit. This oddball, slacker stance is getting kind of old, don't you think, kind of stale. You cannot let your life be ruled by fear any longer.'

'Fear?' He flinched. 'By what fear, exactly, do you happen to believe my life is ruled?'

'Well, I mean, fear of failure, obviously. Fear of mediocrity.'

For an instant he thought he might be sick.

'Right,' he said. 'And why should I fear failure and mediocrity? Failure and mediocrity have such august traditions! Anyhow, what's up with you, Amity?'

She'd been easily distracted, and they chatted on for a while, but when they hung up, he felt very, very strange, as if his apartment had slightly changed shape. Amity was right, he'd thought; it was fear that stood between him and the life he'd meant to be leading.

That was probably the coldest night of the whole, difficult millennium. The timid midwestern sun had basically gone down at the beginning of September; it wouldn't be around much again till May. Black ice glared on the street outside like the cloak of an extra-cruel witch. The sink faucet was dripping into a cracked and stained teacup: *tick tock tick tock . . .*

What was he *doing*? Once he'd dreamed of designing tranquil and ennobling dwellings, buildings that urged benign relationships, rich inner harmonies; he'd dreamed of meeting fascinating strangers. True, he'd managed to avoid certain pitfalls of middle-class adulthood – he wasn't a white-collar criminal, for example; he wasn't (at least as far as he knew) a total blowhard. But what was he *actually doing*? His most exciting social contact was the radio. He spent his salaried hours in a cinder-block office building, poring over catalogues of plumbing fixtures. The rest of the day – and the whole evening, too – he sat at the little desk his parents had bought for him when he was in junior high, slaving over *Passivityman*, a comic strip that ran in free papers all over parts of the Midwest, a comic strip that

was doted on by whole dozens, the fact was, of stoned undergrads.

He was twenty-four years old! Soon he'd be twenty-eight. In a few more minutes he'd be thirty-five, then fifty. Five zero. How had that happened? He was eighty! He could feel his vascular system and brain clogging with paste, he was drooling . . .

And if history had anything to teach, it was that he'd be broke when he was eighty, too, and that his personal life would still be a disaster.

But wait. Long ago, panic had sent his grandparents and parents scurrying from murderous Europe, with its death camps and pogroms, to the safe harbour of New York. Panic had kept them going as far as the Midwest, where gruelling labour enabled them and eventually their children to lead blessedly ordinary lives. And sooner or later, Nathaniel's pounding heart was telling him, that same sure-footed guide, panic, would help him retrace his family's steps all the way back to Manhattan.

OPPORTUNISM

Blip! Charlie scatters again as Lucien's attention wavers from her and the empty space belonging to her is seized by Miss Mueller.

Huh, but what do you know – death *suits* Miss Mueller! In life she was drab, but now she absolutely throbs with ghoulishness. *You there, Lucien* – the shriek echoes around the gallery – *What are the world's three great religions?*

Zen Buddhism, Jainism and Sufism, he responds sulkily.

Naughty boy! She cackles flirtatiously. *Bang bang, you're dead!*

THE HALF-LIFE OF PASSIVITY

Passivityman is taking a snooze, his standard response to stress, when the alarm rings. 'I'll check it out later, boss,' he murmurs.

'You'll check it out *now*, please,' his girlfriend and superior, the beautiful Princess Prudence, tells him. 'Just put on those grubby corduroys and get out there.'

'Aw, is it really *urgent?*' he asks.

'Don't you get it?' she says. 'I've been warning you, episode after episode! And now, from his appliance-rich house on the Moon, Captain Corporation has

tightened his Net of Evil around the planet Earth, and he's dragging it out of orbit! The US Congress is selected by pharmaceutical companies, the state of Israel is run by Christian fundamentalists, the folks that haul toxic sludge manufacture cattle feed and process burgers, your sources of news and information are edited by a giant mouse, New York City and Christian fundamentalism are holdings of a family in Kuwait – *and all of it's owned by Captain Corporation!*'

Passivityman rubs his eyes and yawns. 'Well gosh, Pru, sure – but, like, what am I supposed to do about it?'

