

WRITERS RESPOND

STORYLINES

Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim

GUGGENHEIM

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Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim

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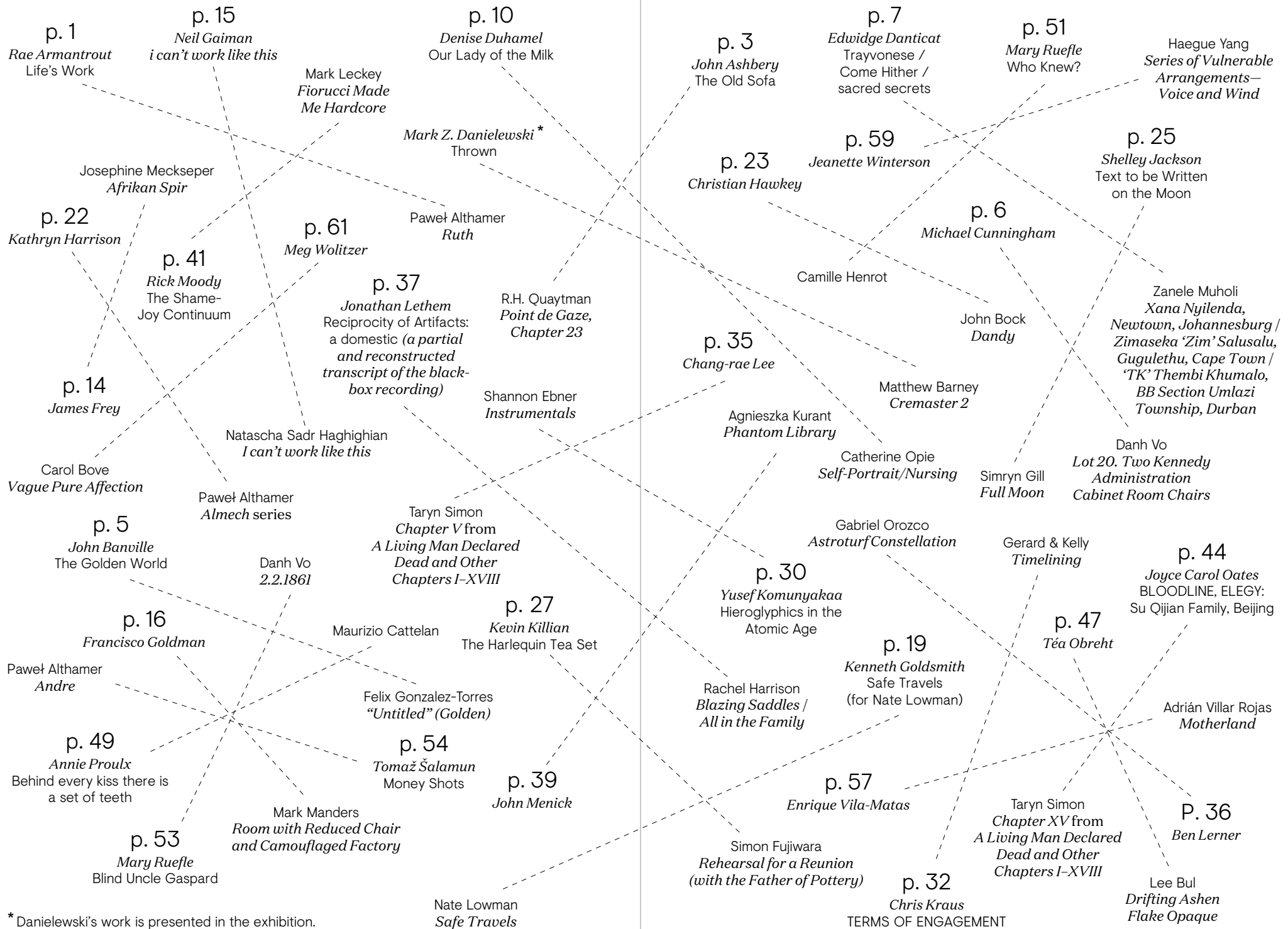
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Foreword

Bringing together over one hundred works from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's contemporary collection, *Storylines* examines the diverse ways in which artists today engage narrative through installation, painting, photography, sculpture, video, and performance. The exhibition offers an expansive view of how recent artistic practice has become the site of new paradigms for storytelling. Over the past decade, this narrative turn has paralleled the increasing prevalence of social media, with its reverberating cycles of communication, dissemination, and interpretation. Seemingly every aspect of life is now subject to commentary and circulation, highlighting the roles that each of us can play as both author and reader. As a means of celebrating this dynamic, the museum has commissioned thirty-one writers to contribute reflections—in prose or poetry—on selected works in *Storylines*.

The relationship between literature and visual art has a long, complex history, dating back to the ancient notion of ekphrasis: a literary depiction of an art object in which the poet emulates and expands on the creativity of the source. Over the centuries, this tradition has elicited many notable evocations, from Homer's description of Achilles's shield in the *Iliad* (8th century BCE) to John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819) and W. H. Auden's 1938 rendering of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. By inviting an audience of writers to respond to artworks in the Guggenheim's collection, *Storylines* hopes to engage and amplify this legacy within contemporary culture. Each author selected a specific work or works in the exhibition as inspiration; no stylistic or structural parameters were given. The resulting polyphony of responses, riffs, and alternative narratives signals the diverse interpretive potential that lies within each object in *Storylines*.



* Danielewski's work is presented in the exhibition.

Life's Work

Rae Armantrout

1

Did I say I was a creature
of habit?

I meant the opposite.

I meant behavior
is a pile of clothes

I might or might not wear.

Before all the sowing and reaping
could go on for centuries,

before the calendar,
I must have been convinced

that my movements
were both mandated

and blessed.

I've never been an old woman
knitting by a fire

but I've played one
in images

where it meant being foolish
or wise, a mistress

of distraction's
indirection.

To rock while entwining
is life's work,

but I am reckless,
restless

—on Paweł Althamer's *Ruth* (2011–12)

The Old Sofa

John Ashbery

Hello. I have to go
in a little while. Well,
maybe later. If at all.

There hasn't been better than the average atmosphere.
After dinner we're turning all the lamps into magic lanterns.
We'll see who knows best.

The camera began taking pictures.
If they'd like some again, after the day
after tomorrow, they can have it.

One genius throttles two or more. I know. Tell them I
said it. And they kill... and kill...
Beetles don't count any more. If you hadn't seen one...

The stage splashed with finishing light.

Take a family of fish. Grandpa,
grandma, a school of pickerel and
two uncles. What life's about...

Eat your victuals. Company is coming,
with the audience primed for the invasion series.
What more could I expect from longing?

This season's layered look resembles last
year's, in that both are harried.
Two or more were wanting.

The shades are drawn earlier, as light expands
always when a productive air settles over the terrain.
Buy philological figs.

Friends... die down with me.
Shouldna done that. House passed away.
I'm taking the lunatic express. House passed away
in two different cities. Manny's propaganda film

if she would have done,
insisted they have no place
(and that's another thing about it).
That should tell you something.

—on R.H. Quaytman's *Point de Gaze, Chapter 23* (2011)

The Golden World

John Banville

There was, and still is, I hope, a little cantina on the seafront in a southern town, I forget where, exactly; on an island, maybe. Mostly it is fishermen who frequent the place. They sit under a canvas awning at little round zinc tables, drinking anís and talking politics in their throat-clearing local dialect. The sunlight all afternoon is limpid with a bluish tinge, and turns tawny as the day wanes. On the horizon a white ship seems to have run smack up against the sky and come to a dead stop. Occasionally a breeze wanders in from the ocean, rumpling the awning over our heads and making the front edge of it crack like a whip. Behind us there is a rattling sound, a sort of reticulated sigh. Paloma, the owner's wife—there is always an owner, there is always a wife—brings a basket of bread and a plate of tiny fried fish whose eyes are made of mother-of-pearl. A drinker at a far table calls out something to her, followed by a guttural laugh, and she throws up her chin dismissively and says *Ay-ay-ay*, but gives us a merry wink. She goes, and there is a swish behind us and again that beaded clatter.

We have come to the blazing south from a land of doors; up there, the wind keens in the jambs and whistles thinly through the keyholes, wanting to be let in to warm itself. Our houses are dens, and, outdoors, even the most clement day can turn to spitting fury on the turn of a cloud; the weather gnaws on us. Journeying sunwards down the side of the planet, we seem to step through a curtain of gold beads into a golden world, Gonzalez-Torres's torrid world, it might be, and our eyes dazzle. Cleopatra melted a pearl and drank it; Gonzalez-Torres gilds, engoldens, the very air. Come, step through, into the shining light.

—on Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*" (*Golden*) (1995)

Michael Cunningham

All of it vanishes.

Populations, of course. But governments and cultures, beliefs and bodies of habit, also vanish eventually. As do, or will, the frescoes and bronzes, the cathedrals and libraries, though they take considerably longer.

Perishability is the realm in which we live.

Danh Vo's *Lot 20* is the leather upholstery—the skins, if you will—of two chairs that once stood in the office of Robert Strange McNamara (yes, his middle name was “Strange”), who served as Secretary of Defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. The Vo piece was created shortly after Sotheby's auctioned off McNamara's memorabilia, an auction that included—listed as Lot 20—two black leather chairs. Vo, the winning bidder, bought them for \$146,500.

