

# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

AMANDA GUTMANN-GONZALEZ	Dead fish on the Road: A treatise on Absence
MICHAEL THORNTON	Icarus

## FICTION

PETER GRIMES	The Progress of Tongues
COLLEEN HOLLISTER	Landscape with Building, Zoo, and Hardly Any Animals
MICHAEL MARTONE	Tuesday
CARL PETERSON	The Ted Costume

## POETRY

MAUREEN ALSOP	Apantomancy
RUSS BRICKLEY	Ultrasound
CHRISTINA COOK	Gull in Oil
JAMES DOYLE	Bow Hunters in the Sahara
JOHN ESTES	The Old English Rune Poem
HAFIZAH GETER	a mass of elements, this man who sleeps next to me  i have been sleeping in all your beds
BERNADETTE GEYER	Elegy for Bridges
CHELSEA REBEKAH-GRIMMER	A Ferryboat



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

	Lines
THOMAS HEISE	from <i>Moth; or how I came to be with you again</i>
ANGIE MACRI	Piranha to Scurfly Scale
	The Test
CHRISTOPHER MUNDE	Hers
SIMON PERCHIK	*
DONNA PUCCIANI	For Anton
F. DANIEL RZICZNEK	from <i>Leafmold</i>
ELIZABETH WADE	Ecchymosis
JACKIE WHITE	Body Cento: From the Decade I Edited

## Night Walk 2

### SCHOLARSHIP AND CRITICAL COMMENTARY

CYNTHIA CRAVENS ◦	Review of <i>Tinkers</i> , by Paul Harding
CLARK LUNBERRY	Writing in Waves, a Poem on a Pond
LISA HAINES WRIGHT	Constructing Paralysis: The (Lethal) Narrative of Momentous Consequence

### VISUAL ART

MOLLY-ROSE ARNSTEIN	Armful
	The Boys
	Handholding
	Toss
MARK RICE	The Big Yawn



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

The Big Yawn 2

The Big Yawn 3

Origin Story Series 1

Origin Story Series 2

Origin Story Series 3

Origin Story Series 4

◦ Invited contributions from the University of Illinois at Chicago community.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Amanda Gutmann-Gonzalez**

**Dead Fish on the Road: A Treatise on Absence**

They should have called me, when, on the way to the 24-hour diner, they found the fish on the road. My friends, transfixed by the terrible, the moon: that pendant, how it should always be this way, how we should always see this way. The moon, that piece of a thing in the sky, *thing* like *white* and *whole*, though it is only part of something greater—strayed, the way all stars are fragments, the way all planetary bodies are a reconfiguring. For him, always, the snapshot of the *now* against the roof of mouth, snapshot against death. Framed: look. Look at what we lose every second, the act of living nothing but melting, slow and irreversible. Look at how we lose, how it is also what we have: the two relentlessly inseparable, the tooth and the jaw.

\*

A comma is a punctuation mark and a species of butterfly.

\*

Something doesn't fit: they should have called me when they saw the slit, the head delicately detached, a slipper away-ing slightly from its pair. A point of departure. As if the fish desired at the last to go on, head-first, and though fish can only ever move head-first, lacking



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

hands with which to reach, this time, ripped scales and tissue. Oh, how the head of the fish reaches out when nothing else can, when the fins can't because they are useless against asphalt, the parched stripes of the road. Oh, that fish could head their way, even in death.

\*

Take, for instance, the phrase *I miss you*—how it is, from the very beginning, a failure of language. How much it lacks in its non-specificity till it becomes vacuous, and by enacting absence too well, becomes incapable of expressing it. How what I really mean is: Why isn't this moment between us a comma instead of a paragraph break, a simple bend in the sentence when *sentence* means *road* and we're on the same one together? Because this is also about physical location, about bodies in space. What I really mean is that I noticed today, when looking at the people crisscrossing to class and out the doors of the old building with the bell tower, noticed the leaves turning and brushing against faces like secrets, and the students' faces hardening with something—outside of themselves, maybe, like the weather, like the hard glass overhead, which is also underneath, reflected by the hard cement—their faces as if bent on something, the curious melancholy eyebrow, and I want to say to them, *Look at that bench where you turn to enter and exit the building for class, that is where I used to sit and wait for her*—I catch glimpses of that bench here and there among the sweaters, the wood broken, it seems, by scarves, and I love this time of year because of the scarves, and everything falling: the hats, the leaves, aspects of the



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

building, such as chunks of roof from the too-wild wind that wants to take everything with it in one ambitious embrace. But that bench—it's not like the people, not bent on anything. Yes, the bench is grayer today and too reflects the now molting sky, but ah, even when people sit on it, it doesn't bend, not in the least. Like these walkers, the bench is *affected* by the weather that acts upon it yet it continues to be there, open-armed, regardless of what wind, what rain, waiting for a passerby to take its gift of rest at any moment in time and with no reservation whatsoever.

\*

*They should have called me*, I want to insist. They should have called me, because I want, like they did, to lick the fish with my eyes. I think of our restraints, imposed perhaps, that keep us from licking with our tongues. I think: *At one point, we knew this desire*. I think of what it would take for us to remember, to go down on our knees for that fish, or something else strange and forgotten. To risk. To use our tongues—that forgotten potential—to reach.

\*

I don't know, in the way I used to, where you are going. I mean, I once made a map of your wanderings, spied from different angles, behind this tree here, from that hammock over there, and then charted out a schedule for you, one with enough room for possibility, with enough new unbridled highways and unlatched, tossed-open windows that you'd think I was doing



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

something other than keeping track of how close you were to me. It is what the compass knows: that North is marked in relation to the person seeking. North is *relational*. When I entered your office to write “10:02—Arrival” with chalk on the board, what I was doing was keeping track of the ticking. I mean *pulse* here. The way pulse is what transpires between people, but also after, when they leave. You asked how I knew when you’d arrived, you hadn’t seen me watching. I said I hadn’t been; I’d been listening. I said, “I was in the classroom next door and I could hear the click-click-clicking of your high heels.” You said, “We all wear high heels here,” and I told you how yours sound different, how that is also something I’d committed to memory. It is difficult to describe the sound of walks, but if I had to with yours, I’d speak of sound as image, of association: the sound of slightly-forward, of momentum that builds upon itself like a long poem, I’d speak about angle, about putting the weight of your height into each step.

\*

What I like about falling things is gravity. What I like is a force acting upon an object and having such a clear, unavoidable effect. When the roof fell from the old building with the bell tower, no one could avoid noticing. What I mean by *I miss you* is sound-of-roof-falling.

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## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

The body angles; memory ledges. Memory wedges into the body—or doesn't. Memory stays; sometimes, it leaves. I had forgotten, had to return to the refrigerator door. Outside that space, memory did not exist—not until I looked inside, saw in the light the buzz, the beckoning cold: the past, and I retrieved the memory. The refrigerator door and memory opening at the same time. Like this, memory strays in and out of place. Memory *is* a place: what exactly is enclosed in a knuckle? Without knuckles, what would we know about angles, about *bending*?

\*

But I see somebody has moved the bench. Like they moved the bench in front of the library from one side of the ginkgo to the opposite side. Maybe the benches stir at night. All over campus, maybe the benches move, not with the help of arms, but by themselves, in the night—maybe, in fact, the benches change places at night and we don't know, don't notice that the one in which "you suck, Jesse" is written with a nail is now facing the Quads instead of sitting under the ginkgo, and thus, the benches, in their mobility and mischief, participate in something akin to what these hands on scarves and hearts in bodies, walking and walking past the bench, do—a similar kind of agency, a transposing exercise. In the walkers, something resists being warmed by the scarves or desires to be warmed by them and *that* has nothing to do with the appearance of clouds.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Though these faces over collared coats are not wondering, like I am, where you are going at this very moment.

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The insides unfolded before and *for* my friends, the fish giving itself up at the very end. Or worse: ravaged after death by some claw or other, the spike of a wheel. Either way, the thing spilling from inside. And because my friends had eyes, spilling for their eyes, as if for the first time. Although of course it wasn't, of course the scales came undone much earlier and without the help of their eyes. Not with those eyes, which seemed to descend because the wound is open and invites; because this fish, this scene, is as much an entering as a mode of exit. Like this, *with* this, I question the irreversible, because what am I doing now—with these words, this page? What if not disrupting, reversing?

\*

Sometimes I walk to the bench as if it were a friend that I'd left momentarily. "Hey, bench." It doesn't so much as acknowledge my presence but it does allow me to sit on it, which is another way of being cordial. It strikes me then, sitting on the bench, watching things blow by—birds, leaves, bats, strands of human hair disengaged from their heads of origin—how I used to sit



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

here around the time I knew you'd pass to get your mail, and ask you as you went, "HEY! Where are you going?" knowing the reply, but liking the exchange nonetheless: the way it took no one by surprise, but was like a punch line every time, the good part of a song you predict before it arrives, the way I could predict that you were returning in five minutes, this time with your mail, so I would wait for you, pretending that I didn't have anything better to do, pretending that I didn't see you until you were crossing right in front of the bench, pretending to be surprised, though my body itched, like it did as a kid when I waited in a dark corner for a person to pass before the leap *out*, my body itching with contained laughter.

\*

Truly the body enters and exits out of memory. Just now in the hallway, my body veered to the heater protruding from the wall, and then from my voice arose a low peeping. Against the wall: peep-peep-peep-peep. This can't be called *myself*, can it? My mind arising then out of the warm, thinking: *you're peeping at the wall*.

Yet also the mind conspiring: the image of bodies with feathers like breath, fleshing patterns on a cold window. Feathers with heartbeats underneath, bodies touching bodies, and the more commanding heartbeat radiating from the mother's raw, featherless belly. The tangle of legs. In the chicken coop the mother, if not careful, can maim or kill its young. The hatched, when they are still wet—as if licked into existence—can be, by the mother, unknowingly killed



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

with her legs. Those legs are gnarled and razor-tipped, a legacy perhaps as old as the dinosaurs. The ideal mother is a dancer, steps *around*. The mother, stepping back, looking, realizing that her feet have sharp corners that can kill (and maybe here I begin imposing, maybe here I depart) and yet not understanding what happened. Asking what happened. Why, now, this absence. Or not asking. I try, and I fail, to understand which is worse.

\*

The comma is used primarily for separating things; the fish lies broken, too.

\*

Sitting on the bench, this bench you passed every day until you left, it strikes me how *here* it is.

\*

An arch, devoid of angles. It invites, reads *gateway to somewhere else*. What exactly is it you're crossing when you cross an arch? Where are you going?



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Weeks ago I went out into the night with a group of others, a spilling out of doors. I threaded past the football field, which is called “the Bowl,” not touching it—thirsty, but for something else. We crossed between firs, sat on cement benches bordering the angle-less swoop of the track, watched a woman saunter by, out of breath. The old building with the bell tower, lit by beams below, looked stark against the black sky, naked, as if I’d never seen it before. As if I hadn’t spend the last three years in this place. *I have one more year here* I thought, and saw the grass glisten strangely. We walked over the grass towards an arch at the other end of the track. Though small, the arch loomed as we approached; it widened with our footsteps, a veritable mouth. I thought: *here we go*. I thought: *one day, after this, we will wake up blinking, shivering—somewhere else*. I thought: *here we shed memory—or it will choke us*. The arch, veritable though it was, made the briefest shadow on our clothes as we crossed. Veritable though it was, or maybe because of this, the arch had nothing to offer on the other side—and yet everything because there, again, was everything that we had, for a second, left.

\*

As you left, so the fish: its insides were also leaving.

\*

Take the phrase—I miss you—trying to signify something, yet useless, useless, like a dead fish pouring itself out onto the road.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

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I want to ask you again, “Where are you going?”

I want you to lift your butterfly sunglasses and say, with a touch of pretend surprise,  
“None of your business.”



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Michael Thornton**

**Icarus**

**Play “*That’s What Friends Are For*”**

**1986**

**Yearly Inflation Rate USA 1.91%**

**Average Cost of new house \$89,430.00**

**Average Income per year \$22,400.00**

I have never been good at business. In second grade, I drew a picture of who I wanted to be. It was an architect/businessman/monster, an impossibly rectangular man standing foreground with the Chicago skyline bending behind him, the bases of each building impossibly large, ascending skyward in vertiginous curves meeting top-page. The boxy-bodied human wore a blue suit and carried a brown briefcase. Off to work with his briefcase. A ghoulish fingernail of a smile with wide eyes. And there were skinny birds in the sky. Clouds were purple. It was a work of art one would see hanging on the walls in an art therapy room for those who had just undergone major brain surgery. Even by second grade standards, it was a demented piece of shit.

I did not become a businessman. That title would be claimed by my friend Gabe sitting one row in front of me and to the left in that second grade classroom.

Gabe was the fifth child of Irish immigrants. And even at that age, Gabe could do the math: with his next youngest brother 19 years his senior, Gabe was—he proudly pronounced—an “accident child”.

**Play *Nirvana, “Smells Like Teen Spirit”***

**1992**

**Yearly Inflation Rate USA 3.03%**

**Average Cost of new house \$122,500.00**



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

## **Average Income per year \$30,030.00**

The accident child had every brand-new pair of Air Jordans©, Starter©Jackets and Dyno© bikes. The accident child showed me my very first porno and giggled sinisterly through the most nasal Chicago resonance as the 1980s VHS played an endless closeup of an impossibly tubular and angry-looking cock pistoning its way into a glistening bush of perplexing fascination and revulsion. We prank-called the next door neighbor's creamy-thighed and supple 17-year old daughter, who was unfortunate enough to have a bra size and IQ of the same number; Gabe and I told her Congratulations!, she won a beauty package at the local salon, so come on down and collect. We watched from the upstairs window as she excitedly left with her mother to claim her prize. We laughed as the car drove away and when, 20 minutes later, it returned with the girl empty-handed, crying, her mother screaming behind her. I'd love to say we felt bad. And maybe we did for a minute. But we probably just laughed again. But not as hard as after we prank-called Animal Cruelty on Gabe's other neighbor for fucking a goat.

## **Play: "I Believe I Can Fly"**

**1997**

**Yearly Inflation Rate USA 2.34 %**

**Average Cost of new house \$124,100.00**

**Average Income per year \$37,006.00**

When we were asked in high school what we wanted to be by the time we were 30, Gabe announced: a millionaire.

He majored in business at U of I, immediately entered the real estate market, and, by 2006, *was*.

## **Play: OutKast "Hey Ya"**

**2003**

**Yearly Inflation Rate USA 2.27%**



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Average Cost of new house \$268,300**  
**Average Income per year \$45,016**

As I was recuperating in the hospital, Gabe swung by and brought me McDonald's. And when I received my first night pass and decided, naturally, to spend it at Timothy O'Toole's down the street, it was Gabe who wheeled me to the bathroom and helped me cath myself, resting his suit jacket on the toilet and rolling up the sleeves to a dress shirt whose sheen and lightness screamed *you cannot afford me*. Gabe helped unzip my fly and carefully guide the lubed, fire engine red tubing down my urethra so I could have relief. "It's not as weird as I thought" he half-laughed, through tears which frightened him. I was his best friend he had nearly lost two months ago; I was the 6' 2", 280-pound guy who had to intercede at the bars when Gabe's mouth would get us in trouble, when Gabe's promise to "put my foot up your ass, buddy" caused a small riot at Sedgwick's, which culminated in me throwing Gabe's would-be-assailant through a table; Gabe, who had suggested I do high school theater at the neighboring girls' school; Gabe who, at 16, made the boo-boo of asking my couch-beached father, "So, Mr. T, what are you doing with your money?", a question greeted by my dad—never once taking his eyes off the television—slamming the den door in Gabe's face; Gabe, who secured all paperwork and expediting for The Gift Theatre Company to start building our space on Milwaukee: and here we are in a handicapped stall on Fairbanks, my urine running from the tube into the plastic hand-held urinal, doing our best to unweird the weird, to normal the new normal. No amount of drink could get us there. Ever.

**Play Gnarl's Barkley, "Crazy"**  
**2006**  
**Yearly Inflation Rate USA 3.99%**  
**Average Cost of new house \$325,000**  
**Average Income per year \$46,996**



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Gabe's new friends, like him, were in real estate. He spent weekends on the bows of yachts, drinking Ketel One and, when the urge struck, a limo ferried him to Midway where he was transported to Indiana casino rooftops via *helicopter*. He threw a party at R. Kelly's infamous house (which he was helping to sell) and staged faux peeface pics for the camera in a room painted floor to ceiling in scenes from the movie *Spacejam*.<sup>1</sup> One summer, at Gabe's annual pig roast (a party so large it involved the hiring of Chicago police), Gabe accidentally lit his Lexus on fire. He was investing in Vegas and Ravenswood. I asked if he thought the housing bubble would burst. "All bubbles do," he said. "We just don't know when."