'I don't know,' Princess Prudence says. 'It's hardly my job to figure that out, is it? I mean, *you're* the superhero. Just – just – just go out and do something conspicuously lacking in monetary value! Invent some stinky, profit-proof gloop to pour on stuff. Or, I don't know, whatever. But you'd better do *something*, before it's too late.'

'Sounds like it's totally too late already,' says Passivityman, reaching for a cigarette.

It was quite a while ago now that Passivityman seemed to throw in the towel. Nathaniel's friends looked at the strip with him and scratched their heads.

'Hm, I don't know, Nathaniel,' Amity said. 'This episode is awfully complicated. I mean, Passivityman's seeming kind of passive-aggressive, actually.'

'Can Passivityman not be bothered any longer to protect the abject with his greed-repelling Shield of Sloth?' Lyle asked.

'It's not going to be revealed that Passivityman is a double agent, is it?' Madison said. 'I mean, what about his undying struggle against corporate-model efficiency?'

'The truth is, I don't really know what's going on with him,' Nathaniel said. 'I was thinking that maybe, unbeknownst to himself, he's come under the thrall of his morally neutral, transgendering twin, Ambiguityperson.'

'Yeah,' Madison said. 'But I mean, the problem here is that he's just not dealing with the paradox of his own being – he seems kind of *intellectually* passive . . .'

Oh, dear. Poor Passivityman. He was a *tired* old crime fighter. Nathaniel sighed; it was hard to live the way his superhero

lived – constantly vigilant against the premature conclusion, scrupulously rejecting the vulgar ambition, rigorously deferring judgement and action . . . and all for the greater good.

'Huh, well, I guess he's sort of losing his superpowers,'

Nathaniel said.

The others looked away uncomfortably.

'Oh, it's probably just one of those slumps,' Amity said. 'I'm sure he'll be back to normal, soon.'

But by now, Nathaniel realizes, he's all but stopped trying to work on *Passivityman*.

ALL THIS

Thanks for pointing that out, Miss Mueller. Yes, humanity seems to have reverted by a millennium or so. Goon squads, purporting to represent each of the *world's three great religions* – as they used to be called to fifth-graders, and perhaps still so misleadingly are – have deployed themselves all over the map, apparently in hopes of annihilating not only each other, but absolutely everyone, themselves excepted.

Just a few weeks earlier, Lucien was on a plane heading home from Los Angeles, and over the loudspeaker, the pilot requested that all Christians on board raise their hands. The next sickening instants provided more than enough time for conjecture as to who, exactly, was about to be killed – Christians or non-Christians. And then the pilot went on to ask those who had raised their hands to talk about their 'faith' with the others.

Well, better him than Rose and Isaac; that would have been two sure heart attacks, right there. And anyhow, why should he be so snooty about religious fanaticism? Stalin managed to kill off over thirty million people in the name of no god at all, and not so very long ago.

At the moment when *all this* – as Lucien thinks of it – began, the moment when a few ordinary-looking men carrying box cutters sped past the limits of international negotiation and the frontiers of technology, turning his miraculous city into a nightmare and hurling the future into a void, Lucien was having his croissant and coffee.

The television was saying something. Lucien wheeled around and stared at it, then turned to look out the window; downtown, black smoke was already beginning to pollute the perfect, silken September morning. On the screen, the ruptured, flaming colossus was shedding veils of tiny black specks.

All circuits were busy, of course; the phone might as well have been a toy. Lucien was trembling as he shut the door of the apartment behind him. His face was wet. Outside, he saw that the sky in the north was still insanelly blue.