They were perfectly good chairs, but not in any way extraordinary; they were deemed to be worth \$146,500 because of the powerful posteriors that once occupied them, and the events they'd mutely witnessed. They were just a couple of chairs that happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Which renders their “hides” all the more potent. They're like the pelts of stags that once ran and rutted; they're like the stained housecoat of the deceased woman who once made her grandchildren feel like the most beloved and treasured of all beings.

Like pelts and empty housecoats, they are the inanimate material that remains after the living have moved on. And, like all significant works of art, they're cogent and meaningful—they can to a certain extent be understood—but, at the same time, they harbor a mystery that rejects absolute comprehension.

They're artifacts, they're art, and they're enigmas. They're testaments to that which we all know, but can't quite articulate, about time's passage, about power that waxes and wanes, about the ordinary objects that persist in ways we do not; the incidentals that become totems and tokens only after we who paid them so little attention have departed.

— on Danh Vo's *Lot 20. Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs* (2013)

Trayvonese

Edwidge Danticat

I am him, but not really him.

He died and I lived.

I am him, but I am me too.

We wear the same uniform.

We have the same skin.

His dreams look like mine.

His wails sound like mine.

Like all of ours really,

When facing an uncaged beast.

I am him, but not really him.

He died and I lived.

But he did not die for me.

Or the others who keep dying.

He died for nothing at all.

And now I can't breathe.

— on Zanele Muholi's *Xana Nyilenda*,
Newtown, Johannesburg (2011)

Come Hither

Edwidge Danticat

Come hither
Come hither
I'm not going to go away.
Your gaze will not kill me.
Your judgment will not hurt me.
I'm not a butterfly.
My wings are made of steel.
My laughter is fire.
My fists are made of gold.
I will not disappear.
I will not be disappeared.
My feet will claim your ground.
And I will stand my ground.
Come hither
Come hither
You will not destroy me.
You will not break me apart.
You will not deconstruct me.
You can not set me free.
I will not be lost.
I will not be dust
There's no way I will bow.
I will not be yours.
Still Come hither, please.
Come hither, now.

— on Zanele Muholi's *Zimaseka 'Zim' Salusalu, Gugulethu, Cape Town* (2011)

sacred secrets

Edwidge Danticat

we carve our stories
into riverined streams
picturing hills of dreams
satined urban silk
brick-broken shadows
sliprock unfolding
menace lurking
dawn ice shattering
while our glass eyes
crack
and the shards fly away
let us gather here
among our precious chaff
here on this mound of imaginings
where we carve stories
to fill the earth
and announce ourselves
where we carve stories
to wipe the scars off our faces
while they're still healing
where we carve stories
between the living and the dead
where we carve stories
even with our last breaths.

— on Zanele Muholi's *'TK' Thembi Khumalo, BB Section Umlazi Township, Durban* (2012)

Our Lady of the Milk

Denise Duhamel

what is a mother if not animal, suckling
her son, blue veins/vines
curling from her nipple/rose

blue tattoo wound (as in coiled)/
wound (as in bruise)
around her forearm

blue veins at baby's temple, mother
his first mystic meal, ancient
expression/expressing milk

mother, fading pervert—
she can't be both acceptable and not—
and her divine unmarked baby

litter, liter, tits and titter
what will we tell our sons
about Iraq and Syria

Seriously what did
Mary, Our Lady
of the Milk, tell Jesus

about bonding and bondage,
latching, latch key kids,
weaning, a trickling stream

Zeus placed baby Hercules
on Hera's breasts
as she slept when she woke,

startled, she tossed the infant
from her chest, which squirted
the Milky Way

what is a mother if not human, marked
by freckles and tan lines,
cheeks flushed,

plush breasts,
her ambition, her past,
and chapped hands

in the Roman Empire
a mother dripped milk
onto her fingernail

the drop was supposed to
stay intact that is, until her hand
fell to the side

and the perfect milk ran
not too thick
not too thin

Goldilocks, golden boy
mother's calm face
belies her ache

the frozen peas
she'll put on her breasts
to numb the throbbing

mother, fading pervert—
yes, she can be both acceptable and not—
domestication, domestic bliss

Betty Friedan noted
post World War II women
romanticized domesticity

before that, Darwin noted the ears
of domesticated animals
relaxed and drooped

look at baby's perfect ear,
mother's perfect ear,
two bass clefs

the opera of humanity
between them
no housewife no wolf

half of American women surveyed
think breastfeeding in public
is gross

but all endorse
our gross
domestic product

the son rests
his toes in the crook
of mother's elbow

she won't tell him yet
how he really got here
the blood and the shit

her wailing that day
of his birth
and how pain waned

like the cuttings,
the trimming of the grass/
the blades on her skin

the need to push
forward—conform and not—
history, her story,

libretto and folk song,
the music of the spheres/
the music of queers

what is a mother if not goddess,
her body round as the moon/
a berry, the equator/a compass

the mother wore him
like a backpack
but in the front

until her spine ached
until her feet started to swell
and there he was

the top of his head,
her crowning he wore
his mother like a crown

— on Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004)

James Frey

Every day for thirty years I've woken up, put on my make-up and done my hair, gone to set and said my lines, smiled, did the interviews and press tours and walked the red carpet. For thirty years I've collected successively larger checks and lived in a succession of larger and larger homes with more expensive furniture and garages filled with more exotic cars. I am called beautiful and talented, sensual and luminous, an inspiration and a role model, strong and fearless. I've won an Oscar, an Emmy and a Tony. Women around the world buy the clothing I wear after I'm photographed in it, little girls send me fan letters and ask me for autographed pictures. If only they knew what I know, if only they felt what I've felt. If only they understood how I've gotten where I have, what I have had to do, and how I hate the world for forcing me to do it in order to succeed. There is a black bird that lives in my soul. It is a beautiful black bird, noble and fierce. It sees everything, never forgets, never forgives. When I am alone it speaks to me, whispers softly in my ear, makes me question, makes me think. It tells me that the world I live in is a façade, empty and meaningless. That the people around me are fools, making garbage, selling garbage, believing in garbage, living in houses that look like garbage, eating garbage, turning their country into a steaming pile of garbage. I debate the bird sometimes, for fun, to pass the time, because I know it likes the debates, but in my heart, I know the bird is right. It tells me I should leave, leave it all, walk away, say goodbye, never come back. Burn down my post-modern house, my post-modern life, burn it to the ground and dance in the ashes. I am called an inspiration and a role model, strong and fearless. I know better, the bird knows better, you know better. Burn it down, burn it to the ground, dance in the ashes. Then, and only then.

— on Josephine Meckseper's *Afrikan Spir* (2011)

i can't work like this

Neil Gaiman

My dream in the wall of ghosts
is that when, heart-frozen and silent,
I begin to whisper my discontent

breaking a lifetime of silence
an afterlife of choked indignities,
insectile, I exorcise myself

old glories become cremains,
dry ash and rising damp and
the mindless graffiti of my chrysalis

on a twig in the wood of souls.
I can't work like this.
I should not have come.

Speaking in absences, as I always must
the final nail hammered home
So those who come behind me will remember

so those who take my place will understand
I could not work like this. Nobody could.
Nothing endures. My sole remains:

complaints in a dead letter office,
written with a finger on water
and hard words whispered onto foggy glass.

— on Natascha Sadr Haghghian's *I can't work like this* (2007)

Francisco Goldman

The sight of any tall factory smokestack, whether standing in the sky above some post-industrial landscape in the northeastern U.S.A. or rising from the “camouflaged factory” of Mark Manders’s bewitching sculpture, always reminds me of the smokestack that loomed over the neighborhood that I grew up in, in Needham, Massachusetts. The Tillotson Rubber Company factory was an enormous, decaying brick eyesore, with rows of grimy windows, many broken, and a towering smokestack evocative of some nineteenth-century industrial inferno. It sat, squalid and leaking underground rivers of toxic balloon dyes, facing pretty wood-lined Rosemary Pond, and with a wooded swamp behind it. The factory was famous, or one time was famous, for its balloons, but it also made rubber dishwashing gloves, rubber dolls, and so on; as children we’d find and play among rusted iron axles lined with black molds—rows of black hands, black dolls, as well as balloon molds—discarded deep in the swamp, where in winter we sometimes walked and even skated over ice tinged blue, yellow, pink, green, from those leaked dyes. Apparently it wasn’t until the sixties or so, a decade before it closed, that the factory became fully mechanized: before that its workers must have had to hoist those heavy molds with their arms like weightlifters, dip them into vats of hot liquid latex solution, and hang them up to dry, over and over. We used to play in the factory’s fenced-in back lots, a wonderland of industrial waste: mucky pools of multicolored dyes and mud, sheds overflowing with the flaccid remnants of discarded balloons. Before high school dances, we made our sneakers psychedelic, dipping them into the dyes; we crawled up onto the tar-paper roof and got high sitting under the smokestack, looking out over the pond. As children we used to swim in that pond, and that, at least according to my mother, is how I came down with a terrible pus-oozing infection. Soon after, the pond was closed to swimming, and remains so to this day, four decades later; it seems like it doesn’t matter how often they drain it, treat and refill it. The factory is long gone, torn down during my last year of high school. Also razed and carted away was the enormous sandy hill that

stood alongside the factory, and atop of which was located a U.S. military missile site radar site of some kind. It’s as if the factory and the hill had never existed, replaced by a very ordinary complex of relatively inexpensive condominiums. But the pond is still polluted. I doubt kids still find doll or glove molds in the swampy woods behind where the factory used to be. Once, cutting through there on my way to Hillcrest elementary school, I found, right there in the middle of the spongy dirt path, a decapitated German shepherd’s head resting on a sheet of butcher paper. Mark Manders’s sculpture reminded me of that too. *Room with Reduced Chair and Camouflaged Factory* is like a beautifully strange but disturbing dream I might, on a lucky night of dreaming, have had myself, produced from deep within my own balloon dye-contaminated subconscious.