I saw him infrequently.

He was 25.

## **Play Radiohead, "15 Step"**

**2008**

**Yearly Inflation Rate USA 3.85%**

**Average Cost of new house \$238,880**

**Average Income per year \$40,523**

In 2008, after we would all learn the meaning and implications of cold and yet somehow sexual-sounding terms like *subprime*, *toxic asset pools*, *adjustable rate mortgages*, and *collateried debt obligation*, Gabe was living in Midland, Texas, sleeping on the floor of a one-bedroom apartment in a sleeping bag. He was 28 years old and \$7M in debt. Nigerians were looking for him. I'm still not entirely sure what Gabe did, though setting up a side company whose CEO was his dead dog was one of them.

He could have declared bankruptcy. He could have gone to jail. He could have ended up in the trunk of a car or—in the case of his boss who, upon learning he had lost everything, drove his

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<sup>1</sup> This could arguably be a major reason for Mr. Kelly's being found not guilty, as I imagine the ability to watersport, get an erection, and fuck a minor all in the presence of Daffy Duck trying to hit a jump shot demands superhuman abilities of concentration.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

BMW deep deep into the forest preserves, put the barrel of a gun in his mouth, and shot himself—in the drivers' seat.

Gabe didn't do that. Instead, to his clients who had lost everything, Gabe offered a pledge. "I'll pay you back."

Midland, Texas. Hurricane Gustav swarmed in and racked up \$4.3 billion dollars in U.S. damage. Roofs were damaged. A market appeared.

Belt Buckle with initials? Check. Ford F-350 that runs on diesel? Check.

"Buddy, you're roof's fucked up," Gabe would tell some seven-foot, 300-pound cornfed monster, climb on the roof, and sell the man a new one. He did this every day. House by house. He did it in Denver (where he also slept on the floor), he did it in St. Louis. Ding dong. I referred to him half-jokingly as the disaster capitalist, but then again, is any part of capitalism not built on some sort of disaster?

## 2010

**Yearly Inflation Rate USA 1.1%**  
**Average Cost of new house \$ We'll see**  
**Average Income per year \$ We'll see**

When I heard that Gabe was back in Chicago working for a new company which went door-to-door offering roof repairs, I was immediately snarky. "And how much do they pay the people to go fuck up the roof the week before?" I asked a friend who Gabe had just hired to work alongside him. "Nah, it's totally legit," my friend Tim said in his southern drawl. Tim could smell bullshit a mile away. If he said it was legit, it was legit.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

I recoiled at my nastiness, rolled outside and sat by the lake. I hadn't hung out with Gabe one-on-one since months ago, when he came in from Denver to settle legal issues. He looked gaunt and steadily smoked Marlboro Ultra Lights. He looked tired. He looked like he had gotten his ass kicked. This was one fight whose assailant I could not throw through a table.

I stared at the lake and thought of the weekend before. Leaving a performance of *Suicide, Incorporated* at The Gift, weaving through the audience on Milwaukee, I briefly met former Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson, who was in attendance that night: Paulson at the Gift, the theatre Gabe helped us acquire. Both of them at diametrically-opposite poles, survivors of the same created shit storm. I looked at the lake and realized: I blamed Gabe. I was angry at him. For what? For getting suckered? For going down the drain with oh, I don't know, *countless* twentysomethings just like him who got in the game right after college as the bubble grew? Was it that only one of us was supposed to be felled by life's storms and I thought I had taken care of that with my getting sick—and if so, what kind of fucked up magical Catholic Lucky Charms Irish martyr bullshit thinking was *that*? Yes, I had been ridiculously busy, but so what? Did one failure not want to be around another? Am I as shallow and narcissistic as I fear: one whiff of ruin and I wheel away as fast as possible lest I *catch* it? Let's call it like it is: I'd been a bad friend.

That day, I bought two albums on iTunes, paid my Comcast bill, and selected some ass-kicking All Clad© cookware for my and Lindsey's wedding registry. I did this all online. Somehow, through the slow accretion of greed, I—and the rest of us—have become consumers more willing to engage in transactions through computer screens than screen doors. The image of a man at the front door makes us think who and what is being done at the back. What does this bode?: The Museum of Natural History 100 years from now. Cro-Magnon Man, the Woolly Mammoth, the Door-to-Door Salesman. Forget a clean shave and an honest face; trust is now earned by a clean and easily navigable website.



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Yes, there are thieves. Yes, there are con-artists. But not too long ago, a crucial step in the life of a product was meeting people in their homes through a salesman. “Good morning, ma’am, my name’s Gabe and I just wanted to introduce myself. We’ll be doing some work on your neighbor’s roof, and I noticed yours could use some improvement. Here’s my card.”

Sixty years ago, this wasn’t sketchy. And while there’s a good goddamn reason to not trust someone at your door, while decades of affinity scams, would-be tree-trimmers, driveway resurfacers, magazine subscription- and time-share salesmen have taken the elderly, the gullible, and the all-too-trusting for innumerable rides, surely there must be an honest salesman somewhere going door to door.

Every day, Gabe goes knocking. He’s paid his clients back. He’s not so thin anymore. He’s still smoking.

I’ve asked Gabe to tell me how he got scorched. But after a big inhale which makes him look like a fat woman is sitting atop a piano on his chest, he can’t—or won’t. “It was just...a lot of stuff,” his voice and gaze trailing off into the night. I try to imagine what he sees. I imagine his world feeling perhaps like my second grade drawing with skylines bending in on him, immovable bases of real estate built impossibly large and incredibly fast, architecture groaning towards unmeetable apices, buckling under its own weight and about to fall, Icarus-like, to the Earth. Buglike eyes. Skinny birds. Abandoned briefcases. I can’t imagine the pressure. I didn’t help him through any of it.

The recession took a lot out of my friend. Arguably worse, it took a lot out of our friendship. I blame myself.

**Gabe’s Facebook© status: August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010**



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

“Last night was like the good old real estate days.”

I don't know what he's referring to. Perhaps a party of Roman indulgence with new friends; perhaps he lit his Ford 350 on fire; perhaps a deal went really, really well. I don't know. I wasn't there.

Under his status update, Facebook's “thumbs up” logo heralded that 1 person liked this.

It wasn't me.



# PACKINGTON REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

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**Peter Grimes**

## **The Progress of Tongues**

From *Merriam and Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (1979):

Bilious (bil'yəs) *adj.* (1) Relating to bile, especially William's. (2) Suffering, as does William, from liver dysfunction. (3) Indicative of a peevish, William-like disposition, prone to episodes of lying, desperation, and animal aggression. – bil'ious▪ly *adv.* –bil'ious▪ness *n.* [Fr: *Guillaume.*]

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October 16, 1980

Editors

*Merriam-Webster*

43 Ave. C

New York, NY 10009

Dear Sirs,

I write as a concerned citizen in objection to certain elements of your definition for “bilious” on page 139 of your most recent edition. My considerable research reveals that this particular gloss dates back to 1828, when it debuted in your founder's *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Reasons an update is needed appear below, organized according to the elements of your definition.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

(1) *Relating to bile, especially William's.*

By “bile” I suppose you mean my occasional low spirits. Like all gentlemen—Williams or otherwise—I have a particular way of coping with the human condition. Churchill battled his Black Dog; I happen to call my *bête noire* the Squids—an inky malaise when the seasons turn. This is unrelated to my gallbladder, as your definition would have it, where bile merely emulsifies fats, assists their absorption into the intestine, neutralizes stomach acids. I don't, of course, hold it against Mr. Webster—who likely meant a different William—for making wrong assumptions based on the wild inaccuracies of eighteenth-century science, but maybe we could omit the personal from the *modern* dictionary? I've got my Squids; you might wake up some mornings as Lester the Magnificent; my wife displays the Luff when a rival gets her goat. So be it, unremarked.

(2) *Suffering, as does William, from liver dysfunction.*

One glass of Cabernet Sauvignon with supper, maybe a second on Fridays at Le Bec-Fin. I know my limit. (If you want an elbow-bender, it's Larry Boswell of Cherokee Ct., whose liver is likely foie gras). Burroughs and Faulkner may have given Williams worldwide a bad name in the years since the French and Indian War; however, while accusers cite the pickled priests of Tangier and the Mississippi Delta as evidence of abuse, I counter with Penn, my state's founding Quaker.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

(3) *Indicative of a peevish, William-like disposition, prone to episodes of lying, desperation, and animal aggression.*

“William-like?” This word, I might point out, appears nowhere else in your editions, and it’s this definition that particularly paints me blue in the face. Accuse a man of lying and . . . well, pardon my French, but *merde* if we moderns are to honor dear Webster’s belief in bodily “humours.” The Sanguine will get studded with leeches, the Phlegmatic forced to expectorate, the Melancholy tapped like maples. And William the Choleric? I’ll be plied with cold porridge, pursued like Frankenstein to the North Pole, there stashed in an iceberg. It is 1980, fellows. Biology is not destiny.

Let me bring the issue into perspective by way of a little cautionary tale. Last Friday, my daughter encountered the contested word, “bilious,” in her schoolbook: *The bilious turtle snapped at the boisterous salmon*. Joan sidled up: “Daddy, what does that word mean?” I’d taught her well (she knew “boisterous” already). Together we turned to the most recent edition of your always well-maintained and updated tome. So many words has it taught me: *animus*, *perfidy*, *jihad*. This time, though, what did we find? Verbal atavism, etymological fossil! Joan is nine years old. Is this how she will know her father? She wept as I burned your 8<sup>th</sup> edition on our front lawn.

(4) *Reasonable, principled, direct, as William Gaul of Philadelphia.*



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

This is only a suggestion. I'll admit to getting carried away at times. In hindsight, it's better I waited a week to write—seven days for logos to equal pathos. Too, it's taken half a fortnight for Joan to forgive my fury, though it was mainly through her own verbal misfortune at school yesterday that she came to appreciate my position.

Over French toast this morning, she asked why classmates call her Bones. (Her true eponym burned in Rouen). At last! I thought. She perceives how language can go wrong and send a father to burning books. Kids are cruel, I wanted to explain. Most get it from their parents. Take the *Roots*-induced genealogy craze, *toubab* housewives scurrying to their branch libraries. Their fuss sends kids the wrong message. History, body, lineage—these alone do not determine identity. Webster knew the true American way to be self-definition, not digging for clues among the putrid roots of the European garden. Think of Horatio Alger, Ben Franklin, Frederick Douglass!

But a nine-year-old wouldn't understand this, so I took the direct approach, no beating around the *buisson*. We splurged for lunch at Showbiz—not because I regard the restaurant as anything less than a vitiation of Italian cuisine, but because she likes it. In fact, I required four fingers of Cognac before I could brave the stench of kid sweat and mozzarella.

I levered a slice of the revolting pie onto her pre-sticky plate.

“Aren't you having any, Daddy?”

I raised my glass of flat beer, undeserving of the brand name its tap must have born. “All yours. They call you *Bones* as it is because they find you svelte.”

“Do you think I'm slender, Daddy?” (“Svelte,” you see, she already knows.)



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

“You’re perfect as you are.”

“Am I fat?”

I quaffed my brew, tried to keep frustration at bay. The youthful mind, taught to respect and subsequently misled by a reference book, becomes a delicate and unpredictable thing. “How do you contemplate being both ample and airy at the same time? Those imps have made you doubt your body beyond logic.” I raised a finger. “Always question the source!”

She must have sensed reproach when I’d only meant to convey love through reason and a touch of wit. Her eyes welled with a clear fluid that—if Hippocrates were still Surgeon General—would indicate not excess of blood, of yellow or black bile, but of the nymph’s humour. Hopping up from the table, she ran into the play area near the stage with the fake gorilla and his band. Joan is sensitive. The tones of words—the curve of connotation, the web of context—affect her more than they do the average child.

“The cheese was phlegmy,” I told the cheerful waiter, and pursued Joan into the welter of sound and lights. I found her seated on a little plastic chair, her band-aided knees under a little plastic table. The gorilla, his space-suited canine drummer, the cheerleading mousette, and other automata lip-synched a Beatles medley, starting with “Drive My Car” and moving on, prematurely, to “No Reply.” Evidently, they were unable to finish an entire verse.

I squatted, knees popping, beside my daughter. “Perhaps this is the wrong venue for our tête-à-tête. Would Le Bec-Fin serve as well?”

She shook her head and scooted her chair in.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

“I only meant to say that you’re neither fat nor skinny. Words can be false and hurtful.”

No reply. I couldn’t even be sure she cleaved to my wisdom over the distraction on stage. I felt rising in me the inarticulate rage—tentacles grasping at a quill—that sent me to your dictionary in the first place and taught me the pen is mightier than the snee.

I stood and approached the stage.

“Will you knock it off?” I’d adopted an argot low enough that even a mechanical gorilla might understand—*Fatz*, read the tag on his golden lapel.

They played on. “Happiness is a Warm Gun,” and then, inexplicably, “All You Need is Love.” By this point, fractions of half-a-dozen songs, transitions like interstate speed bumps, had serenaded the carpet. I spied an electrical outlet by the stage and, with the directness and principle-guided behavior characteristic of my name (see definition #4), yanked the cord.

The flashing lights of a pinball machine went dark; the animals still gyrated.

“Hey,” came a snotty grievance, no doubt that of a spoiled Billy deserving your definition.

I ignored him and scissored onto the stage just as the animals faked their way into “Michelle.” *Mi-chelle, ma belle. Sunday monkeys gone touché on some.* I’ve never understood the Fab Four’s appeal. I stood up front a moment, sucking air, a conductor who’s thrown in the baton. The animals’ snouts moved, but nothing came out. They were puppets without a master. Whom else could I blame?

Note: I don’t report the following incident with an aim to justify my behavior. Nor do I seek in this missive, against my own interests, to prove the Webster of 1828 correct about me. As if a



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

man can be encompassed in a definition! I only want what every William wants: the truth of my life noted.

I wrapped my tentacle around Fatz's neck and shook till it yawned, dangling the head by wires. I pummeled the circuits behind his horsehair coat, his Radio Shack heart and lungs and liver. None of his pals came to the rescue. He whirred to a splendid silence just before someone cut the power on stage, and the remaining animals sunk into gloomy stillness. "Quiet!" I shouted. "Quiet, quiet, quiet."

After collecting myself, I faced the human audience I sensed behind me—adults and kids alike had joined my daughter stage-side, close to one hundred having come out of the parti-colored woodwork. "Now maybe we can talk," I said. "Maybe now we'll attempt a civil conversation."

Nobody answered. Some of the kids held their hands over their ears, as if the silence oppressed more than the British Invasion preceding it. A few mothers had clamped sparkly-nailed fingers over their mouths in disbelief. My daughter sank her elbows into her lap and hunched down with palms pressed against her eyes.

So this is how it's going to be, I thought. This is where my example leads. Back to the Stone Age. Grunt and beat the ground.

Sirs, the moral is simple. Revisit your definition of "bilious" and, from now on, maintain a closer watch on each entry, no matter how quickly the language expands. *Keep up with the times or*



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

*you'll have a hard time keeping your nose clean.* (That's my own coinage, a first-rate chiasmatic arrangement of honest American idioms. Feel free to include it in your next edition as an example for this rhetorical figure).

Despite what you may be thinking, I don't approach you solely from a position of defeat. The police officers who arrived at Showbiz to haul me away bore no signs of learning beyond the academy, where I suspect they don't teach Literature. One was a drawling country lad of no more than twenty, acne like corpses strewn across a Southern battlefield. The other, a husky woman around forty, looked to be of Samoan descent. No doubt they'd both known the cruelty of American schoolchildren. Why else would they have joined the law? I expected the worst.

To my delight, once I had explained my attack's provenance—both dictionary and elementary classroom—their expressions changed from routine disgust to a nervous respect. They spoke quickly with the manager, who agreed to let me and my traumatized charge go with a promise not to return (Joan's mother can always bring her back to this menagerie if she so desires). The parents clapped as we exited. You may suspect otherwise, but I maintain they were saluting my victory, my example—my stand.

Stand with me, editors! Change the word.