THE AGE OF DROSS

Well, superpowers are probably a feature of youth, like Wendy's ability to fly around with that creepy Peter Pan. Or maybe they belonged to a loftier period of history. It seems that Captain Corporation, his swaggering lieutenants and massed armies have actually neutralized Passivityman's superpower. Passivityman's astonishing reserves of resistance have vanished in the quicksand of Captain Corporation's invisible account books. His rallying cry, *No way*, which once rang out over the land, demobilizing millions, has been altered by Captain Corporation's co-optophone into *Whatever*. And the superpowers of Nathaniel's friends have been seriously challenged, too. Challenged, or . . . outgrown.

Amity's superpower, her gift for exploiting systemic weaknesses, had taken a terrible beating several years ago when the gold she spun out on the trading floor turned – just like everyone else's – into straw. And subsequently, she plummeted from job to job, through layers of prestige, ending up behind a counter in a fancy department store where she sold overpriced skin-care products.

Now, of course, the sale of *Inner Beauty Secrets* – her humorous, lightly fictionalized account of her experiences there with her clients – indicates that perhaps her powers are regenerating. But time will tell.

Madison's superpower, an obtuse, patrician equanimity in the face of damning fact, was violently and irremediably terminated one day when a girl arrived at the door asking for him.

'I'm your sister,' she told him. 'Sorry,' Madison said, 'I've never seen you before in my life.' 'Hang on,' the girl said. 'I'm

just getting to that.'

For months afterwards, Madison kept everyone awake late into the night repudiating all his former beliefs, his beautiful blue eyes whirling around and his hair standing on end as if he'd stuck his hand into a socket. He quit his lucrative PR job and denounced the firm's practices in open letters to media watchdog groups (copies to his former boss). The many women who'd been running after him did a fast about-face.

Amity called him a 'bitter sceptic'; he called Amity a 'dupe'. The heated quarrel that followed has tapered off into an uneasy truce, at best.

Lyle's superpower back in school was his spectacular level of aggrievedness and his ability to get anyone at all to feel sorry for him. But later, doing sound with a Paris-based dance group, Lyle met Jahan, who was doing the troupe's lighting.

Jahan is (a) as handsome as a prince, (b) as charming, as intelligent, as noble in his thoughts, feelings and actions as a prince, and (c) a prince, at least of some attenuated sort. So no one feels sorry for Lyle at all any longer, and Lyle has apparently left the pleasures of even *self*-pity behind him without a second thought.

A while ago, though, Jahan was mistakenly arrested in some sort of sweep near Times Square, and when he was finally released from custody, he moved to London, and Lyle does nothing but pine, when he can't be in London himself.

'Well, look on the bright side,' Nathaniel said. 'At least you might get your superpower back.'

'You know, Nathaniel . . .' Lyle said. He looked at Nathaniel for a moment, and then an unfamiliar kindness modified his expression. He patted Nathaniel on the shoulder and went on his way.

Yikes. So much for Lyle's superpower, obviously.

'It's great that you got to live here for so long, though,' Russell is saying.

Nathaniel has the sudden sensation of his whole four years in New York twisting themselves into an arrow, speeding through the air and twanging into the dead centre of this evening. All so hard to believe. 'This is not happening,' he says.

'I think it might really *be* happening, though,' Lyle says.

'Fifty per cent of respondents say that

the event taking place is not occurring,' Madison says. 'The other fifty per cent remain undecided. Clearly, the truth lies somewhere in between.'

Soon it might be as if he and Lyle and Madison and Amity had never even lived here. Because this moment is joined to all the other moments they've spent together here, and all of those moments are Right Now. But soon this moment and all the others will be cut off – in the past, not part of Right Now at all. Yeah, he and his three friends might all be going their separate ways, come to think of it, once they move out.

CONTINUITY

While the sirens screamed, Lucien had walked against the tide of dazed, smoke-smearing people, down into the fuming cauldron, and when he finally reached the police cordon, his feet aching, he wandered along it for hours, searching for Charlie's nephew, among all the other people who were searching for family, friends, lovers.

Oh, that day! One kept waiting – as if a morning would arrive from before that day to take them all along a different track. One kept waiting for that shattering day to unhappen, so that the real – the intended – future, the one that had been implied by the past, could unfold. Hour after hour, month after month, waiting for that day to not have happened. But it had happened. And now it was always going to have happened.