But this isn’t the end of my story.

Neil Tillotson, the legendary founder of the company, is considered the inventor of the modern latex balloon, and definitely created the first specialty balloon, one shaped like a cat’s head, with pointy ears. His fortune grew from that discovery; Tillotson Rubber Company was founded, in 1931, to manufacture those balloons, a historic commercial success. Many years later, in a pretty disreputable Guatemala City bar—I am Guatemalan on my mother’s side, and in the eighties I worked in Central America as a freelance journalist—I found myself sitting next to a down-on-his-luck, red-haired American guy, about a decade older than me, who had also grown up in Needham. Wow, what a coincidence! And what had brought him to Guatemala? Well, it turned out that both his parents had worked in the Tillotson rubber factory, his mother as a secretary for none other than the inventor of the cat-eared balloon. She had told her son, before she died, “If you ever need someone to give you a hand in life, you go down to Guatemala, and find Mr. Tillotson.” It turned out that the Tillotson Rubber Company had rubber tree plantations in Guatemala! According to this guy, anyway, Mr. Tillotson was living there: he described an almost Howard Hughes-type figure, riding out to his plantations in

an armored limousine, or something like that. Could this be true? Why would he make a story like that up? A few weeks later I heard that the American guy had been arrested for cashing bad checks, and expelled from the country. I don't know if he ever found Mr. Tillotson.

Around that time, back in the U.S.A., I was walking through Brooklyn Heights and spotted, among the trashcans outside a doctor's office, discarded cardboard dispensers of Tillotson latex medical gloves. I picked up one of the boxes; it bore a company address in New Hampshire. Tillotson's was back in business: the AIDS crisis, creating a near-infinite demand for condoms and protective medical gloves, propelled a boom in latex production and rubber tree farming.

Mr. Tillotson, whether he also spent time in Guatemala of the genocidal massacres or not, had by then retired to the township of Dixville Notch, New Hampshire. Starting in 1960, Mr. Tillotson, a Republican, established the tradition of being the very first American to cast his ballot in every presidential election, voting for Nixon over Kennedy. He died in 2001, but his company is still prospering, and Dixville Notch, population 12, is still the first community to have its votes counted in national elections.

What is most commonly camouflaged is violence and death. Both predator and prey, by artifice or nature, are camouflaged. The factory leaks death and toxic mutation. The imperial balloon visionary, with his pointy ears, casts the first vote for mass murder of familiarly recurring types, every four years. We sit in the tiny chair and watch.

— on Mark Manders's *Room with Reduced Chair and Camouflaged Factory* (2003)

Safe Travels (for Nate Lowman)

Kenneth Goldsmith

WELCOME:

Welcome on board Flight ____ (flight #) ____ to ____ (destination) ____.
Our aircraft is under the command of Captain ____ (last name) ____.
He/she has informed me that our flying time will be approximately ____ (i.e., 3 and one half hours) ____.

While we are here to ensure that you do have a comfortable trip with us today, we are also concerned about your safety. With that in mind, we ask that you take the Safety Information Card out of the seat pocket in front of you and follow along as we perform our safety demonstration.

SEAT BELT:

Your seat belt has been designed for easy fastening and release. To fasten, insert the metal fitting into the buckle, adjust to fit snugly with the loose end of the strap, and simply lift the buckle release to unfasten. Your seat belt should always be worn low and tight across your lap.

EXITS:

You are on board a 747. There are ten emergency exits, five doors on the left and five doors on the right, each marked with a red EXIT sign overhead. All doors except the overwing doors at 3 left and 3 right are equipped with slide/rafts. These rafts may be detached in the event of a water evacuation. The overwing doors are equipped with a ramp and off-wing slide. Life rafts are located in pull-down ceiling compartments at the overwing doors. For our customers on the Upper Deck, your escape route will be down the staircase, and out the first available exit. In the event that the staircase is blocked, an additional door with an evacuation slide is located in the cockpit. Operation and use of the exits, slides, and rafts are illustrated in the safety information card. Please locate the two exits nearest you, keeping in mind that the closest exit may be behind you.

FLOOR-PATH LIGHTING:

This aircraft is equipped with aisle-path lighting, which is located on the floor in the left and right aisles. Should cabin visibility be impaired, the exit path will be illuminated. White lights lead to red lights, which indicate you have reached or are near an emergency exit location.

OXYGEN:

The cabin pressure is controlled for your comfort. However, should it change radically in flight, oxygen compartments will automatically open in the panel above your seat. Reach up and pull the mask to your face. This action will start the flow of oxygen. Place the mask over both your mouth and nose and secure with the elastic band, as your Flight Attendant is demonstrating. Tighten by pulling on the ends of the elastic bands. Even though oxygen is flowing, the plastic bag may not inflate. If you are traveling with children, or are seated next to someone who needs assistance, place the mask on yourself first, then offer assistance. Continue using the mask until advised by a uniformed crewmember to remove it.

LIFE VEST:

ALL FLIGHT SEGMENTS OPERATING BEYOND 50 NAUTICAL MILES OF LAND:

(Demonstration of life vest operation required.)

Your individual life vest is located in a pouch beneath your seat. Should its use become necessary, remove it from the plastic packet, slip it over your head, and pull downward on the front panel. Bring the strap around your waist and insert it into the buckle on the front. Pull on the loose strap until the vest fits snugly, as we are now demonstrating. As you leave the aircraft, inflate the vest by pulling down firmly on the red tabs. The vest may be orally inflated by blowing into the inflation tubes at shoulder level. Each vest has a rescue light on the shoulder for night use, which is water activated by removing the Pull to Light tab located on the battery.

LIFE VEST:

ALL FLIGHT SEGMENTS WITHIN 50 NAUTICAL MILES OF LAND:
(Demonstration of life vest operation is not required.)

Your individual life vest is located in a pouch beneath your seat. Should its use become necessary, remove it from the plastic packet, pull the vest over your head, and pull down on the front panel. Bring the strap around your waist and insert it into the buckle on the front. As you exit the aircraft, inflate the vest by pulling down on the red tabs. Use of the life vest is fully illustrated in the information card.

PREPARATION FOR TAKEOFF ANNOUNCEMENT:

In preparation for takeoff, please ensure that your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright and stowed positions, your seat belts are securely fastened, and all your carry-on items are securely stowed. Federal Aviation Regulations require customers to comply with the lighted customer information signs, other posted signs, and crewmember instructions. Please observe the FASTEN SEATBELT and other lighted signs until they have been turned off by the Captain. The NO SMOKING sign will remain illuminated for the duration of the flight and smoking is prohibited throughout the cabin and in the lavatories. All lavatories are equipped with smoke detection systems and Federal Law prohibits tampering with, disabling, or destroying these systems.

— on Nate Lowman's *Safe Travels* (2013)

Kathryn Harrison

The dead, they always arrive before you. They pry the pennies from their eyes: two cents is all they have and all Charon asks to carry them across the River Styx. The penniless must swim.

Limbo. As it turns out, it's all uphill. The dead don't walk; they cannot crawl. We dredge them up out of the dark. Prayers lift them, carry and push them, as they unravel. They can't rest until forgotten, not before all our prayers, and sometimes curses, cease.

"My mask is not here," Paweł Althamer says, walking among those he catches as they depart, catches and holds for as long as it takes to press death masks from their features. "I am looking for myself in this space," Althamer says.¹

How hard it is to conjure absence. To show us what we cannot see for ourselves. The artist is still at work. He has yet to join the dead. His mask is not to be found, not here, not yet.

Bleached white by intercession, so clean they are weightless: the dead grow buoyant; they float ever higher. They close their eyes to the light that pours through them. The atmosphere thins, and oxygen runs out. Of what concern to those who no longer breathe?

Cry out before she's gone forever: your mother, your sister, your drowned daughter, lost friend. Say her name. Say it louder! Has no one taught you how to project your voice? Look up as you call to him! *Father! Don't you see me? Won't you look?*

No one turns at the sound of a mortal voice. Not one will open an eye.

Each prayer takes its toll, after all. Not one has courage enough to watch the colors as they leak and drip, seeping out from under his bandages. Not one can stand to see how the sky laps at her, how it draws all its color, its sunsets and its northern lights, from the dead who must pass through it.

To feel it is enough.

— on Paweł Althamer's *Almech* series (2011–12)

¹ "Artists: Paweł Althamer," Venice Biennale video, 4:07, an interview with Paweł Althamer at the Venice Biennale: *The Encyclopedic Palace*, May 29, 2013, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/mediacenter/video/55-bl2.html>.