Sincerely,

William Gaul of Philadelphia

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From *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition (1983):



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Bilious (bil'yəs) *adj.* (1a) Of or relating to bile. (b) Marked by or suffering from liver dysfunction and especially excessive secretion of bile. (c) Appearing as if affected by a bilious disorder. (2) Of or indicative of a peevish ill-natured disposition. (3) Sickeningly unpleasant <“with clapboards painted red and bilious yellow”— Sinclair Lewis> – bil'ious•ly *adv.* – bil'ious•ness *n.* [Middle French: *bilieux*]

\*\*\*

Obituary from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*:

WILLIAM MILLHOUSE GAUL—Age 51, of Willow Grove, on January 29, 1985, at Abington Memorial after complications from liver disease. Born Oct. 21, 1933, in Yorba Linda, CA, son of the late Richard B. and Elizabeth (Taylor) Gaul; husband for 22 years to Betty (Lough) Gaul; father of Joan Gaul; preceded in death by two brothers, Edgar A. Gaul and Ulysses S. Gaul.

Mr. Gaul worked in sales for 16 years at Westinghouse, was a Vietnam veteran, member of American Legion Post 89, and patron of the Free Library. Friends will be received Friday, 2–4 p.m. in the Dolence Funeral Home, 557 Spring Garden Street. Mass on Saturday in St. Catherine of Siena at 11:00am. Burial in Fairview Cemetery. Memorial contributions may be made to the Gaul Dictionary Club of Upper Moreland High School.

In words spoken shortly before his passing, Mr. Gaul expressed his gratitude to the editors of *Merriam-Webster* for correcting a prolonged error, though he never received the pleasure of a personal response.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Colleen Hollister**

**Landscape with Building, Zoo, and Hardly Any Animals**

1.

A girl grows up from a bird. First, the small slow dropping of feathers, the looping, the settling on wood floors. First, the opening doors: slow, careful, so that there is no creaking, only a soft brushing on a floor, like that of feathers. There is the floor; there are the windows. There is a walking in of feet wearing heels, a clicking. There is a rustling, a movement of a coat, a taking off of sweater and scarf, a patting herself down, to put herself back together after a cold walk from a grocery on the corner, outside. A woman comes in. There is a dropping down of a yellow purse, a letting go of the stapled shoulder strap. There is a peering down, a face close to the floor so that breath clouds up, and fog gathers on the floor that is dusty. There is a looking down, a picking up of feathers between fingers, letting them drop, to the floor, to catch into the cracks, to float into the corners. There is a small sigh. First the fingers on a window, first the touching of a light switch and the swinging, of the walls, into light.

2.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

The building is tall, with many hallways, with dark blue-colored open spaces, and is quiet. Only the soft noise that happens when balloons brush against surfaces. In the hallway, there are balloons, round, pink, and they bob because there is an open window. They are tied to a light switch. There is white paint and a fire escape. In the hallway, there are doors. Plain doors, heavy-framed, heavy-cored, that resound upon knocking, that present satisfaction when knocked. A mailman knocks, puts his ear up to the door to hear no one coming to open it, sets a package on the stoop, and then walks away. He walks down the street to his truck, feels his feet cold in his boots, feels his hands cold in his pockets because no matter how hard he curls his palms up towards themselves, he is still cold. He blows out between pursed lips, an almost-whistle, and his breath freezes. Behind the door is a staircase that goes steeply up to a landing on the floor above and turns into a hallway full of doors. There is wallpaper: dark and blue with large white flowers that droop. In a closet, there are red balloons, but these have been kept hidden out of sight from the girl who has been a bird because they would distract her attention, encourage her flight.

3.

There is a zoo on the edge of the city. Beyond it are forests. Inside it have been cages full of birds and crocodiles; glass walls on which the monkeys push, push off and leap back onto branches, waving tails like flags. There is an animal that bounces, that wiggles its nose, wiggles its horns, black-eyed, like a miniature deer. There are trees, and a path that goes from one cage to another, and old footprints pushed into the concrete, paw prints, as if to point the way.



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

4.

When the girl walks, slowly, down the hallway, wearing a dress that reminds her of feathers, there is a hop in her small feet; there is singing in the way she calls out down the hall to see if anyone is there. *Hello*, she says. *Hello hello hello*. She sticks her foot on a needle that has been left on the floor. She hops back, lifts her foot to see the underneath, to see the blood drop. She hangs there, one-footed, looking out into the hallway. There is a radiator that steams and rattles. Her foot stings; her feet are cold. She rubs at her eyes, at the corners of her temples; she sticks her hands into her underarms, to warm them.

5.

In the cellar, the woman sits on a hard wooden chair. Around her is wallpaper patterned with zeppelins. She is a woman sitting on a chair, knitting. She knits miniature things with tiny needles—a sweater as big as a palm, a scarf that can wrap around her pinky. She is, herself, a small woman, but still, is sitting in a wooden chair, still feet touching the floor, so she could be smaller, really, but isn't; so everything she's knitting is not at all close to her size. She rubs her eyes behind her glasses and lifts a red sweater up to her face. It dangles thread; it is still attached to needles, and she blows on it so that it puffs gently outwards, like the blowing of a candle, out. This is to test it, to make sure it's light, to make sure that it can blow about in wind, can lift up, safely. She is concerned with flight.

6.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

The girl pulls herself up, looks out of the window that sits, square, at the end of the hall. The window is white-trimmed, broken into squares that are the size of her hand. Pulling herself up, she can see below her and in front of her: buildings, doors and stoops with steps, and rooftops, and bridges. The city expands, seemingly, always. There is no end, of buildings, of statues. It is mostly gray. There are, here and there, dots of color—a woman pulling off a mitten with her teeth, a man who carries a bag full of lettuce—but the color moves fast, is hard to catch and make stand still as she looks at it.

7.

It is a city of still swims on still rivers. Of boys in swimming suits that are too big for them, swimming at night across the city, and looking up at the sky as they skim on their backs. Of bridges banded across, held there by feet that walk from streetlight to streetlight, across water black at night before rainstorms. The buildings are tall, with arched windows. Sometimes, on the ground floors, boys wearing blue hats stand inside the arched windows, holding their hands in their coat pockets because the day is gray and the building is cold to the touch, waiting until they can jump on their friends running below. It is, to them, all about the collision.

8.

In the cellar, the woman paces back and forth across a rug. In the cellar, there is a row of meters with square dials and red hands that shift, back and forth, back and forth. The meters are round



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

faces on top of boxes. There are wires that connect them, that string the room, that spark and buzz and hum. There is a concrete floor. The hands capture exactly what is happening in the building at all times: the changing of the temperature of a room as someone leaves it; the shifting of a faucet from hot to cold; the way someone on the fourth floor takes a shower at three o'clock, every night, that is much longer than it should be. The woman lives in the cellar. She watches the goings-on, watches the building as it moves around, wakes up and sleeps and takes a bath. At night she imagines she hears scritchings on the ceiling above her head, floors and floors above her head, before the roof stops and gives way to sky. The scritchings make her calm, because they are normal. So many scritchings, she thinks, so much movement. There are many, many things to pay attention to. But it is night and she hears the doors above her head, and then the door that leads outside, open, slide shut, click slowly, and this is not normal, is strange, but she is cold, and so she rolls back into sleep.

9.

The people in the building feel cold. They wear fuzzy wool socks that are thin at the heels. They walk through hallways, slide in shoes on smooth wood floors. In a bag at the end of the hallway, there are shoes and sweaters with polka dots. They bulge, make the edges of the bag soft. There is a button, a scarf in the bottom of the bag, too, but still, filled to the top, polka dots in colors like yellow, tangerine. The people in the building kick at them as they walk by with bags of groceries, rest their shoe on top on them as they try to find their keys inside their pockets, hold their mail



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

between their teeth. The softness of the bag comforts their feet. When they walk in to their apartments, they rest their heads against the wall in the same way—the coldness of the building comforts them when they walk in, when they have headaches, when they can feel the walking in their feet and want to slow themselves back down. What is happening in the building at all times? They have headaches. At night the backs of their heads—the tops of their heads, the backs of their necks—throb and twist, it seems, into knots. They can feel their bodies tightening as they are shifting in their beds, as the sheets get caught around their ankles and they try to pull themselves loose. They whisper to each other: *help*. The building is cold walls, cold glass. They rub each other on their backs, scratch each other on their heads, through their hair, hope that this will help them sleep at least a little while, eventually.

10.

The zoo on the edge of the city is empty. Cages rust horribly; grass grows like ponds in the places where ponds used to be. There used to be hippopotamuses. They had thick gray skin and short legs. There used to be a white bird, with a long neck, picking fish out of a jar, watching them in its mouth, watching them flap, flop, swim their fins into air before swallowing them in a gulp.

11.

In the cellar, there is a typewriter. It is orange, heavy. It types out fat words on thick paper, paper that spools out at the top and then is yanked out, dropped down to the table with a flourish of an



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

arm. First, the notes say: bring water, send cookies. I have locked up the doors. I have taped up the windows. It is safe. Don't worry. Then, the notes say, nothing works. I am cold. I am worried. This is difficult. What, now, do you want me to do? The room is empty. It is cold. What should I do?

12.

The girl has been captured on film. The film, projected, is a little reel of wings. It is bent at the ends by hands that are careless, that load the projector too quickly, that want, too quickly, to see what it has inside. It seems the film is like a box, like it holds inside of it a collection of things in an attic: a wedding dress with an old-fashioned neck, a diary, monogrammed napkins. It seems to hold the kind of things you would look closer at, hold up to your nose to understand, to see those little stitches, to see your grandmother in the little stitches, and then put back into the box and shove behind the broken microwave, keep until the next time you are curious. On film, she is on a chair, wings spread, legs hopping. On film, she is a bird, a small one, palm-sized, white, a beak almost invisible on-screen, on the wall—the woman projects it on the wall so that the film takes on the bumps left by paint and brushes, plaster; the picture is wobbly; the bird walks on a wooden chair, slides a little on the part that is bent to make it round to fit a sitter, and jumps onto a windowsill, pecks at the glass.

13.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

There is a statue, in copper, of a man and woman holding hands. It is copper, old, and so it is dripping with green, on a ledge on the building at the end of the long street. In the building, the woman waves around an iron skillet, in the kitchen, in the cellar, wearing an apron, but concentrating on the skillet in her hand, thinking about how far it is above her head, how far it is from her body to the doorway, where her husband peeks through with just his nose. She has a headache. She is angry, worried. She would like to feel that sudden *thunk*, she thinks, that clang of iron on bone and then on the doorjamb as everything together fell. He waves a hand into the doorway like a flag. Today, the woman tells him, has been sad. He takes off his hat; they walk up the stairs.

14.

There is a forest behind the city, and around the borders. The forest behind the city runs with deer, runs with circus bears that still know how to drum. Sometimes it sounds like drumming, like whistles. The people in the city know that here, in the city, with the buildings and the buses, the animals keep moving, in a circle, around the city lines, unable to move off or to determine another course. They stay, moving, snuffling at the ground. It's like there are magnets in the streets, like there are gates at forest openings that close with solemn locks to make the trees stay still, make the hippos stay submerged in the lakes that have appeared between the trees. At the edges, when the line between the city and the forest becomes apparent, there are signs that say:



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

*dangerous.* There are signs that say: *do not pass this line, beware of your hands, of how far you are now reaching out your feet.*

15.

In every hallway on every floor of the building, there are light bulbs in a cabinet, each in its own small space, a square that cradles the glass. Each is rattly, pieces knocked about after burning, and gray on the inside, and they do smell like gray—like flannel—if you stand close to them, put them up to your nose. In every kitchen, there have been burned-out light bulbs. They happen when the people in the building walk to get a cracker in the middle of the night—that snap and sizzle of light, dying, the pop, and then the too-early removal of the light bulb from the socket so that they have to hop, toss it back and forth between their palms like a potato. The rooms, because of this, are full of broken glass.

16.

And the people in the building stop for the bicycles. Always, there are bicycles, crowds of them, that turn the corners, swiftly, as a group, as a body, with a rider in the front who calls out the directions. The people in the building stop with one foot on and one foot off of curbs to watch them pass. Standing still, hands in their pockets, groceries in their hands, they watch the girl wandering. She is pale, blue-eyed, short blonde hair that sticks up in the back. They say, *oh isn't that nice, a girl running errands for her mother.* They say, *but really, she should be wearing*



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

*socks. Shouldn't she?* they ask themselves. They imagine her with a red sweater, imagine themselves buttoning it up, to her chin. This makes them feel content; this makes the picture in their imagination whole; content, warmer, they push off with their feet, walk the rest of the street towards home.

17.

Past home, past far, further—turn down all those streets and feel the corners sliding under feet the way the winter makes the streets feel slippery, the statues, the rooftops—there is a zoo, the rows and rows of cages tipped, their corners making sounds when all that air is pushing through the empty spaces. Here, there have been animals. The reptile house, the monkeys behind glass and climbing trees with leaves tucked in with glue. So many hissing things, the glinting of the lights into the animals with eyes. The softness of bears. The zoo is empty. Cages tip to tap their locks into the concrete, dig into the ground their divots so they are now settled in new places, now solid in new places upside-down or sideways.

18.

All of the rooftops are brightly colored. Here is a green one, a red one—the color of copper gone swimming, the color of climbing on the rooftop with a paint roller and a bucket, a long ladder because the building is high. Once, a painter fell, landed on his ladder, landed on the street on top of the ladder, and the ladder was twisted around him by so much speed. The street was



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

aquamarine, splotchy, uneven, because after all the paint fell and was not brushed on. People shopping or walking dogs walked by, dipped their hands in, watched it dripping from their fingers, and it was like a lake, the way it sparkled. The painter, on his back, was twisted; he held his knee; he watched them walk away, blue footprints set by shoes onto the asphalt.

19.

The girl is cold; her feet are cold; her steps are hollow; the streets are empty, the buildings tall around her like a tunnel. The night is made of felt. She is wearing someone else's shoes. There is a garbage man who picks up the bags that line the street, who climbs into his truck and puffs away. There is a man who is asleep but selling hot dogs, the lights in his stand bright, his cheek on top of his hand on top of the counter, a radio playing waltzes to keep him awake.

20.

The moment of evening, between dark and light, is sad. They walk the streets. They think that they will lure her in with sugar, with handfuls of crushed oatmeal from a tin. The only color there is yellow from the stoplight, flashing onto snow, and in-between black, white. They walk together. They walk slowly, check doorways. They are careful with their hands inside their pockets, careful to not melt the sugar, to not mix it up with pocket lint or broken buttons. The woman has left her knitting needles stuck into her coat; they poke into her hands; she keeps her hands inside her pockets, feels the points, tries not to shout. The woman is afraid of night and strangers' hands. The man has turned off his flashlight. They feel the danger of ground, of walls,



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

the ways the corners just jump out and seem to trip them, the way the puddles seem to creep up through their socks.

21.

At the zoo, the girl looks in between the bars to see if anything is there, to see if hippos are hiding in the hollows made by grass, to see if there is a movement of bears. It's quiet. The lights and moon make shadows, make the bars stretch out along the ground, make the building that held popcorn loom. It still smells like popcorn. The ground still clusters with hulls. Here the man and woman hold onto the gate. They look to watch the girl look into cages. They don't follow her inside—just watch, watch the ground for holes, for old balloons that could wrap around her ankles; if any of this happens, their legs are springy—they could run, to catch her, to shore her up like a collapsing wall. They do not. She does not. She wanders off. She won't go back. The evening, she thinks, is sad. The night with all its space is sad. She feels her elbows ache with it.

22.

It's late. They are cold-nosed, cold-fingered. The man has turned off his flashlight. The woman is afraid of how the flashlight will reveal themselves and how afraid they are, of night. Their ears are painful, cold, on their heads. They hold their shoulders together, hold their hands together, hold hands. They open the door of the building, shove it open with their shoulders, hear their shoulders creak as they walk up the stairs, as they move their knees. The man steadies the woman with an arm, gives her a hand, holds her up. Her knees crack. They walk up the stairs. In the



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

room, at the top of the building, high, surrounded by windows, there is a paper airplane on the floor when they open the door to sit. They sit, on chairs, in the room empty of everything but chairs and the wood floor. They do not look out the windows. They sit. The man pats the woman's head, rubs her ears warm. The paper airplane sits, nose tipped-down, wings perfectly creased, nose anchored by a penny, as if it has glided into the room to land and take a rest.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Michael Martone**

Tuesday:

Boston Light:

Brewster Island: 42°19'40.85"N, 70°53'24.26"W

The Last Manned Lighthouse in the United States

The keeper writes when the light, flashing white every 10 seconds, shines. *0123hrs. Seas: calm.*

*Pressure: Falling. Skies: Severely. Clear. Stars: Disappearing. 1 X 1*



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Carl Peterson**

**The Ted Costume**

*The Inflation of the Old Playground*

He arrived, I don't know, during high summer I suppose, through means untraceable by any of us who might have been paying attention at the time. I'd like to say I was the first to notice him, but this wasn't the case. A while earlier, someone had distributed clubs and mallets, and since then we had been stomping along the border of the playground, clacking these tools against its edge. Each strike would create a kind of rippling effect that would cause the edge to shudder where it had been struck, but after a moment this would subside, and the border of the playground would again appear as it always had. Upon his arrival, he realized what we were doing and resolved to teach us that achieving our end was a matter of coordinating our percussion.