Most likely on the very mornings that first Rose and then Isaac had disembarked at Ellis Island, each clutching some remnant of the world they were never to see again, Lucien was being wheeled in his pram through the genteel world, a few miles uptown, of brownstones.

The city, more than his body, contained his life. His life! The schools he had gone to as a child, the market where his mother had bought the groceries, the park where he had played with his classmates, the restaurants where he had courted Charlie, the various apartments they'd lived in, the apartments of their friends, the gallery, the newsstand on the corner, the dry cleaner's . . . The things he did in the course of the day, year after year, the people he encountered.

A sticky layer of crematorium ash settled over the whole of Matsumoto's neighbourhood, even inside, behind closed windows, as thick in places as turf, and water was unavailable for a time. Nathaniel and his friends all stayed elsewhere, of course, for a few weeks. When it became possible, Lucien sent crews down to Matsumoto's loft to scour the place and restore the art.

FAREWELL

A memorandum hanging in Mr Matsumoto's lobby appeared several months ago when freakish blackouts were rolling over the city.

Emergency Tips from the Management urges residents to assemble a Go Bag, in the event of an evacuation, as well as an In-Home Survival Kit. Among items to include: a large amount of cash in small denominations, water and non-perishable foods such as granola bars, a wind-up radio, warm clothing and sturdy walking shoes, unscented bleach and an eyedropper for purifying water, plastic sheeting and duct tape, a whistle, a box cutter.

Also recommended is a Household Disaster Plan and the practising of emergency drills.

A hand-lettered sign next to the elevator says *THINK TWICE*.

Twenty-eight years old, no superhero, a job that just *might* lead down to a career in underground architecture, a vanishing apartment, a menacing elevator . . . Maybe he should view Mr Matsumoto's return as an opportunity, and regroup. Maybe he should *do* something – take matters in hand. Maybe he should go try to find Delphine, for example.

But how? He hasn't heard from her, and she could be anywhere now; she'd mentioned Bucharest, she'd mentioned Havana, she'd mentioned Shanghai, she'd mentioned Istanbul . . .

He'd met her at one of his uncle's parties. There was the usual huge roomful of people wearing strangely pleated black clothes, like the garments of a sombre devotional sect, and there she was in electric-blue taffeta, amazingly tall and narrow, lazy and nervous, like an electric bluebell.

She favoured men nearly twice Nathaniel's age and millions of times richer, but for a while she let Nathaniel come over to her apartment and play her his

favourite CDs. They drank perfume-y infusions from chipped porcelain cups, or vodka. Delphine could become thrillingly drunk, and she smoked, letting long columns of ash form on her tarry, unfiltered cigarettes. One night, when he lost his keys, she let him come over and sleep in her bed while she went out, and when the sky fell, she actually let him sleep on her floor for a week.

Her apartment was filled with puffy, silky little sofas, and old, damaged mirrors and tarnished candlesticks, and tall vases filled with slightly wilting flowers. It smelled like powder and tea and cigarettes and her Abyssinian cats, which prowled the savannas of the white, long-haired rugs or posed on the marble mantelpiece.

Delphine's father was Armenian and he lived in Paris, which according to Delphine was a bore. Her mother was Chilean. Delphine's English had been acquired at a boarding school in Kent for dull-witted rich girls and castaways, like herself, from everywhere.

She spoke many languages, she was self-possessed and beautiful and fascinating. She could have gone to live anywhere. And she had come, like Nathaniel, to New York.

'But look at it now,' she'd raged. Washington was dropping bombs on Afghanistan and then Iraq, and every few weeks there was a flurry of alerts in kindergarten colours indicating the likelihood of terrorist attacks: yellow, orange, red, *duck!*

'Do you know how I get the news here?' Delphine said. 'From your newspapers? Please! From your newspapers I learn what restaurant has opened. News I learn in taxis, from the drivers. And how do they get it? From their friends and relatives back home, in Pakistan or Uzbekistan or Somalia. The drivers sit around at the airport, swapping information, and they can tell you *anything*. But do you ask? Or sometimes I talk to my friends in Europe. Do you know what they're saying about you over there?'