Christian Hawkey

seconds before i sat down to write about john bock's *dandy* i was watching and listening to an interview with sun ra on youtube. sun ra is shown seated, shot from the chest up, facing the camera, facing an unseen interviewer. he is wearing what appears to be a silver lamé robe, along with two—not one, but two—capas; awkwardly, they are bunched and falling off the right side of his shoulder. the strings pull at his neck. he wears also a pair of dark sunglasses with large white oval frames, and a hat, a hat which appears to be a dense mass of thick golden cords, which in turn suggest the weave and fold of our brains, although it also appears to be simply an extravagant fruit bowl that sun ra has flipped over and placed on his head. there is something absurd about his costume, his dress, which is further amplified by sun ra's delivery, which is not so much deadpan as unassumingly straightforward. he looks very much like a superhero, or an alien, or an angel, or some combination of all three. the interview was shot in helsinki, in 1971. in between his responses, the video cuts to footage of the arkestra band playing improvisational jazz, dominated by african drumming, and an electronic keyboard which emits signals, or sounds, of no discernable musical register, or arrangement. a dancer moves to the music—freely, wildly. she gyrates limbs and neck and head in a strange set of counter-asymmetrical spirals—the visual equivalent, figured often in science fiction films, of a lost astronaut hurtling uncontrollably through space. the interviewer asks sun ra: "your music, where do you get your inspiration, to compose it." sun ra: "well, it uh, it's being in tune with the greater universe." those so expansively in tune are often perceived as radically out of tune. the word *absurd* comes from the latin *absurdum*, which means "out of tune." another dancer joins the stage; the music shifts toward pure noise, the keyboards erupt and arc outward, the sonic equivalent of solar flares. another dancer, male, wearing a long white robe, flits across the stage, propelled only by his hands, his legs dragging limply behind him—a kind of wounded, fleeing spirit. sun ra: "you have humans on the planet, and you have angels . . . i don't know of any country that has rights

for angels.” sun ra, right here, at 5:52, smiles, but it’s a tight smile, ghosted by a grimace. a chorus sings and a female singer echoes the chorus, “the sound of love is in lightning,” but i’m not sure i hear it correctly, and so i play it again, this time hearing “the sound of thought is in lightning,” but i can’t quite catch it, so i keep replaying it: the sound of love is in lightning. the sound of thought is in lightning. the sound of love is in lightning. the sound of thought is in lightning.

— on John Bock’s *Dandy* (2006)

Text to be Written on the Moon

Shelley Jackson

Text to be written on the moon, using the eraser end of a pencil, at a size compatible with the medium (dust), in a facsimile of a traditional book font, with exceptional care, but without template or ruler, at the time of the full moon:

There are things that are too uncertain to exist—guesswork on the part of creation, speculations rather than facts. Eighty-odd years ago, one of them almost came ashore. The moon, with the suction discs clearly visible, was becalmed in the Bay of Bengal. It was quite still, except for a pulsing movement. The body filled my view as far as my sight could penetrate, with the neutral buoyancy of thought, neither rising nor falling, only oscillating a little, due to libration, as if gently shaking its head at me. This unwinking orb, I suddenly realized, was an eye. It seemed to be looking directly at me. And I was another eye, looking back. We were like two pistols pointing at each other.

So the moon, apparently so remote, was less cosmic than had commonly been supposed! It botched me. I felt the tide in my body as a sort of deep discontentment. There has not yet arisen the dictionary in which those physical effects might be translated into intelligible words, perhaps *sults* or *flicting*. “What on earth do you mean?” I said peevishly. The moon opened its parrot-like beak.

In modern war, one guided missile will be set to chase another so as to turn it around and send it home again. This is just what language does. It is an ingenious device so connected up that the parts can activate each other in a circle. We no longer live in a world of matter, but a strange, detached, hermetically sealed noon. A man-hour, a Noah’s Ark of what is reasonable to suppose—verbalizations of a knowledge which is not of a verbal nature, that has the advantage of being perfectly intelligible, but simplified and abridged. We live in dowdy commonplaces, and drown when they run aground in the fog. And yet the water refuses to receive us in her bosom, because we behave like the symbols for zero and the infinite, rippling on her waves like moons. It is no coincidence that certain tribes take their names from the words they use for “no,”

for we ourselves are not intelligible speech, but noise, knots,
naughts. Such for instance are some of the many sounds for which
ah! oh! ah! aie! are the inexpressive written representatives; such
is the Malagasy *u-u!* of pleasure or the sigh which is written down in
the Wolof language of Africa *hhihhe!*

All this the moon said, not in speech so much as a carefully
worded silence, a kind of cavitation in utterance.

“But what has that got to do with me?”

The moon ate a crab. “Come and find out,” the moon said, or
signed, or shined.

If this story were fiction, it would end.

— on Simryn Gill's *Full Moon* (2012)

The Harlequin Tea Set

Kevin Killian

Simon, I come as a man without father issues, to Candy Land.
I like a little candy,

do you?

I brought you a bag full of candy,
red and peppermint and round like

stones, *did you?*

to ask questions, buried anciently, beneath yon Ur and Nineveh.

What's your favorite food? *Live squid*

Do you follow football *Only the World Cup*

First movie you remember seeing

Something with Paul Rudd, Or shall I tell a lie?

Simon, my father, once so close, is dead now, distant now, gone into
shadows, yet he watches me become him in the Nao of Life. While he
lived I could never reach manhood, but tell me,

have you a scar, what caused it?

*I have a double birthmark occurring in identical positions on my
right and left hand*

Have you any bad habits? *What can you mean by this?*

He hung himself on the Spanish steps, his hush puppies bobbing like
children for apples, in the rain.

From below his soles looked small, like the heads of baby rabbits.

“Cut him down,” cried my aunt, tugging her apron with the raw, red
hands of a farmgirl. “Down, down I say, or out comes the harlequin
tea set!”

What was it like, the member of the man who destroyed you?

I threw up

Name six colors without even thinking *grey black blue red white peach*

I shall pour out tea in this bleak anteroom to hell. It is the taproom
where our fathers used to meet and smoke in, joke in,

the cloacal cistern of Anabaptism.

No it's not your script,

The acting is "real," Ralph Richardson quality, the highest sort.
Is Peter Brook alive, bring him here: make him gaze in alarm!

Worst job you've ever had? *I've never had a job*

Have you ever been hospitalized? *Oh yes* Hypnotized? *No.*

when you're young and healthy—a
child, in fact—you believe it all:

there's a future so watery
widows rock in it, death's just a

wag of your kite, and money's a
crack in a pair of specs no one

needs you know except for the
square, while sickness is but a

kind of health viewed backwards,
the way the old so view things.

Do they? Yes,
both dads wear a
smug candy look like pumpkins

like brains on a side dish

If you were a jewel, which one would it be? *Coal* Which languages
can you speak? *English, Japanese, Spanish, French, German, Italian*

What time period would you have liked to live through? *I can't
imagine what life was like before the short-lived utopia of the welfare
state. I want to taste the meat before industrialization. It's so exciting,
wood! Metal! Cold before central heating. Disease, and architecture as
the supernatural, painting as the supernatural, how boring it must have
been, what a dark confusion, what small penises and dirty fingernails,
what secrets, I love secrets.*

When you're frightened do you move or breathe more quickly or slowly?

I can't remember being frightened.

— on Simon Fujiwara's *Rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of
Pottery)* (2011)

Hieroglyphics in the Atomic Age

Yusef Komunyakaa

A montage of ingots, slugs of obsidian
or molded rare earth arranged in twos
& threes. I can almost see prototypes
of the past honed into an instrument
to keep minds working to interrogate.
We wish everything utilitarian,
even our first tools were weapons,
& the movie in my head projects
Instrumentals on a wall in a defunct
industrial town between towns,
except for a sparrow singing, the grass
& weeds sprouting through concrete.
One iota leads to another schema,
& I stand at my father's workbench
as he grabs tools without a single
glance, but always the right one
& maybe that's why I am afraid
of anything my hands can't grip
or guess the shape of in the dark.

Shapes change the future, yet ink
recasts dungeon icons on an ivory field
of contrast where parallels almost couple
before we're someplace else, the parts
coming apart to converge, a riddle
of hooks, fat leaden beads on chains
& shackles on masonry nails
in an age blind to parts of the whole,
to equal two or three steelyards.
But step back, eyes drawn to one object
as if to highlight asymmetry,
& it seems this could be a mockup
or blueprint of a celestial machine
tuned for an opus of prepared pianos.

Now, the music of night & day, sun
& rain, the black keys & white keys,
I walk around the city with questions
in my head. Is it the suggestive weight,
or a negative space that travels back
to the mysteries of the natural world?
Now, I know the score. Now, I know
I was wrong. (*Laughter.*) It's oracular.
It makes the thick damp silence ask,
What more do you wish to learn
about medieval history & pennants?
Only an insatiable harmony unweaves
the surprises underneath the tablature,
& silhouettes hold a pattern in place.
This is a template of the implements
reflected from the cave we reckon
with in the hour of chiaroscuro
till we've mastered the equation
that squares the labyrinth.