It took time for him to win over many of us, and again, I wish I could truthfully claim that I was among the first of his converts. However, his posture was such that we couldn't doubt his expertise indefinitely. We arranged ourselves around the border of the old playground and began to strike the edge in the fashion he had described, while he conducted our movements from the center, standing atop one of our favorite pieces of equipment so that each of us could see the rhythm he established by waving his arms. He was leading us, true, but we were also acutely



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

aware that his was the main performance. For a few moments, nothing occurred but the reverberations of our hammering. Then, as we finally synchronized with one another, there was suddenly a great deal *more* than before. Not gradually, or even very quickly, but immediately, so that it seemed as if it had always been that way. More of us. More, too, of the playground, a greater diversity of forms. More space all around. Yes, it was hard to tell right away, because there was *more of everything*, but it became clear that all of it had expanded considerably. This opened up many opportunities previously denied to us. We had space for games that we'd always wanted to try. We could have parties and not feel obligated to invite everyone for fear that the uninvited would hear us and feel angry or embarrassed for being excluded. I had enough room to construct a closet for my cheeses.

When we went out to congratulate him near the swing set, or rather, what we had formerly referred to as the swing set, a thing which had now become something else without an invented use, we saw that he'd acquired a transparent plasticity that made him difficult to see except at certain angles. We spoke to him for a while and then, when he didn't respond, we began to touch him, stretching him into the shapes we'd always suspected he might acquire, posing him in the stances of various gods. After this we encircled him and began to press in on him all together until what remained was little more than heat, and from this we retreated into the darker recesses of our new realm, hungry to go about learning what had now become possible.

*His Body*



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

He has a mole the size of a dime on his neck, just beyond the boundary of straw colored hair that grows along his throat and cheeks when he fails to shave for several days. He is six feet and one inch tall, and his right ring finger is thicker than the others from a fastball, high and inside, that hit him where he gripped the bat his sophomore year, breaking the knuckle.

*standing over the open flame of the stove, heat dancing up his arm, bringing the skin closer until the trembling white hairs coiled back browned, the scent of scorched popcorn kernels or dried dung climbing through the air*

The hair on his head is colored like the mixture of dirt and sand that lined the Tennessee River of his boyhood. It curls up into tangles when the weather warms and lays down by the end of fall, casual undulations.

*his foot finding nothing as it comes down at the edge of the trampoline, the space between mat and frame swallowing his leg to the groin, contracting springs biting the skin on his thigh*

He is twenty-two years old. He gained five pounds his first year of college and has weighed one-fifty-six since then. When he stretches his arms straight at his sides, the tips of his fingers reach to the point where his thigh muscles begin tapering toward his knees.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

*between the trunks of trees and tripping over roots, chasing Morgan in the dull light echoing toward them from the house beyond the bushes, the clattering laughter of others somewhere else in the*

*bacchanal darkness, a spiderweb clinging suddenly to his face as he ducks under a branch, cloaking his nose and cheeks, the creature itself skittering away along the back of his ear*

His eyes are brown like the cherrywood jewelry box on his mother's vanity. When he was twelve he noticed this and spent an hour comparing them in the silence of his parents' bedroom, the afternoon daylight draped over the stillness, his mother at the store.

*Michael astride his chest, his arms pinioned to the brown carpet by his older brother's knees, Michael letting a long string of saliva drop to within an inch of his face before slurping it back into his mouth, Hayden newly arrived careening into Michael shoulder first, freeing him for an attempt at*

*retribution, two against one*

He wears size twelve shoes. His left foot is perhaps one quarter size smaller than his right, and when he jogs regularly, his left foot shifts in his sneaker and this gives him blisters. He pops these



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

with a quick snip from his fingernail clippers, and they drain and harden into calluses that last for a week or so. His right foot remains unblemished.

*lying on his quilt, soles of his feet against the smooth eggshell white wall  
at the top of the bed, laced fingers cradling the struts of his neck, sunlight  
unapprehended  
through the window warming his face and shoulders, drowsing, book resting half-  
read face  
down on his chest*

His earlobes blend the quick bulging curve of his ears without incident into his cheeks.

*lactic acid illuminating the muscles of his legs as he accelerates up the final hill of  
the  
course, his cross country coach garlanding him with a necklace of obscenities as he  
passes*

His vision is twenty-twenty.

*swinging as he hangs from the tree branch, legs tucked back, palms of his hands*



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

*pinching against the tree bark as he rotates*

He has a scar across his right eyebrow that looks like a check mark, cutting down toward his eye and then turning ninety degrees and moving just out onto the skin of his forehead. It is about half an inch long, all told. At age ten, his brother Hayden pushed him near the entrance to his bedroom, and as he fell his head hit the brass-colored tongue of the door latch sticking out from the side of the door. The door shuddered back a tiny space into the jam behind it before holding firm.

*in the apartment his junior year, cold February, not wanting to ask his parents for money  
and instead setting the thermostat at sixty, the shower each morning his one moment of  
warmth,  
the sheaves of water rushing across the muscles of his back, his shoulders, his scalp*

His chest is hairless. His nipples are scarcely larger than thumbtacks, a boy's nipples, he feels. His ribs are visible below his lean pectorals. His shoulders come to crisp, well toned corners, shaped by the hundred pushups he does every morning.

*his friend Morgan working hands up his leg under the blanket, to the rigidity  
grossly encased in his boxer shorts, the cold fingers as they dip under the waistband*



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

His lips are quite thin, his chin smooth and narrow. His nose is tall and long in the bridge, which rises much farther out of his face than the flat arches of his nostrils. His eyebrows are hard to see from a distance. Looking in a mirror from a few feet away, he notices only a dusting, the lightest touch of the brush.

*a political science textbook corkscrewing like a wounded bird through the air, creased soft*

*cover*

*and front matter flapping errantly, launched by his dormmate, also named Ted, the lower*

*corner*

*of the spine hitting him in the sternum and his body flexing concave to receive it*

His left elbow has a long brown scar. There is a matching discoloration on his left buttock. When he was thirteen, he fell off his bicycle going down a hill and skidded along the pavement on his arm and ass. He biked home to find the house empty. Gravel from the road had burrowed into his flesh, which was beginning to pus. He called his friend Jeremy's house, and Jeremy's mother came over and helped him clean out the wounds while he stood naked in the shower, a towel wrapped three quarters of the way around his torso. She kept a straight face, but he thought he saw behind that control a smile waiting to emerge.

*The Despondent Baronage*



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

That morning, the workmen tore down the last vestiges of our ancestral tree house. Grandpapa was in a vulgar mood. He strutted in his moldering sailor's suit until we had to put him out and place his honorarium in escrow. His was a pristine agnosticism. When the last brace of logs and its sheets of plywood came tumbling to the earth, Grandpapa ballyhooed barefoot in the grass even as, in the study, we raced desperately to balance our ledgers, ignoring him as best we could. Overnight, the doors had swollen shut and blue ink had begun to ooze from the thickening planks. Our mechanized samovars had all been left too long in the sink. Nobody would claim responsibility for the pills scattered about on the majolica- stained floor tiles, so we reluctantly ground them with our boot heels into a paste we would later use to subjugate foreign wildlife. Eventually, as we sipped out mango bellinis and carved likenesses of one another into a shank of beef (because Grandpapa would never permit a sightline to his visage, we omitted him), we convinced ourselves not to worry over these matters. Undoubtedly, we thought, there will come a debate regarding the wilted houseplants.

However, as the sun reached its zenith and the susurrus of the lawn rodents began hinting at a new cartography, we couldn't help but draw close to the windows, stained glass depictions of our ebullient rituals moved from the old tree house to this, our newer fortress. Looking through the candied greens, carmines, and purples, we saw Grandpapa fretting the workmen with his woebegone tennis racket and his waffle face.

Throughout the afternoon, we testified to one another about olfactory laxatives, conducting market research. We drew up blueprints for a room's worth of fireplaces, built them, and then discarded the excess hummus. We entwined staircases around the exterior of the lyceum, hoping



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

to achieve insight into the chemical reactions within that would afford us a coppery independent wealth. With each life size re-creation of the battlefields we remembered from our drinking days, we expected to uncover a lapful of honest trajectories, a rostrum for displaying our trophies.

Near dark, we brought Grandpapa the book. He had not ceased his potpourri protest. He had summoned a bushel of constellations. The book, though, gave him pause. We had, of course, constructed it by the standard method, heating the gypsum by quietly biting the edges, braiding the stems growing from the unused onions like the hair of a deceased manservant, staunching the mercury when it began dripping in the direction of the coast. However, despite our craftsmanship, he held the volume only a moment before setting it next to the debris pile. By midnight, a herd of land spiders had carried it off, Grandpapa doing nothing to stop them.

Now, when we discover a new use for our periscopes, we no longer chant to Grandpapa as if we had just finished weaving robes for our mannequins. He is out there still, in the yard, painting a taboo for our children.

## *Levels of Winning*

Wine Tasting Level. Tylenol PM Level. Foot Poised on the Lip of a Fountain Found Only While High. A Game of Nine Ball, Twenty Dollars from the Wallet of a Charming Adversary.

Canonization. Turning Down a Job Offer from a Brother in Atlanta. A Penny Arched Through the Open Space Over the Bar, Landing with a Small Plop in a Red Cup of Beer. Birthday Level.

Touching the Bumper of a Car as It Accelerates Away from a Stoplight. Waking Up with No



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Taste of Tacos Lingering in Mouth. Cleaning a Boyfriend's Microwave. Hip Check Level. Theft of a Painting Level. Level Where a Brick Wall is Scaled. Mutilating a Satellite Dish on the Roof of a Church. Defining the Space of the Contest. A High Score with the First Coin in the Slot. Six Slices of Pizza to Five. Nine Orgasms to Eight. Symmetry. Rock, Paper, Paper, Scissors, Rock. Knowing What a Punch Line Is, and What It Is Used For.

*Excerpted from the Official Report*

In the bed of the accused, we found many letters. Some of these are signed by the accused, while others are addressed to him and authored by his known accomplices. Then there are those that bear no manifest connection to the accused, written by and for persons unaffiliated with him, many presently unidentified. We do not know how he came into possession of these letters. An analysis of handwriting would appear to confirm that he did not invent them himself. Many of the letters were written on identical men's shirts of a linen and cotton blend. Some were arranged using shriveled produce. Two were carved into a wet sand bar beneath a pillow. The missives provide an undeniable table of evidence, especially when indexed using the alpha-numeric psychoprofiling Haskins Scale, concerning the accused's sociophonic perversions. One such, written on the inside of a soup label with an ink made from the husks of seeds, details plans by an unspecified organization to sonically infiltrate the highest levels of government. It is not known if the accused is a member of this organization, but letters such as this one may implicate a broader array of suspects, even high ranking bureau members. To quote from it: *Honeycutt, today we sang hymns in the basement of the house on Wilson Avenue and after hours collapsed in delight*



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

*on our folding chairs, the metal dented and cold beneath our legs, clapping our hands together as the sun disappeared from the windows near the ceiling. The letter was signed Walker.*

Another, in its entirety: *Jenkins, babe, don't know where you went last night to make the bells stop, but we're all thinking you should come back and get us in on that good something you had going last week seems like Boo and Earl won't quit talking it up it's all they can gab about—*

*Damion.* Obviously, we were careful to isolate team members who raided the accused's apartment from the content of letters like this one, lest they become contaminated by the letter's heterodox audiology. The communiqués also present behavioral abnormalities that bind together a cross section of disciplines that have been tagged as subversive or militant. For instance, in one letter written with what we believe to be an antique hormonal lacquer or creosote, there are clear references to regional magnetism, probability narrative, and hierarchical food play. Another stitched into the mattress with thread the color of turnip scalps addresses the inchoate guerrilla field of bioacoustic sublaxation: *See, Jenkins, his back slipped up against the assembly housing, and somehow the vibrations shook him loose inside. The doctor said it's not the machine's fault, but he's a company doctor, and we all know he'll say anything to protect the mechanisms from replacement orders.* You, members of the committee, may draw your own conclusions, but it's apparent to our team that the accused was planning to disseminate such skeletally disruptive techniques to other cells in his resistance organization in order to launch a misalignment attack on the government. Consider, too, this tactical dispatch, which reads like a department-by-department stratagem for perforating and collapsing the bureau: *We arrived on the island just*



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

*before dawn. We could see the darkened mass of land before us blotting out the orange and gray light on the horizon to either side. We jumped into the surf and dragged the boat up onto the beach, Ivan taking the lead. Barrett and Jones were nearly overcome with exhaustion, so our first goal was to gather anything edible and worry about shelter later. We had to move with speed and precision. Calvin's injuries had worsened during that final night on the waves. He moaned in the base of the boat and his bare legs looked like dead and bloated fish, so pale that they seemed to contain all other colors within their deathly whiteness. Theo, I can tell you now that I did not think we would ever see our homes again, the homes beyond the field of waves working endlessly toward us in a fluttering motion that we marked from the highest grassy hill on that hump of earth. I dreamt of them often while we built makeshift huts with the few dead sticks we could find, woven together with walls of straw and weeds. Calvin lived nearly a week before screaming himself into stillness one night. We burned his body and buried the ashes near the outcropping of black rocks on the westernmost point, the only bedrock to assert itself between the soil and the sea. Shortly after this, we began to develop a method for leaving the island. The boat, despite the scoring on its hull from countless collisions with the offshore reefs during our arrival, remained functional. We needed a direction, a most likely bearing for striking upon another landmass once we'd left that one. It was Andre who devised the echolocation apparatus from the coral of the reefs themselves. Meanwhile, the dry season arrived and almost everything green on the island withered. We went hungry, spent the nights watching the stars with increasingly blurred vision. We began to wonder if drastic measures needed to be taken. We caught Nikita one evening*



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

*chewing the leather straps that served as oarlocks on the boat's gunwale. We whipped him the next afternoon, but this pain, the first nourishment he'd had in days, only caused him to shiver with delight. If Andre had not that week marked land some distance to the north, our tribe may have descended into anarchy. At the end of the fourth month since landfall, we launched again in hopes of sighting a more receptive country. But Theo, I had my doubts, and so I scooped a clump of sand into my palm and carried it with me in my trouser pocket as we departed. How glad I was to be proved wrong! I possess that sand still, in a glass jar on the mantle in my study. I will show it to you when you are at last able to visit me.* We also believe that the accused may have been developing a new form of sonic ciphering. Many apparently blank sheets of paper and bolts of fabric were found in the bed, and we are currently exposing these to a modulating group of frequency clusters (using Haskins' most commonly identified audiophilic tendencies as baselines) with the firm conviction that when the right harmonic is discovered, the encoded messages will surface. Until that time, we will continue to subject the accused to various chromatic coercion methods, as well as alternating sessions of cold resonance bursts and immersive oil symphonies in hopes that these, too, may deliver him as a possible counterintelligence agent to be used in the chthonic spheres where he traveled before his apprehension.