'Please don't say "you", Delphine,' he had said faintly.

'Oh, yes, here it's not like stuffy old Europe, where everything is stifled by tradition and trauma. Here you're able to speak freely, within reason, of course, and isn't it wonderful that you all happen

to want to say exactly what they want you to say? Do you know how many people you're killing over there? No, how would you? Good, just keep your eyes closed, panic, don't ask any questions, and you can speak freely about whatever you like. And if you have any suspicious-looking neighbours, be sure to tell the police. You had everything here, everything, and you threw it all away in one second.'

She was so beautiful; he'd gazed at her as if he were already remembering her. 'Please don't say "you",' he murmured again.

'Poor Nathaniel,' she said. 'This place is nothing now but a small-minded, mean-spirited provincial town.'

THE AGE OF DIGITAL REASONING

One/two. On/off. The plane crashes/ doesn't crash.

The plane he took from LA didn't crash. It wasn't used as a missile to blow anything up, and not even one passenger was shot or stabbed. Nothing happened. So, what's the problem? What's the difference between having been on that flight and having been on any other flight in his life?

Oh, what's the point of thinking about death all the time! Think about it or not, you die. Besides – and here's something that sure hasn't changed – you don't have to do it more than once. And as you don't have to do it *less* than once, either, you might as well do it on the plane. Maybe there's no special problem these days. Maybe the problem is just that he's old.

Or maybe his nephew's is the last generation that will remember what it had once felt like to blithely assume there would be a future – at least a future like the one that had been implied by the past they'd all been familiar with.

But the future actually ahead of them, it's now obvious, had itself been implied by a past; and the terrible day that pointed them towards that future had been prepared for a long, long time, though it had been prepared behind a curtain.

It was as if there had been a curtain, a curtain painted with the map of the earth, its oceans and continents, with Lucien's delightful city. The planes struck, tearing through the curtain of that blue September morning, exposing the dark world that lay right behind it, of popula-

tions ruthlessly exploited, inflamed with hatred, and tired of waiting for change to happen by.

The stump of the ruined tower continued to smoulder far into the fall, and an unseasonable heat persisted. When the smoke lifted, all kinds of other events, which had been prepared behind a curtain, too, were revealed. Flags waved in the brisk air of fear, files were demanded from libraries and hospitals, droning helicopters hung over the city, and heavily armed policemen patrolled the parks. Meanwhile, one read that executives had pocketed the savings of their investors and the pensions of their employees.

The wars in the East were hidden behind a thicket of language: *patriotism, democracy, loyalty, freedom* – the words bounced around, changing purpose, as if they were made out of some funny plastic. What did they actually refer to? It seemed that they all might refer to money.

Were the sudden power outages and spiking level of unemployment related? And what was causing them? The newspapers seemed for the most part to agree that the cause of both was terrorism. But lots of people said they were both the consequence of corporate theft. It was certainly all beyond Lucien! Things that had formerly appeared to be distinct, or even at odds, now seemed to have been smoothly blended, to mutual advantage. Provocation and retribution, arms manufacture and statehood, oil and war, commerce and dogma, and the spinning planet seemed to be boiling them all together at the centre of the earth into a poison syrup. Enemies had soared towards each other from out of the past to unite in a joyous fireball; planes had sheared through the heavy, painted curtain and from the severed towers an inexhaustible geyser had erupted.

Styles of pets revolved rapidly, as if the city's residents were searching for a type of animal that would express a stance appropriate to the horrifying assault, which for all anyone knew was only the first of many.

For a couple of months everyone was walking cute, perky things. Then Lucien saw snarling hounds everywhere and the

occasional boa constrictor draped around its owner's shoulders. After that, it was tiny, trembling dogs that travelled in purses and pockets.