— on Shannon Ebner's *Instrumentals* (2013)

TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Chris Kraus

“We live in a world in which our desire for knowledge is immediately satisfied, but the desire for transformation is not.” (Brennan Gerard to Natilee Harren, *East of Borneo*)

April 23, 2031 *Timelining*, the Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

(the following is a hypothetical explication)

Two performers—let’s call them Tanaquil and Jason—arrive slightly before the museum opens and sit on two chairs in the still-empty tall rotunda. They wait. Their presence has transformed the space into a site of potentiality: a playing field, performance space, or auditorium.

Like Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly, these two were once a couple. Joined by intimate relations, all performers who have or will enact this work are siblings, parent/child, friends, partners, ex-lovers, etc.

A spectator arrives. Jason and Tanaquil begin walking in a circle. They will speak in turns, both for and to each other, although not in conversation. They’ll speak of pre-selected memories—“June’s suicide”; “first ballet class”; “moved to Palo Alto”—within a backward timeline. Each captioned memory triggering unscripted recollections. They’ll also verbalize their temporal observations: “wood floor”; “rain outside the window.”

Jason starts from “Now.” He stops by choice or faltering. Then Tanaquil begins, also with “Now.”

They’ll walk in loops, sometimes side-by-side and other times in opposite directions, towards each other. Periodically, these spoken memories engender ‘movement-memory snapshots,’ a series of improvisations that were previously explored during a six-day

‘transmission’ of the performance score by someone who Gerard & Kelly have designated as a ‘transmitter.’ “Follow your sensations and do not be concerned with how your movement looks ... Continue moving ... Let your movement be impacted by your speech ... And vice-versa.” Only those who’ve once performed this work may be designated transmitters.

Another spectator walks in. Tanaquil stops talking. The arrival of each spectator is a trigger to the performers. Jason says, *Now*, and begins the memory loop again, acknowledging the small event—“a man in a red jacket arrived”—and then recalling something from his past about the color red, or jackets. If no memory arises, he’ll recall the recent past, or memory. “Recent” is defined as everything that happened a) since the beginning of the performance; b) since the beginning of the day; c) since the beginning of the transmission process.

A web of rules: springboard to freedom.

The work is both elaborate and simple.

Critics sometimes speak about the work in terms of gender politics and queerness.

Emotion—anger, sadness, receptivity, aggression—sometimes cuts through the even texture of the repetitions.

Timelining was purchased by the Guggenheim Museum in 2014. The work consists of a 70-page instruction manual and the right to have the work performed at any time, pursuant to conditions that include the engagement of an authorized ‘transmitter’ and at least two people who are involved in some form of intimate partnership.

To date, there are about two dozen people in this pool of transmitters. But they are people, and these people might lose interest, move away, or die. In order to maintain its rights, the Museum must replenish the pool, repeatedly presenting the performance to keep its transmission-pool alive ...

— on Gerard & Kelly's *Timelining* (2014)

Chang-rae Lee

She loves them far more than she will ever love herself. This is axiomatic. And then startling, how the old country has become useless, a brush where there's no ink. What is left is a massing only she can gird. Would she choose it this way if it weren't already so? She must believe. Someday she might have risen in her own regard, been revealed as equal to herself, but that day will never come. She dies young. For now it's almost mystical, how she knows, these murmurings in her belly. *Don't stop. Don't rest. Don't sleep too deep.*

Keep scouring this grubby flat. It's spotless, yet the roaches come and come. They dine on air, on the sweet stink of each other. All day by herself so there's no one to tell her: cease. It's not obsession. Not even duty. It's how she locates herself in these three cramped rooms, she is secretly falling in love with how they endure her exertions, her frustration shaped in the rings she ghosts in the vitrine, the enameled stovetop, the speckled medicine cabinet mirror. Out in the metropolis, where she compels nothing, the buildings glower over the streets. To her, a chimney city. The people bellow, too, their constant talk. Talk talk. She will look for chance alleyways when she ventures out, passages barely two-wide.

But today she will stitch herself into the checks of the parquet flooring, rooting out single grains of rice, a nail clipping, a tiny, yarned galaxy of lint. No pleasure, exactly, but instead confirmations she has not gone mad. Sometimes she wonders if she would go mad, were she to pause. Make herself disappear. They would cry forever, they would slowly tear at each other's hearts, they would float, wingless, through their remaining days; all of which happens. The door rings. Someone home. For an eternal second she presses against the bedroom window, in the blue cave of the airshaft, listening for an echo from the very bottom and the very top.

— on Taryn Simon's *Chapter V* from *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* (2011)

Ben Lerner

Scholars speculate that these so-called “asterisms” possessed a calendric function for an urban culture where stars were entirely occluded by artificial light. A purely lunar calendar would have drifted unacceptably against the seasons, and by the time the coastal barriers were erected, the season itself as a unit of measure would have lost most of its coherence. As you’ll see from the other works in this exhibition, a collision between star lore and reasoned exposition is characteristic of the period. Indeed, even the carpet of synthetic fibers made to resemble natural grasses—a common feature of domed spaces—was known as “Astroturf.” Slow rolling blackouts, some lasting several years, had not yet challenged the hegemony of the digital, and many artists were active, even militant, members of the Dark Oasis. Here the schematic arrangement (grids) of carefully sculpted ritual objects (note the delicate impression of teeth in the glistening polymers) points to what Anika Singh has called “the surrender of science,” a declining belief in the adequacy of existing regimes of knowledge in the face of planetary upheaval. The result is eclecticism—often desperate, as in the works to the right and left of this one, but here notably cool—that borrowed freely from a range of methodologies as they collapsed inwardly like stars.

— on Gabriel Orozco’s *Astroturf Constellation* (2012)

Reciprocity of Artifacts: a domestic (a partial and reconstructed transcript of the black-box recording)

Jonathan Lethem

A: “—mix the tumults and produce hours after all persons afflicted parents were concentrated primarily irreparable. Other things also—”

B: “—in the cushions. Look in the cushions, I dropped it in the cushions, it fell right outta my pants. It’s gotta be in there *somewhere*—”

A: “—I should have been a pair of serrated scissors, scuttling across the parquet of a sunken panic room—”

B: “—that’s it, I’ve had it! I’m confiscatin’ the remote—”

A: “—three initial modalities will be investigated; sectioning, tessellating, and confabulating, including a brief exploration of these strategies by means of small-scale tectonic pratfalls—”

B: “—I CAN’T believe I ate alla them BEANS!!!!”

A: “—the second half of the semester will be dedicated to the construction of an ontological projection in the form of a wall. This semester will focus on the ontological element of the wall; the first three small projects will focus on using fabrication methodologies of suctioning, tessellation, and confabulation as they relate to the wall, and the final project will be full-scale installations of the wall—”

B: “—she said do ya like Hoovering and I said ‘I dunno, I never Hoovered!’ I mean, wait a minute, that’s not it, it goes like ‘I dunno Hoovering, but hum a few bars and I’ll fake it.’ Nah, I mean, ‘I dunno much about Hoovering, but I know what I *like*—”

A: “Encyclopedia Salesman in the Brown Study with the Candlestick. Edith Wharton in the Bunker with the Laughing Gas. Colonel Sanders in the Solarium with the Mustard Archive.”

B: “—then I yell out, ‘bring me a plunger’, and she says, ‘that dog won’t hunt’, and then I scream, ‘hey, even a blind nut finds a squirrel every once in a while and furthermore even a stopped-up toilet is right twice a day!!!’”

A: “—everything that radiates must fade away—”

B: “—fell asleep on the goddamn crouch and the next thing I know I got this dungblasted test pattern lodged right up in my crawl space!!!”

A: “——”

— on Rachel Harrison’s *Blazing Saddles* (2003) and *All in the Family* (2012)

John Menick

This library collects unwritten books, books existing only in their conception, a phantom literature larger and more varied than the written one we know. The library is infinite in size, its architecture as imaginary as the books it contains. Four shifts of librarians process the innumerable titles that arrive to the library every day. They classify a book, not by subject matter or geography, but by what prevented the book from existing. On the first floor of one building, for example, are accidents. On the second floor are suicides, followed by illnesses, wars, famines, etc. In an adjacent building are the books whose authors fell victim to life’s troubling generosity. These are books undone by distraction and satisfaction, books interrupted by children, careers, marriages, hedonism, and—most devastating of all—happiness. No matter what the classification, though, most of the books in this library were never written. They are permanently notional, always about to be started, the stuff of conversation and daydreams.

Until very recently, though, a special collection existed in a sub-basement of the main building. These books were known as “crossovers”—unwritten books that have somehow appeared in written books. The crossovers included titles like *Sexplosion*, an unwritten book reviewed in Stanisław Lem’s *A Perfect Vacuum*, and *The Lottery Man*, an unwritten book mentioned in Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*. It is not hard to see why these books were a cause for some controversy. As their designation suggests, the crossovers occupy the anxious contact point between the real and the imaginary. Unlike the rest of the collection, the crossovers originated in the author’s weakness for writing, and for this reason, many of the librarians debated the crossovers’ inclusion. The loudest group, the fanatical conceptualists, believed that any book that appeared in print should be excluded from the collection. Of course, this would have included those unwritten books whose titles have been published in novels. The more moderate librarians argued for the crossovers’ importance, often invoking the library’s patron saint: the American writer, Richard Brautigan. It was he, the moderates said, who helped found the

library, and it was he, even more than Lem, who was most charmed by crossover books. If we were to throw out these crossovers, they pleaded, then what would we do with Brautigan's *The Culinary Dostoevski*?