*Ted, the Horizon of Ted and non-Ted, Saturday, 10:00 p.m.*

Standing five feet from the framed photograph of his father's father that hangs slightly crooked on the wall at eye level near the entrance to his bathroom. Step forward and straighten it. Step back. The frame slips counterclockwise again a few degrees. Step forward and straighten it. Step



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

back. A series of poses, roles, projections of worlds that each possess internal coherence. Go into the living room and do one hundred sit ups on the yoga mat. Pace ten times around the room and then perform a larger orbit into the kitchen. The smell of a basil plant and dirty dishes in the sink, murky waters gathered in their holds. Each space serves as a set of explanations, where the horizon of self shifts, yes, you are a grandson here, an intellectual there (see the particle-board bookshelf? the impressive titles with creased spines?), a fag in some places (but which parts? what kingdoms?), well-defined stomach muscles in others, a tanned face with a goofy nose, a costume, the Ted costume, a coordination of expression. The Teds are each one Ted out of a great many possible permutations, like a series of conjoined rooms at a museum. In the picture, the grandfather stands in a creek bed holding three fish, each as long as his forearm, dangling from a triad of chains that he clenches in his fist. His hands are your hands. His eyes are hidden by dark glasses. The image is washed in the bright pastels of early color photographs, but he is already old, close cropped hair a solid gray. Step forward and straighten it. Step back. Watch the photo slip again, along the wood paneling behind it. Ted is the knowing of the boundary between Ted and not-Ted, a side effect of this ongoing encounter. Ted melts into messenger bags, a baseball uniform, the last stool at the end of the bar, a cocktail dress at a Halloween party, a waiter's posture, the gusts of wind blowing through the park (again up along the ridge of town and down to the river, run faster, goddamn it), a bedroom in Nashville, a creek bed with three fish. Go and be a school teacher in France and learn about wines from the children you teach, their parents working in the vineyards. Go and be a club boy in Atlanta or New York, everybody's fun toy. Go and be a lawyer and make all the money. Step forward and straighten it. Step back. Walk five laps



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

around the apartment, then do fifty push ups on the yoga mat in the living room. Slide bare feet across the rough patch on the wood floor until you draw a splinter up into your heel. Return to the photograph. Step forward. Straighten it. Step back.

## Separate From All The Others

So, we were tasked with finding just one, with separating one out from all the others and examining its properties. Okay, we thought, simple. We peeled one off with the plan of throwing it against the wall to see how it shaped itself. We didn't worry much about our instruments at that time, you know. Well, as soon as we took the one away from the others, before we could place it inside the mechanism, it let off a sort of soft hiss and disappeared. We couldn't believe it. Larson was standing there holding it in the palm of his black rubber glove, and then it was gone. Or rather, it was and it wasn't. Something was left behind, but it wasn't the original thing at all. There was a kind of sludge for a minute. Then that, too, dissolved. We went back to check the batch with all of them together, and to our amazement (Lapley actually let out a gasp), there it was, the first one, the one Larson had pulled off from the group, nestled back in its spot with the others.

We thought it had to be a fluke, so we tried removing the one again, with the same result. Then Liu had the idea that maybe we hadn't gotten a whole one, that maybe the one we were taking was damaged. For days, we listened to all of them together in their chamber, trying to determine if there were any corporate fluctuations, while Liu worked on a new instrument. When he



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

finished, he flipped it on, and, as the dull vibrations pulsed through the chamber housing, we were able to see that when pressed all together, each of them remained undeniably whole, as if it was the contact with the others that made each one discrete from its neighbor.

It was Loretta who used this discovery to postulate that each of them had properties only inasmuch as they were in contact with the others, that isolating any particular one prevented it from maintaining its coherence. This idea led us to develop the next series of processes, the refinement of which took considerable time. Lysome took the lead at this point (his was always a pragmatic genius, whereas Loretta and Lapley were continuously adrift in the aether of their abstractions). We began by separating the one and packing it immediately in a variety of different substances: crystalline structures such as salts and quartzes, dry ice, mercury, a dough that Larson mixed from flour and almond butter. In each case, the integrity of the one would break down just as it had before. We then decided that a certain amount of velocity might preserve our subject. Liu and Lysome constructed an instrument that served as an accelerator, made of vellum and fiberglass. But the one, even when continuously accelerated, would break down long before the instrument reached its operational limit. We remained stuck at this juncture for months, during which time we revisited many failed methods, modified them, and found them still ineffective. An attempt to build a synthetic version of the one represented an especially irresistible and lengthy detour.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

After Larson returned from his vacation, it was Loosestrife who struck upon the sonic solution. He noticed, as Larson was performing one of the old experiments, that the thing maintained itself a moment longer during that particular trial. The only difference in the conditions that Loosestrife could determine was that Larson had been talking to himself, reciting the ingredients for a cocktail he'd been served at the beach. Loosestrife instructed Larson to repeat what he'd just done, only this time to talk louder as he carried the one away from all the others. Again, it maintained its integrity for a protracted time.

Loosestrife called all of us into the lab, and within hours we had attempted any number of permutations. At first, we jabbered at it aimlessly, discussing our work, our spouses, the lunch being served that day in the cafeteria. We discovered that the thing responded more strongly to our talk when we performed a kind of chant, modulating between different tonal frequencies. This cooing led us naturally to begin talking *to* the one, in a singing caress, reassuring it that it would soon be rejoined to all the others, telling it stories about the adventures it was destined to have, how its being the first one to be gotten successfully into the mechanism would win it eternal fame among its brethren. Our songfunction (as Loretta termed it) grew to extraordinary degrees of complexity, with all of us gathered around Larson as he walked toward the mechanism, led by Lapley and Lysome with their respective tenor and baritone, individuals among us offering not just polyphonic variations, but narrative variations as well. This was how we formulated the following principle: It wasn't simply that the one maintained its properties only while in contact with the others; in fact, we postulated, its only property *was* its relationship to all the others;



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

without this interaction, the one could not be said to be a particular thing. Our resonances were providing a kind of temporary structure or field similar to that which it experienced with its group. Unfortunately, on the day we delivered the one all the way into the mechanism, none of us had yet imagined what it was that we'd actually been doing.

In fact, we *should* have suspected, and in the days that followed, we spent hours recriminating ourselves. As we'd been refining our songfunction, we assumed that our improvements were stabilizing the thing for longer and longer periods of time. When it would break down, however, and return to all the others, it began taking longer and longer to do so, and the residue it left behind was more viscous. Eventually, its total evaporation took more than a minute. We concluded that this was a positive development, that we were getting closer to a solution.

On the day we delivered the one into the mechanism, we'd rehearsed our songfunction for several hours in another lab before making our attempt. When Larson plucked it away from all the others and we began marching down toward the mechanism, crooning beautiful stories to it, it seemed almost to writhe in delight. But when we put it in the mechanism and shut the door, racing back to the console to watch from a safe distance, we noticed that although we had ceased our songfunction, the thing had not started to break down. Rather than firing the mechanism and thereby launching the one against the wall to discover its stress shape, as we had always intended to do if we got it that far, we remained frozen, worried now for reasons we couldn't quite



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

articulate. Then it occurred to us what we'd done. In singing to the one, we weren't keeping it stable in the absence of all the others. No, we were morphing it into a different kind of thing altogether, one that no longer had need of all the others, one that was stable on its own, yes, but also cold and still. Inert. Larson went and picked it up with his bare hand, but it had hardened and cooled. We went back and looked at all the others. They had reformed themselves, their pattern perfect as ever, as though the one, forgotten now, had never had a place among them.

## *A Brief Report Concerning Adventures Divers and Riveting*

He walks through the college town's streets at night, before and after shifts at the bar. He sits on the patios of darkened houses, eases himself into porch swings. He walks through the lawns of dogless homes and looks into living rooms where men watch television, into kitchens where women talk on the phone, into bedrooms where teenagers caress one another, soft arcs of skin slipping out from under cotton. He peers into shuttered businesses. He tries door handles and iron gate latches. He stands inside vacant homes being remodeled, large unfurnished rooms with buckets of paint clustered in the corners. He admits himself to apartment buildings and listens at heavily varnished doors, his feet squishing along carpet soggy with unknown liquids and humidity, as he turns corners and finds new stairwells. He sits in the dry fountain in the park and sees a dark shape hustle across the grass, moving laterally away from him toward the tree line, a shape too stout and large for a dog—a wild pig, he tells himself. He stands in the back yards of million-dollar homes. He gently squeezes tomatoes dangling in the gardens of housewives. He taps beer bottles up the sidewalk with his toe. He watches, from across the street, undergraduates



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

drinking out front of bars, penned in by red split-rail fences. He scales black metal poles to the high balconies of loft apartments downtown and leans on the railings, tracking the kids as they walk back and forth below him. He goes to the all night Mediterranean grill and orders a falafel. He cuts across the plaza in front of the football stadium. The bronze statues of dead coaches address him with austere faces, and he in turn examines their pantheon. A bass line from a party somewhere up the street compresses the air around his head. The flags hang limp on their poles.

### *The Loss of Paths*

When we were younger, of course, there were many reliable routes that cut across the high desert and through the mountains on either side. Even if a traveler did get lost, separated from his caravan, perhaps waylaid by bandits, a few days of wandering would put him on a trail or major byway, and he could simply wait to join the next group that came along. He might not end up in the city he'd set out for, but he would end up in *some* city, *some* oasis, and then he could reorient himself accordingly.

Eventually, we began to hear stories of well-known paths disappearing. Some, we heard, narrowed until they became untraceable. Others led groups of travelers around in broad circles, disorienting them until the terrain looked the same in all directions and they began to wonder how they'd accessed these loops to begin with. Yet others simply came to an abrupt end, leaving us or those like us to turn around and backtrack as quickly as possible, before supplies were exhausted. We wondered, how does a trail move, vanish? To complicate things further, we remembered having maps of various regions that indicated the location and direction of these routes. We



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

talked about it and agreed that such maps existed at one time. At some point, though, we stopped carrying them with us.

Various persons among us suggested methods for coping with the crisis, including stringing out endless leagues of rope, constructing a network of pylons that could be seen from great distances, even digging tunnels. Now, when one of us leaves a city on the coast and goes into the mountains and out across the desert, he counts himself lucky if he even reaches the other side, instead of being spit back out where he started or failing to emerge at all. There are rumors that damned wanderers such as these have founded cities of their own deep in the desert's interior. They travel at night and walk beneath the stars, putting one foot in front of the other regardless of what ground they cover, referencing patterns we cannot discern. Soon, we fear, all of our paths will become unreliable or lost, and then the last of us will have to cross over and join this new tribe within.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Maureen Alsop**

**Apantomancy**

*divination through observing objects that appear haphazardly*

Dear sun, I settle into your little cobalt landscape in the hills as the dead are announced into a new universe. Is this your payment, my aloneness? Lover, when you beat my window there is no greater beauty I can think of. Asteroids, seeds, tilt one direction only. The perpetual horizon is a calm impression of your hands opening to me. In the bleating dark, your secret wife, the moon's blue trajectory, wanders the roadside. Come lost winter one, souls assemble in the cardinal's trees. Faith is a found philosophy, a ladder flung across three freeway lanes. Along the internal corridor of grass infantile sprigs of silver holly spread. You finger my hair into a tinsel wreath. I am part of you without evidence. Dear etiquette of slick lament, I no longer recall the vocabularies of the disappeared. What is done is discounted through every field: light bulbs among a mattress of daisies. What slips up inside me is the inventory of distance, a naked river, old water, a floral upholstery chair blossoms under snow.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**F. Daniel Rzicznek**

*from Leafmold*

Ocean after ocean below until gradually we're at ease. Blanket of mauve clouds to the north—a light pokes a star-tinged face out to see. The drive across Michigan rolled by: emerald blur skating the sky's razor lens. I stare so deep into the Weimaraner's wraith-pale eye that a forest rises to confront me with a thousand creatures forming rank. I dreamed of a small mountain: all the tobacco I'd ever consumed, heaped together, back-dropped by a looming system of smoke. The canker digs in at the end of a dog day. Florida, Ohio: when the snows come, the river is an endless napkin flowing from the collar of a starving thief. Crow-call and full trees spinning before rolling over to face my own vomit in the grass. The scent of shallots and butter roams the house well after dinner and into dusk. Circuit: how the sun falls apart into wind and the wind levels out into trees and the trees stare down into a room and the room dissipates into lust.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**F. Daniel Rzicznek**

*from Leafmold*

The dog and I ring the fishpond once around: slipbank, leaftrail, cloudsilver, woodminnow. No words for the belligerent robin guarding two red berries—winter must be embarking somewhere. The dreams flood back midmorning: nipples, buttocks, labia, and somehow teeth shining like ice. Just a faint regard, like the memory of a gift given to you when you were quite small and unable to utter “thank you” but happy just the same, and now it is toward the landscape that you feel this way: a tingling gratitude that blooms momentarily as the hour’s gravity gently moves to crush it. What we cannot know: the sound the puddle’s bottom makes as the last speck of water freezes. That same year, the roof finally gave way. Dear Archie: we say fear and death and loss and you keep saying *radiance, radiance, radiance*. Through the first-story window, across the sidewalk, the cemetery shows one tall stone above its gray brick fence. Happy birthday.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Christopher Munde**

## **Hers**

So we're done for the night. So the big  
Headphones hiss to life to drown out  
The clatter of my wife's furious  
Dishwashing, and like so

Come the pissed-off violins. But they aren't violins  
Once I've heard them, no in this night's cracked mirror they disperse  
Into a cloud of mosquitoes in a wet and far-off night. Not drums,  
These bass drums, but the murmuring of hooded men; not brass, not  
Anymore, but a trembling elephant to which the men,  
Lost in some archaic worship, forcefeed a baby boy. That

Is the scene whole, the child crammed whole  
Into a struggling mouth I imagine to be shocking pink,  
The whole ceremony cast against  
The muffled choir: An inferno of child-voices  
Transcendent, tuneless here, only a mist  
Abiding the frailer, stifled cry.

I would rather all this than think the thing the one I love  
Won't love. So the senses  
Have become violent in their sniffing, selfish  
At witness:

Always I'll remember my wife's story  
About the bloody Amish girl in the waiting room who needed to mime  
For the gynecologist the screwing force that had landed her there.  
And at first hearing, I was sure that my pain  
Was for the girl;

With the girl;  
Hers. But tonight I glimpse it all true: That red diorama reflected  
In some night's warped mirror as though it were my own face  
Until now when I turn from exhaustion to receive

The naked story, to find that the girl is my wife and that I am the air  
That she clutches, the formless English word vanishing into her then out/in for life,



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Though it was not always that way; it was the judging, our fights that year  
(That shaped the glass: What I saw and how I kept it), the dark  
In the listener made it so.

So truth is I wish pain  
Made victim, that witnesses  
Were always starved, or forced,  
Never feasting, honest truth is I wish  
It was elephant, or any exotic beast, and not  
These raw instruments: black taxidermy eyes  
And not trumpets; malaria instead of violins  
Curving a hip-like swath  
Through whatever it is I want now; young death sprouting  
From a single throat in a separate dishless world,  
From my own face reflected instead  
Of shards out the throats of castrati.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Angie Macri**

## **The Test**

Listen now. The sun dogs' howl  
can be heard only by those who  
also hear opal fire, a pop of jewel  
like spark from log, by those  
who smell ferns uncurling  
snake-tongue fronds.

Yes, you see  
they pace the sun, climbing paw  
by paw slowly down the cirrus tier.  
You see their fur fire like light  
off ice.

But these are easy.  
Go beyond words like *girasol*  
and *parhelion*, beyond now's  
clear skies to forty-eight hours  
ahead.

Can you hear in that place  
thunderheads marbling, clouds  
hardening to hail, ions bonding  
into rain? Can you smell soil  
embracing water harder than love?



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Angie Macri**

## **Piranha to Scurfy Scale**

She begins with pomegranate in the eighth volume, in encyclopedias she inherited from her parents. The books always smelled like midnight to her, like the underbellies of trees and darkness pitted with distant suns. From there, as is her habit, she skips to other articles, Schweitzer, Sargent, satygrapha, saudosismo, too many other people, places, things arranged alphabetically. She knows she will forget most of it but can't stop.

There should be more connection, she thinks, flossing her teeth and rubbing shea butter on her feet, more point that pulls an explanation of why she wants to stay up so late to do this. There are twenty-eight other volumes.

The night the salesman sold the set to her parents at the kitchen table, the one in her living room and where she still eats breakfast, and her daughter now, too, her father acted as if the world would soon be delivered, and her mother cursed the price, and none of them used the books until now. Sarabande, Salome, in Santa Fe, a mnemonic tongue twister she makes up for herself, the satyrs saxophone the saxifrage, and so many sun gods.

A crow throws down a nest from an oak in her backyard, and the eggs open to yellow robin oil on the ground. Sometimes, walking, she knows it's raining but can't feel it. Her children in bed, she'd like to call to say something of this to her parents, but there's no context. She keeps reading.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

Chelsea Rebekah Grimmer

## Lines

When Mabel McKay (of the Pomo [*tribe*])  
illustrates how all native stories exist—

(*chronos*)—contemporary and consistently  
(*implicit*), I recycle the thought and think  
(of the breathing space [*between*] my lips and your chin):  
the coded warmth (*between* my hip  
and your shoulder), and each time

I look straight—(not [*inwards*])—the limp,

overwhelming notion, (*or message*), that of this

I may speak to no one consumes me and I

shudder, (*unsure* of this cinch  
closer to the *deeper* [notions of time]),

space, and how one intake of your air

(can cause a [*long*]ing for the line [to *bend*]).