New York had once been the threshold of an impregnable haven, then the city had become in an instant the country's open wound, and now it was the occasion – the pretext! – for killing and theft and legislative horrors all over the world. The air stank from particulate matter – chemicals and asbestos and blood and scorched bone. People developed coughs and strange rashes.

What should be done, and to whom? Almost any word, even between friends, could ignite a sheet of flame. What were the bombings for? First one imperative was cited and then another; the rationales shifted hastily to cover successive gaps in credibility. Bills were passed containing buried provisions, and loopholes were triumphantly discovered – alarming elasticities or rigidities in this law or that. One was sick of trying to get a solid handle on the stream of pronouncements – it was like endlessly trying to sort little bits of paper into stacks when a powerful fan was on.

Friends in Europe and Asia sent him clippings about his own country. *What's all this*, they asked – secret arrests and detentions, his president capering about in military uniform, crazy talk of preemptive nuclear strikes? Why were they releasing a big science fiction horror movie over there, about the emperor of everything everywhere, for which the whole world was required to buy tickets? What on earth was going on with them all, why were they all so silent? Why did they all seem so confused?

How was he to know, Lucien thought. If his foreign friends had such great newspapers, why didn't *they* tell *him*!

No more smiles from strangers on the street! Well, it was reasonable to be frightened; everyone had seen what those few men were able to do with the odds and ends in their pockets. The heat lifted, and then there was unremitting cold. No one lingered to joke and converse in the course of their errands, but instead hurried irritably along, like people with bad consciences.

And always in front of you now was

the sight that had been hidden by the curtain, of all those irrepressibly, murderously angry people.

Private life shrank to nothing. All one's feelings had been absorbed by an arid wasteland – policy, strategy, goals. One's past, one's future, one's ordinary daily pleasures were like dusty little curios on a shelf.

Lucien continued defiantly throwing his parties, but as the murky wars dragged on, he stopped. It was impossible to have fun or to want to have fun. It was one thing to have fun if the sun was shining generally, quite another thing to have fun if it was raining blood everywhere but on your party. What did he and his friends really have in common, anyway? Maybe nothing more than their level of privilege.

In restaurants and cafes all over the city, people seemed to have changed. The good-hearted, casually wasteful festival was over. In some places the diners were sullen and dogged, as if they felt accused of getting away with something.

In other places, the gaiety was cranked up to the level of completely unconvincing hysteria. For a long miserable while, in fact, the city looked like a school play about war profiteering. The bars were overflowing with very young people from heaven only knew where, in hideous, ludicrously showy clothing, spending massive amounts of money on green, pink and orange cocktails, and laughing at the top of their lungs, as if at filthy jokes.

No, not like a school play – like a movie, though the performances and the direction were crude. The loud, ostensibly carefree young people appeared to be extras recruited from the suburbs, and yet sometime in the distant future, people seeing such a movie might think, Oh, yes, that was a New York that existed once, say, at the end of the millennium.

It was Lucien's city, Lucien's times, and yet what he appeared to be living in wasn't the actual present – it was an inaccurate representation of the *past*. True, it looked something like the New York that existed before *all this* began, but Lucien remembered, and he could see: the costumes were not quite right, the hairstyles were not quite right, the gestures and the dialogue were not quite right.

Oh. Yes. Of course none of it was quite right – the movie was a *propaganda* movie. And now it seems that the propaganda movie has done its job; things, in a grotesque sense, are back to normal.

Money is flowing a bit again, most of the flags have folded up, those nerve-racking terror alerts have all but stopped, the kids in the restaurants have calmed down, no more rolling blackouts, and the dogs on the street encode no particular messages. Once again, people are concerned with getting on with their lives. Once again, the curtain has dropped.

Except that people seem a little bit nervous, a little uncomfortable, a little wary. Because you can't help sort of knowing that what you're seeing is only the curtain. And you can't help guessing what might be going on behind it.

THE FURTHER IN THE
PAST THINGS ARE,
THE BIGGER THEY
BECOME

Nathaniel remembers more and more rather than less and less vividly the visit of his uncle and aunt to the Midwest during his childhood.