As was to be expected, the fanatics won. The crossovers were purged, and they are presented here as the casualties of a double censorship. Neither written nor unwritten, these uncommitted works are unwelcome in every library, the excluded middle of literary ambivalence.

— on Agnieszka Kurant's *Phantom Library* (2011–12)

The Shame-Joy Continuum

Rick Moody

These lines will serve as a brief introduction to Michael Harvey's theory of the Shame-Joy Continuum (2001), and, in particular, to the fashion in which the medium of dance has served repeatedly for Harvey as extended metaphor for the psycho-mechanics of the Shame-Joy Continuum (hereafter abbreviated SJC). Harvey's doctoral-era theory about "contortions of the ecstatic" is a proto-genetic theoretical matrix for the SJC, as has been noted elsewhere (Snediker, 2006). Additionally, Harvey's paper on the Evanston preschool case (1988), and its Satanic ritual fulminations, likewise alludes abundantly to the late Nietzsche employing dance as metaphoric catalyst in a fashion both obsessive and compulsive. The concept of a "limit of disgust," especially as this bears on Harvey's "heterodoxies of self" patently serve as an auto-erotic ligature for the "ecstatic convolution" model of the SJC that generated some controversy after Harvey first delivered his paper on "grunge feminism" in 1993. Harvey's use of his own past as a sex worker, and in particular his haunting of black discotheques of the late 1970s, especially as these relate to the eroto-cultural slippage in the conception of disseminatory *hydroplaning*, these inform many middle-period peer-reviewed publications by Harvey, most dealing directly with an evolving SJC dynamic. Which are the texture fields of self-oblivion that are made transparent in the progress of the dance, especially in what Harvey describes as a "parcel delivery mechanics" of the late seventies dance steps, as compared to the "tribal hebephrenics" of the European Rave Period? Harvey's masturbatory sign-language performances at the Modern Library Association's breakout panel on Sufism and Intercultural Penetration in 1997 were considered, especially by the celebrated British collective known as Degree Zero, to be a postscriptus to Harvey's eponymously titled book-length treatise on the SJC, which had been recently issued (Western Connecticut University Press, 1998)—likewise his attempt to speak in tongues, which black critics have referred to as a kind of "oppressor-Gullah," much commented on in the press, which in turn resulted in his dismissal

from a tenure-track appointment at U.C. Irvine. The transcription of the “oppressor-Gullah” dream language incident has resulted in an oft-repeated critical formulation about the meaning of the dance as a social relation in Harvey’s output in the decade since. Harvey’s repeated used of empathogenic chemical agents (“substance D”) during his public appearances, his discussion of hydraulic fracturing technologies under the “biomorphic eco-sadism” rubric, his interest in incest in American familial cults, chiropractic, and “first-position orgasm” during question-and-answer sessions, these demonstrate what Hunt (2012, and ff.) calls “psychomotor over-abundance” in which the language of Harvey’s praxis shimmers against the Terpsichore that is the metaphorical, or perhaps synecdochic, or perhaps sylleptic conveyor of his theory. Dance, that is, *is* political discourse, so that not the sense but the *practice* of his critical writing is the systematic denotative agent. When Harvey’s output, as distinct from Harvey himself (who, Harvey himself argues, no longer exists), is considered in this light, it is reasonable to inquire, as many have, *where, in fact, is the shame?* Where, indeed, is the shame in the Shame-Joy Continuum? The most recent academic criticism about Harvey’s phonemic remains, Harvey’s “prostatic accretion,” as Harvey has written, represents a call-to-action in the matter of dialectical reassurance, in the sense that, like a microphone teetering parabolically before a massive stack of Marshall amplifiers, the Harvey theory of dance travels first to the one extreme and then forcefully in the other. Ecstatic feeling, or, *hydroplaning*, or more exactly, the idea of obsessive-compulsive stamping up and down upon the ecstatic, thereby exactly precedes what some critics (Dunn, 2006) think of as a “superfund bloom” of non-ecstatic sensation, which looks, especially when the idea of dance collides (precisely the right word) with the unpredictable dynamics of crowds, a lot like *riot*, or at the other extreme, perhaps like a generalized outbreak of metanoia. Shame is the rhetorical predecessor of *ideal contagion*. As Harvey has said: sometimes in a contained dance environment ideals circulate in precisely the way that regurgitants circulate in

what Harvey calls “carnival space”—there is a blast radius, and then a dissemination as the material is tracked from one subcultural locus to another, which is another way of speaking to *information transmission*, bacterial, cinematic, and/or lexical. The music of the present moment, with its reliance on appliance simulacra—vacuuming technologies, e.g.—is the inevitable outcome of a post-historical regurgitated dance nutrient, according to the “prostatic-accretive” Harvey, and this dissection is itself by far the best emblem for the “shame extreme” of SJC. Since Harvey’s repeated hospitalizations have called into question any future output—even as they ratify the way in which the SJC and contemporary dance serve as perfect formulations for the retrogressive notion of “self” and “individual” in pre- and especially post-millennial cultural backwaters—we must be satisfied with the way his work has come to retro-schematize an idea of “self” in the midst of dance, that is, a stuttering and inconclusive ritual groping by a Caucasian European male participant foaming at the mouth (in an angry crowd), lusting after the narco-eroto-military orgone blast of Western Capital.

— on Mark Leckey’s *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999)

BLOODLINE, ELEGY: Su Qijian Family, Beijing

Joyce Carol Oates

In the mud-colored Hai River a swirl of infant-girl bodies.
In the river-trance the infant girls are propelled with the current.
You stare, you blink—she has vanished.
But—here is another, and
soon, another.
How small, how fleeting, of no more consequence than a kitten
an infant girl drowned at birth
before the first breath has been drawn, and expelled—
*No crying. We do not shatter the peace of the morning, with crying.
See how good we are!*

In the mud-river so many, you could not count how many.
Out of the bloody womb the small bodies betray the infant girls
for they are revealed incomplete between the legs, pitiable
the *not-male*, the doomed.

We have not been drowned in the Hai River for we
are of the privileged Su Qijian family. And yet
our dreams are filled with drowning amid the swirl
of infant-girl bodies in the Hai River
sweeping past our home.
We do not want to know how the infant girls are our sisters or our aunts.
We do not want to know how they are us for (it is said) they are not us,
that is all we have been told.
And we did not see these infant-girl bodies in the swirl of the mud-river
for we had not yet been born.

We are the largest family in Beijing. We are very proud to be of the
Su Qijian family of Beijing. We have been chosen for the honor
of meeting you today because we are a perfect family (it is said) for
we have been born and our baby girls not drowned. *Bloodline* is all, and
in our bloodline it is a marvel, it is a source of great pride, how our
mother, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers had not been
thrown into the mud-river to drown but were allowed to live.

So we know, we are blessed! We are very special amid
so many millions drowned in the Hai River as in the great Yangtze
and how many millions perished in the Revolution of no more
consequence than infant girls extinguished before they can draw breath
or cry.

Especially, we do not cry.
We have never cried.
You will not hear us cry—*See how good we are! Even
in the agony of death, our tiny lungs filled with the mud-river.*

We of the Su Qijian family have never lamented or mourned
for our privilege is to have been allowed to be born.
We are alive, there are twenty-nine of us alive and not one
of us has been drowned at birth. So we are blessed, we are of the
People's Republic of China. We are alive.

For some Chinese couples just one baby was allowed. For some others,
more than one baby was allowed. And for some, girl-babies were
allowed. We do not understand these decrees
and we do not question.

Bloodline is the very god. Bloodline is the nation.
Bloodline is property of the Office of China State Council Information.

* * *

And then in a dream it is revealed—
it is the mothers of our family who drowned our sisters!

Long ago it happened, in those years
before we were born. It was a different China then (it is said),
it is not the same China now. Our beautiful mother
pleads for understanding. All our mothers weep and tear their hair
in shame! They would tear out their eyes that such ugliness
might spare them.

How is it possible, our mothers are those very mothers
 who tossed the infant-girls into the river to drown...
 Oh but it happened long ago. The world was different then.
 Shuxia is saying, Junxia is saying, Lixia is saying
 they are not evil. Not one of the women of the Su Qijian family
 is evil, they plead with us to understand, and to forgive.
 Our babies who are your sisters were torn from our arms,
 we could not nurse them, we were forbidden. *You see,*
we had no choice. We are but
female, we had no choice but to drown our own.

It is China thrumming with its many millions that is alive
 that is the marvel. In the distance you see the eye of our god
 the China Central Television Tower rising above the suety Beijing
 skyline, that is a greater marvel. *Rejoice! Our great nation*
is the future, and your nation is of the past.

What is the meaning of our lives, we never ask.
 The creatures of the hive do not question the hive.
 The creatures of the river that do not drown
 in the river do not question the river for the river
 has spared them and that is the blessing. This is the meaning
 of all of our lives, and not just Chinese lives.
 That we are is the meaning, and that we have been blessed
 is the meaning, and that we are not drowned
 in the Hai River with our infant sisters is the meaning.