And each mention of this *nagi*—(that is code-switching for *soul*)—inside a  
tree's stump—sister to mine—or in an adder's

(*damning*) role for the husband and the dame's  
(*untrusting*) demise, makes me think of how my ankle,  
(when tapping your [*right*] calf),  
allows me to become (*baffled*  
in your ability to merge [—transparent]—)

with tree's (sap

on the [orange] *Fall*

day), and a step later I know: *our bones bake*

*in this sewing union* (between the map  
of your *soul and mine* [and Mabel McKay]).

All of this lays both lax and alert in the air—

(com[*pressed*])—against (our noses and [linear's *end*]).



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

**Chelsea Rebekah Grimmer**

## A Ferryboat

<p>The intimate          knows trees, roots, leaves, and the            silhouettes of the patterned</p> <p>I look up          (spot the eyes)          and feel a dread.</p> <p>I know that            mirrors the Gravedigger's          Daughter—or          intimately,</p> <p>white            crests splitting open to            subside and</p> <p>I must know, in those yellow          what to mirror in that surging stare;          like how to shatter shards and</p> <p>like Jim knows Marlow,          ships dare          to know both wave and</p>	<p>Crying            wing:            feathers.</p> <p>(Lacan knew nothing)</p> <p>My soul            strives to know her—</p> <p>like a ferryboat's break into the water;</p> <p>subside and rise,  <i>rise.</i></p> <p>(hit the cement wall with a frustration)</p> <p>Eyes            know            like</p>
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# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

foam.

**James Doyle**

## **Bow Hunters In the Sahara**

The brain of the miniature fox  
swells to twice its nesting  
size with moisture, but this

one lives in the desert  
and has never known rain,  
so its synapses have grown

entwined and cunning. It conjures  
strips of dry suspicion for its  
compass points, its prey at the still

center of the sliding dunes,  
where the bow hunters see  
nothing but the grains that chalk

their eyes point blank for slack  
wells and a smear of protein  
on the side. Everything compensates

in the desert. The bow across  
the bare shoulder is camel  
bone to the breaking point

and its string is tendon.  
The fox is there, or there,  
or there. When night comes

and the temperature drops,  
the hunters brew gritty tea  
for sleep. The fox curls

down. The dunes print  
track after track, shift



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

the campsite so many angles

the dawn is prime with new  
lines. Hunger sharpens the hunters,  
the fox lays out its plans.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Bernadette Geyer**

## **Elegy for Bridges**

Transplanted far from family  
I am the farthest ripple on  
this pond called country—so I am  
the last to hear the news:  
*Nicky jumped off a bridge last night.*

Bridges often complicate  
my dreams—sweet Jungian metaphor.  
Pity the mind that can't escape  
its own nocturnal artifice.  
The worst of it: I never felt  
my hand caress the opposite shore;  
journey cut short by morning's breath.

And now, another bridge to haunt  
my memory—another bridge  
whose other side I cannot see.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Donna Pucciani**

**For Anton**

I've always loved Chekhov,  
the manic visitations, the incessant  
comings and goings.

I've never had to abandon a villa  
or watch an orchard fall to the axe.  
But I have known the languid whistle

of a train in the night,  
its trestled lullaby rocking over water.  
I have counted the miles of roads,

overnight stops  
at inns blinking parts of neon words,  
and a Marx Brothers kind of madness,

the way people and ideas hang mid-air  
like a juggler's fruit, the slapstick entrance,  
the bored exit. I know

Vanya's melancholy,  
having hoarded the same sense of loss,  
pacing the empty rooms of the mind,

leaning on my stick of nostalgia.  
I follow in the footsteps of the three sisters,  
their vague sadness interrupting my nights,

and the sea gulls circling.  
It's only make believe, my father said of books  
when I was four, but he was wrong.

The loneliness of snow is unmatched, bitter,  
a new goodbye every minute. Farewell,  
this day and its little disappointments.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Farewell to the colleague who died young,  
the parent who fought the extended tortures  
of old age. Farewell to the lovers, their sad beds,

and the cactus that blooms once a year.  
You knew all the partings, Anton, the openings of doors  
and the closings.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Christina Cook**

## **Gull in Oil**

Like a tarmac,  
sealed.

Fistful of night  
come in on the tide.

Half open-mouthed,  
its silent  
cry.

Beak, gullet, birdhead:  
it looked like the earth

might have swallowed it  
whole

but couldn't bear  
the bone of it.

The feathers wore off.  
Only its essence remains:

wingcoat,  
sea vane,  
jet.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

## Rune Poem

ƿ feoh/Capital

byþ frōfur fīra gehwylcum;  
sceal ðēah manna gehwylc miclun hyt dāelan  
gif hē wile for drihtne dōmes hlēotan.

Pastures full of cattle multiply the wealth  
of an allotted few, but gifts of fealty and cash  
rouse a lord to cast his faith with many.

ᚱ rād/Road

byþ on recyde rinca gehwylcum  
sēfte ond swīphwæt ðām ðe sitteþ onufan  
mēare mægenheardum ofer milpaþas.

Inside, bold fighters ride their soft mounts.  
When the longed-for hall lay miles away,  
strength wishes for a stout heart and steed.

Χ gyfu/Gift-giving

gumena byþ gleng and herenys,  
wraþu and wyrþscype; and wræcna gehwām  
ār and ætwist, ðe byþ oþra lēas.

Honor's praise-worthy hand establishes  
thick walls and warm bonds; the poor  
return more need to the left hand of mercy.

† nyd/Difficulty



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

byþ nearu on brēostan; weorþeþ hī þēah oft niþa bearnum  
tō helpe and tō hāle gehwæpre, gif hī his hlystaþ æror.

Need imprisons a dwindled soul, but reshapes those born of possibility;  
hardship is a helpful omen sent to save the wise, if heard and followed.

⌘ ēþel/Home  
byþ oferlēof æghwylcum men,  
gif he mōt ðær rihtes and gerysena on  
brūcan on bolde blēadum oftast.

Beloved by every heir, the farmstead—  
like the fatherland—is prized by the lawful  
and just, a birthright of prospering fields.

ℳ y̅r/Bow  
byþ æþelinga and eorla gehwæs  
wyn and wyrþmynd; byþ on wicge fæger,  
fæstlic on færelde, fyrdgatewa sum.

A hunter's narrow margin of honor, a worthy sport  
testing men of means, a saddle-buckle's trimming,  
a journey's peace-of-mind, a tool for battle-death.

—*Translated from the Old English by John Estes*



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Thomas Heise**

*from **Moth; or how I came to be with you again***

—I remember when I touched my sleeping mother's hair, it sparked in my hands and I thought she was inhuman, but I was young, and only years later would I understand she was under the spell of an erotic dream—I remember a white door emboldened with a laurel wreath leading into a basement where we retreated frequently in the tornado season—I remember how day after day would pass while nothing happened and how without mercy time would gather weight, accrete a green patina on the locket I chipped with a long fingernail—I remember the swaying firs made a whanging of rusted girders I thought would collapse—I remember sitting at my desk before my most precious things, sheets of graph paper, diagrams, folders, waterlogged and moulded charts, and then unannounced he would come to me, moving my hand automatically across these pages—I remember the gathering darkness of a thousand incidents I never witnessed, and yet, bird by bird, they separated themselves into moments of bright singularity



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

—I remember that I possess no real memory of my mother and only know at all that she even existed by evidence of my own pale skin and the double-helix twisted under it into an X—I remember blurry light, rain on an awning, and then being lifted and placed into a red wagon—I remember when the earth was for me, for the last time in its history, still elastic as cartilage, had not fully solidified into the obstacle of the known, the terrible, stubborn thing called *fact*—I remember *it was the hibiscus winter*, because she said so—I remember writing these words, but only barely, but one after another stone-like in their materiality they are undeniable —I remember remembering a dream, under a low ceiling of illuminated clouds swirling in a tarantella, I rode weeping along the boulevard of an empty city newly in ruins where each crumbling museum was my hidden and sumptuous destitution—I remember someone informed me he had once hanged himself from his swing set, then the memory infected me, became my own— I remember a small, A-frame house, and watching the hawthorn wasting in an emollient sea wind—I remember a white door— I remember it was the hibiscus



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

winter—I remember thinking I had been comatose a thousand years, though this is surely false, and in my uncorroborated absence the whole fungible world, in a moment of chemical agony, had changed in irreversible ways—I remember how everything tasted dark—I remember things I’ve never felt—a seagull feather brushing my lips, a turquoise shell, my shoulders festooned with flowers—I remember thinking what was in my mind was put there by others, by books I read, by objects I looked at but did not own—I remember wondering if other memories remained in the twilight regions of my mind where my failed loves were soil, and if soon someone would enlighten me to things I had done and then, years later, I would remember them as real—I remember tender hands covered in snow—I remember the city, the flames immanent as flowers’ patience to burst—I remember my favorite word once was—



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Gillian Conoley**

## **Channel**

A pickup stalled in a rain gully. Aimless horses, munching.

A dog's bark growing more distant in the hills.

TV portions playing in the head of the joy-faced

autistic boy running up and down the bank.

E and R and P and Q and L and M. E and R full of ardor.

P and Q divorcing. L and M, never making it.

\*

And I?

Circling your hologram

wanting back the hideous statement

that so hurt your self-esteem. I am so sorry.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

This is where the real people

met all the actors and actresses

until everyone broke down and cried

tears into the apertures  
and life went on.

The scapula, the femur. The pelvic floor.

E and R attaching themselves to the page as to a sail

and hoping to blow into the real.

\*

To the room there. To the making room there. Unclassifiable.

The page emptying of E and R, the creek shoal shifting pebbles

in the glint of white spruce sun.

The page

returning to its



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

hunger.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Jackie White**

## **Night Walk 2**

My coyote circling ignites porch lights,  
flares that startle me into braying

Each somnambulant step unbeads a litany—

Beds unbulbed, lawn unmown;  
my eye too often pupiled with horizon—

And asphalt curbs have their own liminality:

Row-houses hunker, shroud yard squares, subdivide  
pre-planned intersections called Thornwood, Thistlegate

Call it witching hour—

Orange August moon bellied with heat pendulums  
all that is swollen green, swelling this emptying

And the wind commands: articulate your tactics:

Torso and limbs reconnoitering, I tongue the spell  
dropped, globular honey, fired saltpeter-like into shot—

Back on my own front stoop, hunched, rocking, I'm afraid of the door  
behind me, the prickling sheets, sinews reshaping





# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Russ Brickley**

## **Ultrasound**

*for my sister and her daughters*

Finite now, you are mostly grains  
Of black and white, swirls, commas, novas  
Of electronic image, a living phantom  
In the palace of your birth,

The aristocratic astronaut of the mother  
Ship, where the seraph meets the machine,  
Swirls an ordained galaxy of shades  
Revealing your lips, arms, legs,

Eyes, the buds of your fists opening  
Like florets unfolding at the drone  
Beyond human sense that quavers into  
Your safe cave and brings your image naked

Into the royal constellations of home and family  
And the promise that all is well  
And will be well, because now  
You are measured—the brain, the bone,

The fluid and the pulse  
Fast as a bird's, rose-bud, flesh-star,  
Diva of the screen, calculated, the charge  
Of blood pumping through your tiny

Conduits and corridors—and to think that some  
Evening you will stand, gaze for the first time  
At the Milky Way, that your tiny fingers will  
Dig in the earth, dislodge the pebbles, and you will

Rise through the hemisphere and perhaps give  
Birth yourself one day, a daughter maybe,  
Like yourself, bathed in the warm essence  
And essential mystery of blood and bone and



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Beauty, and one day you too will see  
How that face carries the chemistry  
Of the long helixes of your mother and father,  
And all that came before and all that come after.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Hafizah Geter**

**i have been sleeping in all your beds**

but, you are just a man  
who has slipped me  
between his breastbone.  
just a staircase splitting  
me open, just these bare feet

nipping at your chest,  
a phone ringing in the hall.  
you are just these afternoon shaved  
legs, just a grave dug for me to rest in.  
just a soiled dish

in the kitchen, the floorboards  
swept clean with both breasts.  
just this house,  
crumbling, these hands  
cleaving room for two.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Hafizah Geter**

**a mass of elements, this man who sleeps next to me**

the man thinks my dreams are mistakes,  
promises to give me a baby. says he could  
make me beautiful. we agree to try

harder. he strokes me by the rib.  
says i am the petrifying  
of wood.

said he found me in the splintering  
open—i looked like iron and cobalt.  
he said he could polish me good,

put me full of complication.  
he told me he could make me strange.  
what is not to trust in a man,

when he touches you like something  
that's not supposed to be around, when he lets you  
curl your hair, or opens pickle jars with a smile.

i know he puts his mouth around evan williams  
whisky, sleeps naked. heels clutched  
around the edge of an undone dress.

that he walks around with flat feet  
that tell he is good with his hands.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Simon Perchik**

\*

These bricks reheated  
remember circling up  
sifting the smoke

for smoke not yet stars  
still inside, terrified  
by its darkness—chimneys

know to focus the sky closer  
as the night that comes due  
blackens this hillside

already in place  
brought down from under  
no longer red—they aim

the way each shadow  
leans against your heart  
tries to warm itself

in grasses and your hands  
made bigger, so slowly  
nothing can save you.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Elizabeth Wade**

## **Ecchymosis**

You are never there when I puncture myself on Tuesday, day of injection, day of routine. And you were not there on the day of aberration, when blood began to seep around the needle as I withdrew it, and blood began to pool beneath my skin, so that the next day my thigh blossomed, violet like a crocus, like the irises that lined the driveway of the house where I lived as a child, before I bore the knowledge that I will never bear a child. As a child, I dreamed about naming a child—the way the syllables would sound, the way letters would be her first inheritance, the way she would bear the identities of those who wore her name before her. My students tell me they want to be referred to as numbers, as symbols. She exists as symbol, as that-which-would-have-been, but isn't. As a child, I heard a man's pelvis crack. I had never seen a grown man's underwear before. I studied the alligators on his boxers, the way they announced his loyalty to a school he never attended, a place he no longer lived. Unlovely, too young, I held his hand anyway, perfecting the futile gesture. In years ahead I learned the words: ischium, ilium, acetabulum. Learned tuberosity, sinew, foramen. The tenderness, the open space. How eggplant fades to rotting lemon. The bitterness, the lack.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Cynthia Cravens**

**Review of *Tinkers* by Paul Harding**

Harding, Paul. *Tinkers*.

New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2009. 192 pages. \$14.95 paperback.

ISBN: 978-1-934137-12-3.

In an economical 184 pages, Paul Harding's Pulitzer prize-winning novel manages to intertwine the two disparate narratives of an estranged father and son, linked thematically by their experience of illness, while also sporadically interspersing excerpts from a metaphysical eighteenth-century instruction manual on the study of clock-making, *and* excerpts from an unidentified journal meditating on aspects of the natural world. The latter two introduce and, for the most part, develop the central motifs that ostensibly structure the novel as a whole—that is, the elusive and magical quality of time, and the awe-inspiring power of nature.

Less a novel than a cycle of stories, *Tinkers* is told in four sections. Sections 1 and 4 serve as the bookends for the whole—counting down the slow death of eighty-year-old George Washington Crosby, a clock repairer, from a point eight days before his death to the moment of his expiration from the ravages of cancer, diabetes, and Parkinson's. This countdown to death is the obvious dramatic manifestation of time, written matter-of-factly, without sentimentality or romantic inclinations. Amid vivid hallucinations of the house, the sky, and the stars collapsing on top of him as he lay in his rented hospital bed in his living room, George is flooded with random uncontrollable memories, unable to maintain a chronological record of his life, frustrated in his inability to properly take stock, and ultimately unable to escape from his deteriorating body or his



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

disordered mind. As we read these chaotic reflections of a dying man unable to chronologize, we are relentlessly reminded by the narrative of the precision and orderliness we ascribe to time.

But before the reader mistakenly interprets this as the beginning of a contemplation of the problem of memory, George's narrative—a few pages at the most—ends and that of his father Howard, the eponymous tinker, begins. In a more linear trajectory, Howard's narrative appears in small doses through section one, becomes the driving force in sections two and three, but is relegated once again to brief interludes in the concluding section. It's through the point of view of Howard, an epileptic, that we experience an intense reverence for nature that feels inherited from Transcendentalism.

Alternating between these two strands of narrative, the novel juxtaposes George's present-moment action of dying with Howard's more richly detailed story as a wagon-driving salesman (a tinker) in 1925 and his unfortunate epileptic seizures often experienced while alone in the deep woods of Maine—episodes he likens to an electric storm “spinning somewhere out on the fringes of the solar system” crackling his blistered brain.