He'd thought his aunt Charlie was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. And for all he knows, she really was. He never saw her after that one visit; by the time he came to New York and reconnected with Uncle Lucien she had been dead for a long time. She would still have been under fifty when she died – crushed, his mother had once, in a mood, implied, by the weight of her own pretensions.

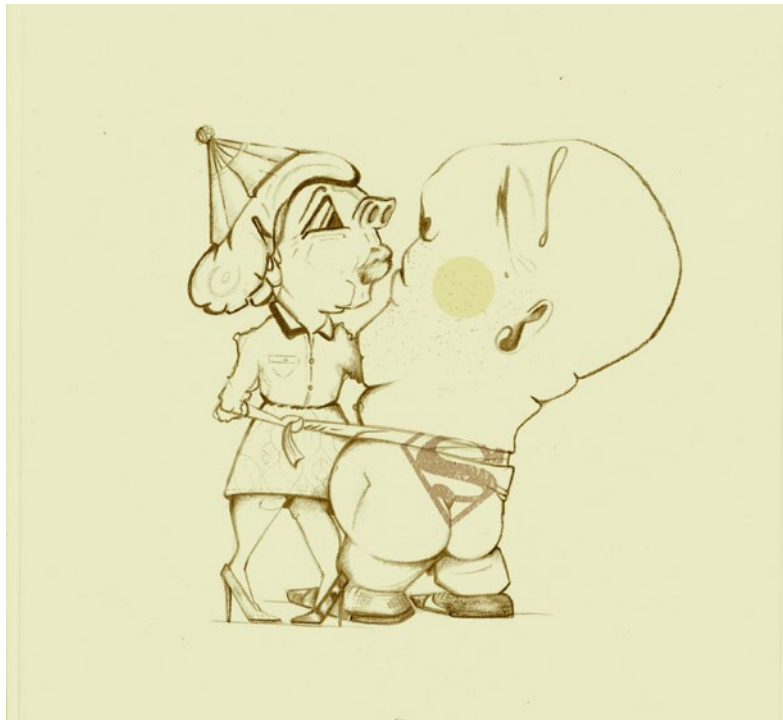
His poor mother! She had cooked, cleaned, and fretted for . . . months, it had seemed, in preparation for that visit of Uncle Lucien and Aunt Charlie. And observing in his memory the four grown-ups, Nathaniel can see an awful lot of white knuckles.

He remembers his mother picking up a book Aunt Charlie had left lying on the kitchen table, glancing at it and putting

it back down with a tiny shrug and a lifted eyebrow. 'You don't approve?' Aunt Charlie said, and Nathaniel is shocked to see, in his memory, that she is tense.

His mother, having gained the advantage, makes another bitter little shrug. 'I'm sure it's over my head,' she says.

When the term of the visit came to an end, they dropped Uncle Lucien and Aunt Charlie at the airport. His brother



was driving, too fast. Nathaniel can hear himself announcing in his child's piercing voice, 'I want to live in New York like Uncle Lucien and Aunt Charlie!' His exile's heart was brimming, but it was clear from his mother's profile that she was braced for an execution.

'Slow down, Bernie!' his mother said, but Bernie hadn't. 'Big shot,' she muttered, though it was unclear at whom this was directed – whether at his brother or himself or his father, or his uncle Lucien, or at Aunt Charlie herself.

BACK TO NORMAL

Do dogs have to fight sadness as tirelessly as humans do? They seem less involved with retrospect, less involved in dread and anticipation. Animals other than humans appear to be having a more profound experience of the present. But who's to say? Clearly their feelings are intense, and maybe grief and anxiety darken all their days. Maybe that's why they've acquired

their stripes and polka dots and fluffiness – to cheer themselves up.

Poor old Earth, an old sponge, a honeycomb of empty mine shafts and dried wells. While he and his friends were wittering on, the planet underfoot had been looted. The waterways glint with weapons-grade plutonium, sneaked on barges between one wrathful nation and another, the polar ice caps melt, Venice sinks.