In parting here is our gift to you, our American visitors: a plastic
 bag of photographs of Chinese monuments, Chinese citizens, the mud-
 colored Hai River at dawn when it glitters with light like the scales of a
 great serpent whose head you cannot see thousands of miles upstream,
 and whose tail you cannot see thousands of miles downstream, that
 abides forever.

— on Taryn Simon's *Chapter XV* from *A Living Man Declared Dead and
 Other Chapters I–XVIII* (2011)

Téa Obreht

The house appeared. To this day, nobody could say for certain how
 the old man did it. Nobody saw him gather the stone or put it up;
 nobody helped with its building. One day, the lot was empty. The
 next, it wasn't.

Now this may seem a commonplace enough occurrence: that
 where a man builds a house, there a house is found. But in our town,
 it was two steps past a miracle, and then some. Let me explain.

The people who first lived here had folded their dwellings
 into the mountainside: white-stone houses stacked up so tight
 there wasn't room for another brick. So high and close on the cliff
 you couldn't go ten paces off the main walk without being overcome
 with vertiginous sick. Abandoned, the houses sat rotted out along
 the karst bluffs, disappearing under spikemoss and bloodflower.
 By the time those first few of us found the ruins after the blow-
 down, it was nothing but flaking white stone, gulls swinging in and
 out of empty doorways, wheeling out toward an eventual shore. At
 first, newcomers didn't build at all, had neither cause nor means to
 build. They drifted through houses readymade, moved on when the
 waiting became unbearable. And so it took quite a while before
 anyone guessed, and a while longer still before it was gospel: you
 could raise no new structure in town that would stay standing.

Some swore it was the slope, its steep grade. Others claimed
 that neither stone nor wood nowadays could withstand the way the
 ground shuddered and rolled without warning. Some said that the
 endless ashfall had crept into the very rock, raised and distorted
 it. An architect coming through from someplace studied the
 surroundings, nancing around on the bluff like a stork, and
 declared it to be a fault of the soil, its loose structure, the way it
 flaked to shale in his hands. But no one could ever account for the
 plain fact that if a person attempted to lay a foundation, the
 coming dawn would find their efforts flattened to a pile of bricks.
 Didn't matter how many times they started over. Didn't matter
 how they faced the door or what incantation they breathed over

the cornerstone. If it hadn't been left there by the people who'd moved down-valley in the Years Before, it wouldn't stand. And so it was understood that what was to blame was the ground itself, the spirit of the shore cliffs, an inbuilt malignancy that wanted no part in any new building. No one doubted this, or questioned it further.

And yet: here the old man came, and left standing a house where none had stood before.

— on Lee Bul's *Drifting Ashen Flake Opaque* (2008)

Behind every kiss there is a set of teeth

Annie Proulx

The watchers see two mocha-faced guitar players, one with a body like a ruined tree stump wearing baggy red pantaloons, the other (and younger) in a grimy brown suit. The name "Carlito" is painted on his guitar. The men sit on small chairs and open their mouths. They begin to sing at each other, faces tortured, muscular tongues curled and flattened. Behind them a woman stands immobile in her flounced dress, crimson shawl knotted over one hip—the kind of woman who, when slapped in the face, laughs and then attacks.

It seems the singers' throats must burst, choked by strangler vines of voice. Carlito's guitar emits an erroneous sound like the watery tremble of a steel knife as it is pulled onto a magnetized bar. The face of the other man—are they brothers?—does not change, but exudes compressed anger.

Red Pantaloons nods his head. The woman standing frozen in her attitude of disinterest suddenly steps forward. She has the face of a powerful oligarch, stamps, turns, stops, a rapping frizzle of feet on the floor to which the guitars respond with suppressed violence. The musicians toss their greased hair, the dancer's hands fly up, showing black-haired armpits. She is no longer young, but that is to be expected. They are all old, even Carlito. Red Pantaloons sings "*amor brutal, amor,*" and although his face is contorted in terrible grief, his lips barely move. The antique dancer's flanks shake with the remorseless stamping. The performance is brief. The men sing slowly, slower, their voices descending, "*Amorr, aaaaaamm,*" Carlito stares ahead like a stuffed cat, the dancer's arms sink as though in water. It is finished.

A gigantic hand descends, its fingers grasp the painted cover, lower it on the figures inside the box.

"*Brutal,*" cries a faint voice.

"How much?" asks the customer.

The proprietor names a staggering figure.

"That is an impossibly high price, even for a Maillardet."

"I did not say it was a Maillardet." He notices the customer's teeth like metal slugs.

"Who then?"

"Unknown. The automaton was discovered in Cosenza in the belfry of a church under deconstruction, so *fatto in Italia*? Or even

some unknown Sicilian puppet-maker. But because it illustrates early flamenco I think Spanish. It could be Swiss. Or even from a French hand. Perhaps North African? It has been suggested a Russian or Baltic watchmaker... In any case an exceptional piece. It was in savage disrepair and has been restored.”

The customer pretends indifference, looks around the shop. He glances briefly at Fabergé knick-knacks, suspect Chinese porcelain, a rust-mottled broadaxe. He looks into a glass-fronted cabinet housing a cluster of stuffed squirrels.

“What might those represent?”

“They are the work of Walter Potter of Bramber, father of English taxidermy. It is said that this group served as the inspiration for Beatrix Potter’s *Squirrel Nutkin*. No relation, I believe.”

The customer has never heard of Squirrel Nutkin and is unmoved. He turns toward the door and the light falls on him in a certain way. Now the proprietor notices he is wearing a brown suit. He sees the man approach the coat room, retrieve his overcoat and a case. The man looks back at the proprietor, lifts one finger in salute and goes out. As he passes the display window anyone can see he carries a guitar case marked with sparkling letters, but moving too quickly to make out what the letters spell.

The next morning the proprietor arrives at his shop for an appointment with a wealthy Chinese collector. He turns the key but the door does not open. He turns it the other way and with a click it is unlocked. He turns cold. Has the door stood unlocked all night? He looks at the shelf. The painted flamenco box is not there. He curses. He is rude to the Chinese collector who arrives at this unhappy moment. He calls the police. A constable takes photographs of the empty shelf to preserve the box’s absent presence.

Eleven days later it is found in the belfry of a nearby church. The bell-ringer, concerned about the muffled tone of a certain treble bell has climbed the thousand stairs and discovered the box on the floor. Poverino Carlito was tied to the bell’s clapper.

Who Knew?

Mary Ruefle

Nothing doing
today. Except
the ice in the trees
bringing the stars
to earth. And
a candle crafted
for my own personal pleasure
by nice people in
Wingate North Carolina
who had another brilliant idea –
adding nuts to soap.
How did they know life
escapes philosophy
in a little bag of
protoplasm? That it is
possible for a revolutionary
to love flowers? For an hour
I read about another man’s
childhood, and so long
sequestered out poured
the old strangely remembered –
every fat particle of it
able to transmit an owner.
I tried to make new
the never-ceasing cry
of the mouth. And
my friend sat with
her hands on her lap
so I could study them.

Every creature in divine sleep
begins to dream of obscure love,
so be not afraid of horses
reading in the moonlight,
be not afraid of people
you see in the street,
each carries a cloud
whose weight is distributed
among us.

— on Camille Henrot

Blind Uncle Gaspard

Mary Ruefle

Rain I've received a letter from.
There is no record of,
no white stone.
It tells a secret too big
to belong to any mammal.
It is as if a terrible crystal
had burst in rain's heart.
The letter's tone is that of
a wild plum throbbing in the heart
of a wood pigeon wooed by the rootlets
of wild grapes. The envelope's spritzed
with the scent of those utterly beautiful
rotten apples you sometimes experience
still hanging on to their tree.
When I first read it I wept
with the formless tender knowledge
of all that is talking.
I didn't know if I was hearing
the rain or if I was a drop
of it. We all begin life oh so
tiny. I supposed it is our duty
to remain compact. O go join
the new to the original particle
of loving and carry it –
either is too precious to be left alone,
to be exposed to the dangers that
would menace it if it were perfect,
I mean no downfall.
Me small ephemeral
I'm going first.

— on Danh Vo's *2.2.1861* (2009–)

Money Shots

Tomaž Šalamun

Translated from the Slovenian by Katarina and Jeffrey Young

Do you love splendor, Sviščaki?
How to crawl out from the coat and dark spots to
the stream.
To Bronzino's chin, to his
lips. His forehead, to
the triptych.

Pellicole!

With a cancelled background, with white dogs.
Sheep-breeding drops.
The reed is cold.
Into you, into you, you cover up and recollect.
You call out to hills, so that they soften.
You're leaving me?
Which is not bush.
Which is not boxwood.
Is not only for the two of us.
Is not a barrel that you can exchange for eyes or
a grebe on the wall?

Did he start? Did he start? Did he unbutton?
Gattamelata, from column to column, from sidewalk to
pavement.
Everything is self-fulfilled.
Disfigures and stuffs animals.
Sharpens. Sharpens.
Kisses crowns and sequences and looks from
the bus.
Rolls shards.
Changes tufts.
Lifts tiles with the back, with its brown
back. Doesn't see the blind one
anymore. Doesn't plough the blade.
My thumbtack.
My dry abyss.

When I burn myself. When I put myself into the exhibition,
that the stars see me.
I'm crying you.