The parallel between George's chaotic, disordered, and untameable mind undergoing the process of death, and Howard's blistered, nearly fried brain overwhelmed with electricity is made patently clear by the intensely lyrical passages with which Harding narrates these episodes. The stars don't merely fall on George, they “[tinkle] about him like the ornaments of heaven shaken loose.” Likewise, the universe didn't just descend, “the black vastation itself came untacked and draped over the entire heap, covering George's confused obliteration.” Similarly, in one of



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Howard's daydreams, he imagines what it would be like to glimpse the other side of nature as if a stitch had come loose:

The weaver might have made one bad loop in the foliage of a sugar maple by the road and that one loop of whatever the thread might be wound from—light, gravity, dark from stars—had somehow been worked loose by the wind in its constant worrying of white buds and green leaves and blood-and-orange leaves and bare branches and two of the pieces of whatever it is that this world is knit from had come loose from each other and there was maybe just a finger-width's hole, which I was lucky enough to spot in the glittering leaves from the wagon of drawers and nimble enough to scale the silver trunk and brave enough to poke my finger into the tear, that might offer to the simple touch a measure of tranquility or reassurance.

The oft-occurring presence of this heightened prose is, presumably, what led reviewers and blurb-writers to describe the novel as elegiac, meditative, visionary, brilliant, spellbinding, luminous, ecstatic, exquisitely precise, astounding, and gorgeous. In the flood of write-ups following the April 12<sup>th</sup> announcement of its Pulitzer Prize win, much was also made of the fact that it was published by a small, independent press—a phenomenon that hasn't occurred since *Confederacy of Dunces*, published by Louisiana State University Press in 1981. The non-profit Bellevue Literary Press—a small outfit housed within the NYU Medical College whose mission is “to bring together medicine, science, and humanism through literature [so that] physicians and patients might be better informed [and] able to cope with the demands that illness imposes”—



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

publishes only eight titles a year. This, coupled with the fact that Harding's novel had been rejected by all of the major publishing houses due, in at least one instance, to a lack of plot, makes the story of this book's rise to success almost as interesting as the book itself.

After consigning the manuscript to a drawer in which it languished for three years, Harding handed the manuscript over to a friend who knew an editor at a press. That editor turned it down, but handed it to another editor, the executive director at Bellevue. She stayed up all night reading it and offered Harding a limited-run contract of 3,500 copies and an advance of \$1000. She then gave an advanced copy to the co-editor at *Publishers Weekly* who raved about it, and a sales rep in San Francisco who not only raved about it, but vowed to make it an area best-seller, which she did. Then, *The New Yorker*, *LA Times*, and *The Boston Globe* raved about it (but not, notably, *The New York Times* who admits they missed it altogether), and a copy found its way to a buyer at Random House who, even before Harding was nominated for a Pulitzer, signed him to a two-book deal. And it was just in time because Harding was living on unemployment checks from Harvard where he had been teaching. (But fortunately he was able to secure a teaching gig at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, where he had gotten his MFA.)

As for its Pulitzer victory, the novel is so quintessentially the material that the Pulitzer committee feasts upon that if more publishers, reviewers, and readers had been aware of its small-press existence, its surprise win would probably not have been a surprise. To begin with, the prose is, at times, dazzling and dense, in that way reviewers like to say shows a mastery of language. More importantly, however, it centers on three generations of New England men: diabetic, cancer-riddled, Parkinson's-afflicted George; his epileptic father Howard; and, in a



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

cameo interlude, Howard's father (George's grandfather), a minister whose increasingly baffling sermons indicate the deterioration of his faculties.

In this way, through the experience of illness and the altered perceptive states it engenders, the three generations of men are mirrors of each other. George's chaotic flux of hallucinations is illuminated by the growing rigidity of his body, which, due to the "toxins leaking from his cancer-clogged kidneys," is no longer under his control. Likewise, Howard's inclination toward luminescent ruminations on Nature seems to be motivated by the susceptibility of his body to seething currents of electricity—a physical event also wholly out of his control. Finally, Howard's father, a man who composes his sermons passionately and obsessively, inhabits a body that seems to fade away before the eyes of his son, his grasp on things, literally and figuratively, becoming no stronger than a draft of air until he seems to disappear altogether.

Significantly, in each case, the son witnesses the decline of the father (although in George's case, his grandsons do the witnessing). Young Howard watches as a group of concerned parishioners, alarmed over their minister's incoherence, take his father away in a horse-drawn carriage, never to be seen again. Many years later, young George witnesses one of his father's epileptic seizures at the dinner table—an event he has never seen—and discovers in the aftermath a brochure on his mother's dresser for a care facility for the insane and feeble-minded. Before his father can be taken away, however, Howard, who has also seen the brochure, leaves the family, sells his wagon, changes his name, and moves from Maine to Philadelphia, never, almost, to be seen again.



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

The novel itself doesn't make an overt connection between Howard abandoning his family and his own father's abrupt removal—the former occurs in the narrative before we find out about the latter, and, even though Howard is recalling his father's deterioration as he sits in the woods following his abandonment of his own family, he doesn't claim or seem to recognize a relationship between the two events. What is made manifest, however, through their respective memories, is the shame the sons feel at witnessing their fathers' indignities. Howard remembers feeling frightened and shocked after seeing his father's thin legs; he looks away so as not to embarrass his father and he feels helpless, unable to restore the lost dignity of his ailing father as his mother dresses him and scolds him for putting on his hat before his shirt.

The implication is that this shame has had a profound effect on Howard's relationship with his own family, particularly his children, from whom he and his wife collude to hide his condition. After ten-year-old George not only witnesses one of Howard's seizures for the first time, but must also force a wooden spoon into his father's mouth—nearly losing two of his fingers in the process—he begins to wish that his father “would just disappear from the face of the earth—not die, not be put away, just miraculously suddenly not be...”. Following the incident, he has to keep from crying “at being so angry for having a mad father whom he loved and pitied and hated,” a feeling so intense that rather than have to face his father again, George runs away. As Howard goes in search of him, he hopes that the boy will succeed, wishes, in fact, that his son had a real chance for escape, knowing all the while exactly where to find him. The next day, realizing the significance of his wife's brochure, the wish for escape still fervent in his mind, Howard leaves.



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

In the final pages of the novel, George's last memory before he dies is of the surprise visit his father paid him during dinner on Christmas night in 1953—nearly thirty years after he left. What George feels at this moment of memory isn't nostalgia or peace of mind, but the recollection of feeling a rapid compression of time upon opening the door and recognizing the man before him. Once again told matter-of-factly without a hint of sentimentality, the last paragraph recounts the awkward conversation between Howard and George undertaken with Howard's car idling in the driveway, a clear indication that he won't be staying.

The streamlined and compact nature of this novel precludes any profound musings on the binaries of father and son, time and nature, illness and health, or mind and body, despite its reliance on them to evoke sympathy and emotion. Its fragmented structure, avoidance of resolution, and prioritizing of language and imagery serve as a kind of compensation in the absence of a meaningful treatment of story or character. Drawing on the traditions of local color narratives (particularly those of the New England variety) and with its clear indebtedness to the Transcendentalist reverence for nature, *Tinkers* is traditional in content while contemporary in form, the execution of which might make more of a case for an award than its awkward lyricism and at times convoluted tumble of prose, however elegiac that prose may be.

Ultimately, the novel accomplishes something other than what its author evidently set out to do—Harding clearly puts an emphasis on time with constant references to clocks, clock repair, clock chimes, counting, ageing, dying, and memory; references which feel, at times, like intrusions or insinuations rather than the development of a seamless motif. In the end, though, the reader is left with the lingering image of sons shamed in the presence of their enfeebled fathers,



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

which are far more powerful moments in the novel than the contemplations of elusive time or vulnerable memory, yet which are, perhaps in keeping with the overt theme, not given quite enough time or space to feel fully gratifying.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Clark Lunberry**

**Writing in the Waves, a Poem on a Pond**

**NOTHING...**

**WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE...**

**BUT PLACE...**

—Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de des...*

Instead of asking the more familiar and time-honored question of *what* is a poem, a better, more fitting one today might be: *where* is a poem, and *when*? For poetic language, set loose, no longer necessarily settles solely into the kinds of solutions once fixedly bound in books, printed on published paper, but today—whether we like it or not—floats fluidly, promiscuously even, into an ether of more ephemeral, fragile form.

Such dispersions of poetic language have arisen, or have been *made* to arise, in relation to an on-going series of site-specific and short-term poetry installations of my own, all involving what I have come to call a “writing on water.” Of this project, a bit of background: to date, there have been three different such installations completed on and around the pond of the University of North Florida’s Thomas G. Carpenter Library: “Water On Water” (2007); “Murmur of Words / Murmur of Wounds” (2008); and most recently, in 2009, the third installation, “Floating Form Less.” When first conceived, this installation project was largely hypothetical and theoretical, proposed—almost on a whim—as part of a course that I was teaching on concrete and visual poetry, its history and applications. However, once the idea for such a project was presented, it seemed that its implementation had to be attempted, even if it were finally to fail.



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

What wasn't realized at the time (nor could it have been) was that, with this first "writing on water" installation, we had begun something that would remain open-ended and ongoing. For as it turns out, the 2007 installation was to be but the beginning of a poem written very, very slowly and very, very largely. With just a few added words installed each year, the poem would thus increase incrementally, its lines of language lengthening in compliance with the calendar. And in an age of great speed, *our* age of immediate and downloadable access to all that claims to matter, *this* poem, unhurried, and floating ephemerally upon the pond, presents itself instead as a poem of great slowness, almost glacial in its growth — and, as such, perhaps the slowest poem ever written. Its development and completion (if there is *to be* a completion) will, as a result, remain essentially unknown, unforeseeable, to all involved, with perhaps a year or so separating — as if marked by tree rings — the added lines of language, ample time taken to conceive with care the words annually needed for its development. Like empty space left on a page (upon which dice might be thrown), empty time would be engaged for this poem's slow growth, long stretches when nothing would happen on the pond's stilled surface, when the water would be water — the previous line of language erased, the next not yet rising to replace it. Or, echoing Mallarmé in *Un Coup de des...*, "Nothing...will have taken place...but place...except...perhaps...a constellation," a constellation constituted, and dissolved, by time.

In what follows I will discuss and describe the initiating installation of this ongoing series and the first such effort, in 2007, to find a way to write on water. The eventual success of this installation was to set in motion the larger project, offering the opening line of a poem that continues to be written today.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

## Installation #1

“With words-in-freedom we will have: Condensed metaphors. Telegraphic images. Maximum vibrations. Nodes of thought. Closed or open fans of movement. Compressed analogies. Color Balances. Dimensions, weights, measures, and the speed of sensations. The plunge of the essential word into the water of sensibility...”

—Filippo Marinetti, *Futurist Manifesto*

Our project was begun by a simple, straightforward desire: to write on water, to put a poem on a pond. My students and I had all heard about “walking on water” but had rejected it as an option, finding it too gimmicky, apparently difficult, certainly overdetermined (and, after all, it had—as they say—“already been done”). Writing on water, on the other hand, opened up territory uncultivated and undeveloped, while offering a new and untested kind of shimmering surface for poetic composition and inscription. True, this surface was radically unstable and, as such, resistant to much written endurance (but it came, nonetheless, with its resonant depths built into it). True, also, that others had famously worked with water, but less legibly so, from Robert Smithson and his *Spiral Jetty* on Utah’s Great Salt Lake, to Christo and the *Surrounded Islands* in Miami’s Biscayne Bay. And there certainly were important textual dimensions to the work of these artists, and others like them, that may have informed our initial inquiries into what and how we wanted to write. However, my students and I intended to be quite literal in our writerly/waterly applications; we were determined to find a way, in fact, to apply letters and words onto the surface of the water itself. Once installed, the poem would then—if only for a brief period of time—be legibly seen, readable to anyone passing by. The words would thus float,



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

or appear to float, in a kind of watery futurist freedom, a late manifestation of Filippo Marinetti's *parole in libertà*, and his desired "plunge of the essential word into the water of sensibility."

The pond in question, located directly in front of the University of North Florida's Library, was not large and so any poem upon it would have to be similarly scaled. In the interest of such needed economy, we would thus take a cue for our composition, again, from Marinetti's injunction for the "Condensed..." the "Telegraphic..." the vibrating "[Node] of thought..." And if the letters themselves were to be large (say 7' x 7') and so clearly seeable and readable from a distance (an ideal vantage imagined from the wide windows of the adjacent library), we had to determine what words could then be appropriately written to fit upon what we were now conceiving as our "blank page," the *tabula rasa* of the library's pond.

Once it was decided for certain that we wanted to undertake this admittedly peculiar project, the many practical components of such an untested installation quickly rose to the surface of our attention—just *how* would this be done; *could* this be done; or even, *should* this be done? First, we had to determine a workable writing material from which the various large letters could be fashioned and from which the words could be subsequently shaped and positioned onto the pond. To pursue such writing, our search entailed multiple trips to places like, *not* Office Depot, but Home Depot, Lowe's and Ace Hardware, trying out numerous kinds of plastic, Styrofoam, wood, wire, rubber, home insulation materials, fencing products—*anything* that might, at limited expense, be placed upon the water and be expected to last for a reasonable period of time (a week or two, for instance). Thinking together, all kinds of options were floated, some more plausible than others: a student suggested piling up and shaping truckloads of deposited stones, tons of



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

them, into the pond (via Smithson's historic solution in Utah), while another proposed using hundreds of strung-together plastic milk bottles (via perhaps the memory of a grade school project). Days, weeks went by as we pondered the options for writing on water, often sinking into the silly or rising into the sublime.

Also, of course, we had to determine just how the letters and words would be held in place, positioned on a substance as unsteady as water, while taking into account the inevitability of wind, rain and wildlife. For instance, might the letters be anchored to the bottom of the pond, fastened from the shores, or strung from above? And how, finally, would we get the letters out into the water? The pond wasn't particularly large or deep, but it was large and deep enough to cause complications, even dangers. Were we to swim out into the water, snorkel, wear wetsuits? Take a boat, string the words out from the side, float them into position? And what were we to do about the animals so typically found in and on the ponds of north Florida—the geese, the fish, the large turtles and, yes, even the small alligators that prowled the shores and swam just beneath the pond's dark surface? Years of writing on paper, or composing on a computer screen, had not prepared us for such fluid challenges.

In fact, all of these practical concerns proved a lot more confounding than expected and, as much as my students and I were really committed to the idea of this writing project, it quickly became clear that its actual implementation was going to be quite difficult, maybe far more expensive than imagined, and (as we occasionally muttered in moments of frustration) perhaps not worth the trouble after all. It was even meekly suggested that we *could* abandon the project entirely without shame (no one, at this point, knew about it but us), leaving it all as just a really



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

intriguing, conceptually compelling endeavor, but one that was finally, materially unfeasible. We even took comfort from, and saw as a usable alibi, the cue of the conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner, who famously wrote (regarding his own ambitious installations, some on water) that:

- 1. The artist may construct the piece**
- 2. The piece may be fabricated**
- 3. The piece need not be built**

In grappling with the many practical components of this project (while finally resolving that it *did* “need [to]...be built”), my students and I were—I suppose—“putting the cart before the horse,” the form before the content, the *material* of the poem before (some might say) the poem of the poem. If, as William Carlos Williams insisted, there should be “no ideas but in things” (while also notably proclaiming that “a poem can be made out of anything”), most of *our* ideas—so far—were lodged largely in the *thing* of the poem itself, “ideas” involving the building of that thing to be made out of... “anything”...*something*. But what, we wondered? It’s as if, in imagining the more conventional composition of a poem, we were spending massive—perhaps ridiculous—amounts of time figuring out the writing instrument with which to write the poem: would we use a fountain pen, a ballpoint pen, a pencil, a computer?

I retrospectively realize, however, that such delays proved pedagogically and poetically instructional. For in this most rudimentary of searches (compelled by the many formal constraints of the composition), we were returned to, or reminded of, a kind of primitive, archaic beginning



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

of writing itself—a writing *before* writing. Indeed, as we set out to locate the workable materials and implements to be employed, the usable instruments for our imminent inscription, *prior* to inscription, we were obliged to rethink and reimagine the very *idea* of inscription and the *things* needed to achieve it: the poetics of *that*.