In the horrible old days in Europe when Rose and Isaac were hunted children, it must have been pretty clear to them how to behave, minute by minute. Men in jackboots? Up to the attic!

But even during that time when it was so dangerous to speak out, to act courageously, heroes emerged. Most of them died fruitlessly, of course, and unheralded. But now there are even monuments to some of them, and information about such people is always coming to light.

Maybe there really is no problem, maybe everything really is back to

normal and maybe the whole period will sink peacefully away, to be remembered only by scholars. But if it should end, instead, in dire catastrophe, whom will the monuments of the future commemorate?

Today, all day long, Lucien has seen the president's vacant, stricken expression staring from the ubiquitous television screens. He seemed to be talking about positioning weapons in space, colonizing the moon.

Open your books to page 167, class, Miss Mueller shrieks. What do you see?

Lucien sighs.

The pages are thin and sort of shiny. The illustrations are mostly black and white.

This one's a photograph of a statue, an emperor, apparently, wearing his stone toga and his stone wreath. The real people, the living people, mill about just beyond the picture's confines, but Luc-

ien knows more or less what they look like – he’s seen illustrations of them, too. He knows what a viaduct is and that the ancient Romans went to plays and banquets and that they had a code of law from which his country’s own is derived. Are the people hidden by the picture frightened? Do they hear the stones working themselves loose, the temples and houses and courts beginning to crumble?

Out the window, the sun is just a tiny, tiny bit higher today than it was at this exact instant yesterday. After school, he and Robbie Stern will go play soccer in the park. In another month it will be bright and warm.

PARADISE

So, Mr Matsumoto will be coming back, and things seem pretty much as they did when he left. The apartment is clean, the cats are healthy, the art is undamaged, and the view from the terrace is exactly the same, except there’s that weird, blank spot where the towers used to stand.

‘Open the next?’ Madison says, holding up a bottle of champagne. ‘Strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree.’

‘Strongly agree,’ Lyle says.

‘Thanks,’ Amity says.

‘Okay,’ Russell says. ‘I’m in.’

Nathaniel shrugs and holds out his glass.

Madison pours. ‘Polls indicate that 100 per cent of the American public approves heavy drinking,’ he says.

‘Oh, god, Madison,’ Amity says. ‘Can’t we ever just *drop* it? Can’t we ever just have a nice time?’

Madison looks at her for a long moment. ‘Drop what?’ he says, evenly.

But no one wants to get into *that*.

When Nathaniel was in his last year at college, his father began to suffer from heart trouble. It was easy enough for Nathaniel to come home on the weekends, and he’d sit with his father, gazing out the window as the autumnal light gilded the dry grass and the fallen leaves glowed.

His father talked about his own time at school, working night and day, the pride his parents had taken in him, the first college student in their family.

Over the years Nathaniel’s mother and father had grown gentler with one another and with him. Sometimes after dinner and the dishes, they’d all go out for a treat. Nathaniel would wait, an acid pity weakening his bones, while his parents debated

worriedly over their choices, as if nobody ever had before or would ever have again the opportunity to eat ice cream.

Just last night, he dreamed about Delphine, a delicious champagne-style dream, full of love and beauty – a weird, high-quality love, a feeling he doesn’t remember ever having had in his waking life – a pure, wholehearted, shining love.

It hangs around him still, floating through the air out on the terrace – fragrant, shimmering, fading.

WAITING

The bell is about to ring. Closing his book Lucien hears the thrilling crash as the bloated empire tumbles down.

Gold star, Lucien! Miss Mueller cackles deafeningly, and then she’s gone.

Charlie’s leaving, too. Lucien lifts his glass; she glances back across the thin, inflexible divide.

From further than the moon she sees the children of some distant planet study pictures in their text: there’s Rose and Isaac at their kitchen table, Nathaniel out on Mr Matsumoto’s terrace, Lucien alone in the dim gallery – and then the children turn the page. ◇