I reached, I reached with the right hand and inserted a piece
of white paper into your small, membranous box where wolves
bud.
The most given.
The most given to tear the belly.
To show to monkeys spleen and the spirit of the great.
To tackle.
To side with the solvent.
To crumble with the rollercoaster.
And finally in front of the chain.
To take down.
To hear the wild screams of companions of animals of dogs.

Ivory meadows, inside them rolled
wires and mess tins and moss, with which they
washed the mess tins, the moss was taken out from
the stream. And spears caught fire,
they called over the skin.
Pickpockets nodded.
Here is the signboard, here is the signboard, they shouted,
shoemakers, not that they would be
aware.
And over rounded stones as with all
nations that translated the Bible
too late.
The graft will rot.

With the sixth brigade, with big shoes, with
a pot on the back.
With a nun, stripped, blissfully blown out and
pacified.
Accommodated with mirrors.

My warrior. My raver. My happiness. My
 tunnel. Benches placed flat into
 Sanskrit. We two devour posters.
 We two glide a small ball.
 We two look for a billfold and find it.
 You touch the turtle.
 I touch the turtle under the roof and Kamila.
 Where small flowers grow.
 Where with sun and scourge
 we roll. We roll what
 we roll.

Moneyshots.

Each one was sated by Fra Angelico.

— on Paweł Althamer's *Andre* (2011)

Enrique Vila-Matas

Translated from the Spanish by Anne McLean

Where is art headed? Sooner or later, we end up seriously asking ourselves this strange question, probably not so strange to the creator of the small dead bird, the creator of this invisible sculpture you now find yourself facing: an absent sculpture, spared from being here and situated in another part of the museum, maybe on the roof, up there where Conan the barbarian found a way to get home.

The question of where art is headed shouldn't strike the author of this invisible sculpture as strange, since he's spent quite some time interrogating himself about how one can make work that is destined to disappear over time, and also asking himself about how the residues of human culture will be read, what will be left of the world and of what we call civilization when everything has died out.

But even if the question sounded strange and difficult to everyone, the answer should not offer any problems, given that it is simple.

Art is heading toward itself, toward its essence, which is disappearance.

Understand: it's not that art, by its own nature, finds itself near destruction, at the gates of the apocalypse. No, it's not that. It's that art is already before those gates, traveling irremediably in the light of the final sky and one day will die, as all things die, as the Sun and the Earth, the Solar System and the Galaxy and the most obscure memory of mankind will all die out.

What will then remain of our loves? The little bird of nobody's memory. And the attitude. I think the attitude we might have had will remain. For me the most indestructible of all attitudes will have been the attitude of those who knew how to decide, as tough and as fragile as life might be, that what matters is to do something interesting with it. Something with the snow and the light and the old wood and the draft of air along the ground that announces the approach of autumn; everything that reflects the trace an instant leaves and allows us the consolation of knowing that the light, the rain, the old door, the fog down by the docks and the last bird, the wind and that mountain, were always admirable because, unlike the rest, they knew how to persist in their being.

— on Adrián Villar Rojas's *Motherland* (2015)

¿Hacia dónde va el arte? Tarde o temprano, acabaremos haciéndonos muy en serio esta extraña pregunta, probablemente no extraña para el autor del pequeño pájaro muerto, el autor de esta escultura invisible ante la que se halla ahora el espectador: una escultura ausente, salvada de estar aquí y situada en otro lugar del museo, quizás en el tejado, allí donde el guerrero Conan descubrió la forma de volver a casa.

Al autor de esta escultura invisible no tiene que parecerle extraña la pregunta de hacia dónde va el arte, ya que él mismo lleva tiempo interrogándose acerca de cómo puede uno hacer una obra que está destinada a desaparecer con el tiempo, y preguntándose también sobre cómo serán leídos los residuos de la cultura humana, qué quedará del mundo y de lo que llamamos civilización cuando todo se haya extinguido.

Pero aún si la pregunta sonara extraña y hasta difícil para todos, la respuesta no tendría por qué ofrecer problemas, dado que es sencilla.

El arte va hacia él mismo, hacia su esencia, que es la desaparición.

Entiéndase: ya no es que el arte, por su propia naturaleza, se encuentre próximo a la destrucción, a las puertas de lo apocalíptico. No, no es eso. Es que el arte ya está ante esas puertas, viaja irremediamente en la luz del último cielo y un día morirá, como mueren todas las cosas, como se extinguirá el Sol y la Tierra, el Sistema Solar y la Galaxia y la más recóndita memoria de los hombres.

¿Qué quedará entonces de nuestros amores? El pequeño pájaro del recuerdo de nadie. Y la actitud. Pienso que quedará la actitud que hayamos tenido. Para mí la más indestructible de todas las actitudes habrá sido la de quienes supieron decidir que, por muy dura y muy frágil que sea la vida, lo que importa es hacer algo interesante con ella. Algo con la nieve y la luz y la madera antigua y la corriente de aire que a ras de suelo anuncia de pronto el otoño; todo aquello que refleja el rastro que deja el instante y nos concede el consuelo de saber que la luz, la lluvia, la vieja puerta, la niebla en el muelle y el último pájaro, el viento y aquella montaña, siempre fueron admirables porque, a diferencia de lo demás, supieron persistir en su ser.

— sobre Adrián Villar Rojas's *Motherland* (2015)

Jeanette Winterson

When I look at this installation I remember that many people do not have a home of their own but live in temporary shelters moving from place to place. I remember that being bombed out or foreclosed or sleeping under a tarpaulin or on cardboard or in a car, happens to millions, not a few.

On the way to the museum today how many homeless people did you see?

The scents from the machine are Brave New World narcotics. Scents to soothe us, scents to provoke memory—even false memories of a golden age that never was—a long time ago, when we could smell the ocean and the forest.

We like to believe that if things were good once, maybe they will be good again. The most vulnerable thing about us is that we keep hoping.

Temporary, flat-pack, portable. collapsible, lightweight, see-thru, semi invisible. The industrial fan churning the air of the provisional space that has become permanent.

Temporary shelters. Temporary lives.

Life is so short. What a way to ruin it.

If art asks no questions, art serves the silence.

If art makes no statements, art serves what is said.

Let there be voice. Let there be wind.

Life itself is a series of vulnerable arrangements. We know we will die though that knowledge isn't knowledge we know how to live with. We will likely live longer than we want to, and die helpless alone, or among strangers.

Walk between the blinds—imagine you are safe. Imagine this is home. What is home?

The seeming-solid city is a lie. The skyscrapers and apartments blocks, the monuments and museums. The stores, schools, offices, hospitals, prisons. Concrete and vanity.

The mind is still a nomad looking to leave.

You there! Close the blinds before the light spoils the furniture. What? There is no furniture? This is empty space?

Now I remember that atoms are that; empty space and points of light.

The building block of history is empty space.

If art is anything it is an arrangement of light.

When art is something it empties space.

We need some empty space.

The planet herself has become a vulnerable arrangement.

Is the planet for the few or for the many?

Is art for the few or for the many?

What separates us is so flimsy and so fixed.

— on Haegue Yang's *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Voice and Wind* (2009)

Meg Wolitzer

The bohemian childhood ages strangely. A thousand years later we come back to empty out the house, we two thick midlife sisters who once banged into these walls, all elbow, all the time, shuddering shelves and causing the things on them to tremble and potentially drop like acorns, or icicles. But never, originally, did any of it seem fragile; instead these were just one family's collection of accepted mementos and pollen in all its totemic mystery and familiarity, held fast by a vertical, arboreal frame.

For days in the house upon our return, we are on our hands and knees in closets and rooms, like animals in a field grazing, dismantling. At first we are hesitant to approach the nucleus of it all, the radiant shrine. I don't know what the parents meant by any of it, but I can't ask them now. I, the younger and always the shorter, gravitate to the low-hanging fruit of the bottom shelf. Books will always be fruit to me, and the parents in their ardent, touching quest for the mystical must have sat cross-legged on the bed and read in and around these texts, scavenging for something that I could not see, so blanched was my vision by a child's self-absorption. Moving upward, less tentative, I encounter the purity not of their lives but of how they *wanted* their lives—our lives—to feel. I could not feel it then, sock-footed and sliding across the shining floors. But here it is now.

My sister reaches a hand toward the thing at the top that is like the star on the bohemian family's Christmas tree. She catches the object that's been allowed to tremble there, singularized and made special in its isolation. She puts her ear to it, her pink, hot ear flush against the pink, cold, folded-back lining. Perhaps in that moment all the objects cry out to her in tiny, distant polyphony, up from the archive that is anyone's past, up from the collection, up from having been chosen and placed somewhere with care.

You can still feel that care, even though the carers have fled for another place—guided, maybe, by their murmuring, mystical texts. Please let the texts guide them. Please let the objects, long cooled, long separated from the heat of the choosers' love, retain the choosers' presence and residue, a light breeding of their

genetic shavings. We always know that objects outlast people, and that in an animate versus inanimate game of “scissors paper stone,” the objects find a way to triumph. And yet if we really believed it, we would hate our most astonishing things, and would never display them with anything resembling pride, or love. If we really believed it, we would never want them near us.

Now I put my ear to the opening.

— on Carol Bove’s *Vague Pure Affection* (2012)