Nonetheless, in the midst of our ruminations about *how* and *with what* to make our poem, a short line of language was finally proposed for the project, something short and sweet that would help us to further visualize the project in question. The words put forward for the pond poem were simply:

## **WATER ON WATER**

As if arising from out of nowhere or nothing, something about this line of language seemed immediately appropriate for our particular purposes. And the more we thought about it, the more these three words (or two, since one word **WATER** is repeated twice) struck us as perhaps ideal for what we had in mind, *les mots justes*—even fulfilling, quite elegantly, the Futurist directive for that desired “[Node] of thought....,” for “Compressed analog[y]...., plung[ing]...the essential word [**WATER**] into the water of sensibility...” Being both materially and conceptually “compressed,” this three word poem (that might end up taking three months finally to write) would state precisely and concisely *what IT was* at the very moment that it was



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

stating it: a saying of what we were seeing (**WATER**), a seeing of what we were saying (**WATER**), conjoined by its own literal, prepositional placement *ON* (**WATER**). In fact, the beauty of this line (that was, in its multilayered compressions, perfectly congruent with itself, as in: let  $X = X$ ), would be that, once installed, we would have materialized a kind of “floating signifier” that would manifestly signify itself floating, *as it was floating*, as a signifier signifying (its own signifying). Here, in all its isomorphic simplicity, would be a poem in which its watery meaning would be self-identical with its watery appearance, unequivocal and unambivalent. And if, looking out onto the poem one day, someone were to ask (as someone inevitably would) “*but what does it mean? What’s it meant to mean?*,” all we would have to do is point out onto the pond, to the thing itself, our index finger silently directed to the “essential” words on the water as our succinct, self-sufficient response of  $X$  equaling  $X$ , water equaling water, equaling **WATER** on **WATER**.

So, before we knew it, these were the determined words that were to become our determined poem, the language that was to be placed upon the library’s pond. All we needed now was to figure out how to do it, how finally to write **WATER ON WATER** on the water. Surely, with so much time already having been spent upon this project, a practical solution could be found to this poetic problem, our thoughts upon it materialized, made concrete—if only briefly, as liquid resonance, as floating form.



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

And, soon after, a possible solution was found (though we wouldn't know for sure of its workability until the actual installation weeks later). After going down numerous blind alleys, being detoured onto convoluted routes of expensive and overwrought implementation, finally it was the simplest and cheapest of solutions that won out (which was a good thing, because there was no real budget for this project). The mental image that settled and solved it all for us was derived from childhood memories of backyard clotheslines and, from this recollected pastoral image, the idea of laying out—with the use of a borrowed kayak—four lines of ordinary twine that would extend across the 75 feet of the library's pond, resting tautly upon the water's surface. The actual material for the words would come from those neighborhood hardware stores mentioned earlier: a thick industrial plastic (sold in a roll, 30' x 15', for \$39.95), the large letters cut out from this translucent substance after having been carefully measured and stenciled ahead of time. From within the kayak, a person—the writer of the words—would then attach the plastic letters to the stretched twine with old-fashioned wooden clothespins (sold at the same hardware store, 250 of them for \$4.95, thus completing the backyard inspiration). Remembering William Carlos Williams' liberating advice that "a poem can be made out of anything," these were the *things*—plastic, twine, clothespins and a kayak (no ideas but in them and the water)—of which our poem would finally be made.

Five students and I met at the library's pond on a warm April afternoon. The various materials had already been purchased and two teams were immediately set up: one for preparing and then installing the lines of twine across the pond, the other for measuring, marking and finally cutting out the large letters. In spite of the remaining uncertainties, after months of



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

speculation and preparation, the day had finally come to see this project through, to sink or swim, to fish or cut bait. First, the four evenly spaced large wooden stakes, about a foot and a half apart, were pounded into the ground on opposite shores of the library's pond. From within the kayak, the twine was then stretched across the water, 75 feet of it going back and forth, back and forth. Once this was completed, a stabilizing clothesline of a grid was then in place on the unstable water; with our surface of sorts in place, the writing could now begin.

On the sidewalk in front of the library, the other team busied itself with measuring, marking and then cutting out the letters. This aspect of the project, however, proved more difficult than expected, as a seven foot "W" or "E" was not, as it turns out, to be so easily extracted from the plastic; errors were made, and materials were wasted, as parts of letters, seen at such scale, were misconstrued and often mangled or misdrawn—the midsection of the "A" was too tightly sketched out; the top of the "T" too thin; the leg of the "R" extending oddly, its upper curves irregular (and so unreadable). In addition, it was a windy afternoon and the large sheets of plastic, laid out upon the sidewalk, would flip and fly about, only causing more confusion about how the letters were to be drawn and cut. In spite of these complications, however, we could now nearly picture the poem already in place and thus were more determined than ever to see this project through to the end.

After the letters—one after the other—had been loaded into the kayak, the words were gradually and arduously positioned, clipped upon the twine with the clothespins, the line of language slowly, slowly forming, as we yelled from the shore to the person in the kayak to move, for instance, the "O" a little more this way, the "N" a little more that way. Until finally—after six



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

exhausting hours of effort—the piece was finally completed, the writing was on the water, the poem was at last on the pond.

It was unclear how long our poem would stay on the water, how effective our design would prove to be or not to be, and how it would hold up over time. That remained a big question. To our surprise, however, the piece weathered well, even gaining additional dimensions of meaning and resonance as time went by, as it finally lasted—to the surprise of many—for nearly two weeks. At first, the geese that seasonally inhabit the pond were a bit put off by our poem and disappeared for a while—harsh critics, one might say, of the entire endeavor. Within a day or two, though, they had returned and could regularly be seen swimming alongside the words and, occasionally, directly upon and over it, apparently no longer troubled by this artificial insertion into their natural habitat.

The large turtles that are frequently found in the pond proved especially skittish in the beginning, staying out of sight for several days. But by the end of the first week, they had also returned to the shores and, by the second, had even begun crawling up onto the poem's letters, sleeping upon them, sunning themselves as if upon a reef of words. It seems that our poem had sufficiently integrated itself into their turtled environment that the writing had become just another element among the elements, the words absorbed—like water onto water—into their daily routine of rest and repose.

Through wind, rain, and wildlife, our poem thus endured, while sinking daily ever so slightly just beneath the pond's surface. For unexpectedly and unintended, our pond poem had, over time, begun both to signal and sinkingly manifest its own ephemerality and progressive



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

disappearance, with the words enacting upon the pond something like an applied act of entropic, or deconstructive, poetics. And, contrary to the more conventional and enduring inscriptions of poems on paper (or even those chiseled into stone), our poem had integrated into it something of its own eventual vanishing, as the words were written onto the very substance that would slowly submerge and subsume it, erasing it from view.

In fact, by the end of the second week, nearly all of the letters had sunk several inches beneath the water—the pond having slowly risen from recent rains, the twine having stretched slightly over time—and, at certain moments of the day, at certain angles of the light, the poem became increasingly opaque and difficult to read at ground level. However, from the elevation allowed by the library's adjacent windows, the words were still beautifully and fully visible (perhaps even more subtle and ethereal in their newly submerged and muted condition). Actually, seen from the various levels of the library, the translucent plastic of the now sunken letters appeared increasingly like a thin film or a delicate membrane of shaped light coalescing into watery words. There, just beneath the pond's absorbing surface, was the uncanny sight of the sunken poem, as if fallen from Rimbaud's own drunken boat, a hallucination of language.

By the end of the second week, the pounded stakes on the shores of the pond were pulled up and the words were unceremoniously dragged from the water. With its removal, the sublimity of the poem's readable form was quickly replaced by the slime and sludge of the filthy plastic that was, alas, summarily deposited into a nearby dumpster, a jumble of illegible letters now destined for the landfill. Without words upon it, the water (as water) was quickly restored to itself, the pond no longer divided by the poem, its full expanse returned to the geese and the



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

turtles. For several days thereafter, though, a kind of afterimage of language seemed to linger from off of the water, as if the watery words (as phantom forms) were somehow floating still on the pond's shimmering surface.

## Notes

1. In November 2009, the most recent and third part of this ongoing poem, titled "Floating Form Less," was installed on the pond at the University of North Florida's library. Images from this installation, and others recently undertaken, can be found at my website:

<<http://www.unf.edu/~clunberr>>.



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Lisa Haines Wright**

**Constructing Paralysis: The (Lethal) Narrative of Momentous Consequence**

Interested in the relation between agency as we feel it and agency as it is shown us, I focus on choices that are not chosen, but are nonetheless determinative, *as if* they had been chosen and, more, sworn to. I ask not why people do things they deplore, but why, once they do, they find it so difficult to change course. That difficulty, I think, shaped—by a conceptual model current in our culture—the idea that in a sequence of actions, there is a *kairotic* moment, a moment of no return, ominously consequential. I think that idea both mistaken and dangerous—for most of us, anyway. Some find it useful. But they are those who would co-opt others’ agency, and such theft, most of us would resist. To that end, I critique a particular kind of narrative: the catastrophic ‘turning point’ story. It naturalizes the notion that single moments foreclose possibility. And that notion disables human agency, displacing it into an irreversible past or unknowable future—always, in any case, where we are not.

My central term—*kairotic moment*—I take from Stephen Greenblatt, who adapts it from classical rhetoric. He uses it to specify a long-aculturated conviction—a cultural myth—which predicates the ‘moments’ he calls “kairotic.” That myth posits that there are

certain critical moments upon which a whole train of subsequent events depends, moments whose enabling conditions may be irrevocable and whose consequences may be irreversible. Such a conviction is formally expressed most often in relation to great public events, but its influence is more widespread,



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

extending, for example, to rhetorical training, religious belief, and [. . .] child rearing. (Greenblatt, “Cultivating” 87)

This notion derives from and helps consolidate a certain sense of time: time unfolding on a unilinear track, rather than in multi-dimensional space. This flatly reductive vision is both reflected in and sustained by a specific kind of narrative, very common in our culture. I call it ‘quest’ narrative: narrative that plots a teleological course. Goal-directed rather than “goal-seeking” (Wilden 78-79), its end is its beginning. The desire that drives it—and which it helps shape—is singular and specific: the holy grail, for example, in the thirteenth-century *Quest* for that object (about 1225); the one and only “She,” in Ryder Haggard’s novel of that name (1887); in Hardy’s *Jude* (1895), a university education; in Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932), an unambiguous racial identity. Such a desideratum might be secured; generally, I find, it is not. But whether or not this totalized object of desire is achievable, seeking ‘It’ is the only game in town. Any other movement is distraction—weakness of purpose.

Such seeking plots a simple line between desiring ‘I’ and desired ‘It’. Said line must be as straight as possible. To the degree that narrative plot, or human life, exceeds the shortest distance between its two points, it measures human imperfection—‘fallen’ nature. Only if we see time in a unilinear fashion could a moment of no return—an irreversible turning point—achieve plausibility. Such a point could be defined only if we suppose a single, pre-existing right course. And the “irreversible” consequences that follow from the turn define only one other—the wrong one. We imagine for ourselves only two possible time lines—and one, we devote to catastrophe.



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Think, for a moment, a long way back: Thomas Malory in fifteenth-century England. Arthur draws a sword from a stone and, inadvertently, proves himself “RIGHTWYS KYNGE BORNE OF ALL ENGLOND.” Coincident with that momentous event, he learns he’s not the son he thinks he is: the only father he has ever known tells him that, and only that, he is a fosterling. No more than Sophocles’ Oedipus does Arthur know who he is. Early in his reign, his kingship is contested. In a respite, he receives a visitor: Margawse, queen of Orkney and the wife of a rival; she comes “in maner of a mess[enger],” in fact to spy (Malory 27). In either case, though, she is “a passynge fayre lady,” and Arthur desires her. They couple, and Arthur begets a son—Mordred. Morgawse leaves, and Merlin drops by with some remarkably ill-timed news: “ye have done a thyng late that God ys displeasid with you, for ye lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme (Malory 29).”

“A,” says the king, “ye ar a mervaylous man!”<sup>1</sup>

Both logical causality and moral responsibility have been utterly mystified. Arthur is to die by his own son’s hand because he sired that son on a sister he didn’t know he had. He learns both his crime and its punishment in the very same moment that he is given his identity. He does not even protest the retroactive judgment. He does not plead ignorance, though he speaks to the very man who might have enlightened it.

I could explain this acquiescence. Arthur’s identity as incestuous offender also consolidates his claim to righteous sovereignty: it is as Uther’s son that he is rightwise king of England. But I think the bribe distracting. I want to foreground the kairotic moment—the



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

‘moment of no return,’ which is neither real nor useful. Arthur couples with a lovely woman: it is simply silly to charge that event with lethal consequence, just because she is—after the fact—found to be his sister. Given its moral and logical poverty, I’m amazed that this move is plausible. It both shapes a ‘moment of no return’ and displaces it from knowledge and control. Wherever one is, the decisive moment is elsewhere. That story undermines human agency.

Nonetheless, we cling to it. Narratives much closer to our own time—Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1900), for example, or Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932)—show us re-cycling it. It is incoherent with both our metaphysics and our experience, but still we tell it, and still it’s read. Perhaps we find it comforting: there are situations in which one would rebuff one’s own agency. If so, though, this story—so old its speciousness is no longer self-conscious—is dangerous: it underwrites, for example, the pedagogy of Nazi planners. The absurd thing is: these stories work by not working. *There is no ‘there’ there*: I have looked, and I can’t find any fatal moment that ‘turns’ toward disaster—not even in stories that pretend such.

In *Lord Jim*, Conrad points to a kairotic moment, sharply and insistently. It is the black hole that draws both the would-be hero and his narrator, who would have us name Jim “one of us” (Conrad 45.300). Jim abandons a failing ship and eight hundred pilgrim passengers. The ship makes it to port, and its renegade crew is disgraced, Jim among them. He jumps—once. And years later, in altogether another place and other circumstances, he attends still—not to present urgencies, but to ancient disgrace. In Patusan, loved and trusted, he grants a gang of murderers free passage out of the land they have terrorized. Not because it makes any sense to grant these men quarter, but because—quite by accident, “as if a demon [were] whispering in his ear”



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

(Conrad 42.279)—their captain invokes Jim’s old shame: “I would let you shoot me, and welcome,” [he] said. “This is as good a *jumping-off* place for me as another. . . . But it would be too easy. There are my men in the same boat—and, by God, I am not the sort to *jump out* of trouble and leave them in a damned lurch.” (41.275-76, emphasis added)

If we look at the moment that both centers Jim’s life and drives him to death, we find nothing at all: it’s not there. The over-loaded ship’s bulkhead bulges, promising any moment to give way, and Jim freezes as other crew launch themselves a lifeboat: “[His] only distinct thought . . . was: eight hundred people and seven boats, eight hundred people and seven boats” (7.64). Then the other crew—overboard, safe. Jim tells Marlow,

The ship began a slow plunge; the rain swept over her like a broken sea; my cap flew off my head; my breath was driven back into my throat. I heard as if I had been on the top of a tower another wild screech, ‘. . . Oh, jump!’ She was going down, down, head first under me. . . .”

He raised his hand . . . and made picking motions with his fingers as though . . . bothered with cobwebs, and [then] he blurted into the open palm for quite half a second before he blurted out—

“*I had jumped . . .*” He checked himself, averted his gaze. . . . “It seems,” he added. (9.81, emphasis added)



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

Not even Jim himself, secure in a patient listener, can locate the fatal moment: apparently, it wasn't there. There is no moment of choice: he doesn't decide to jump. He vanishes into the past perfect: He "*had* jumped."

Nonetheless, he pitches the rest of his life both from and toward that zero moment. Marlow says Jim persuaded Patusan to unleash marauders because "[h]is fate, revolted, was forcing his hand" (Conrad 42.282). "One of us" (Conrad 45.300 *et passim*)? Like all "mankind," "driven by a dream of greatness" (37.251)? Such enchantment of retrograde motion, I call dangerous. It takes us from ourselves, fixing us at a place that never was.

Likewise, Joe Christmas, in *Light in August*. Faulkner tells us, within seconds of murder, Joe's "body seemed to walk away from him" (Faulkner 12.281). The kairotic moment? When does he turn toward murder, yielding to white violence both his life and his manhood? Here, too, that moment's gone missing. Like Jim, Joe Christmas 'jumps'—from the immediate future to the past perfect. Even before he has cut Joanna's throat. Cleared of distraction, this sequence reads: "*Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something*" (5.104). Slightly later, "*Something is going to happen. Something is going to happen to me*" (118, no end stop). Later again, "I better move. I better get away from here" (12.260). And still holding: "I have got to do something. There is something [. . .] I am going to do" (12.271). Then, "I am going to do something. Going to do something" (12.276). And here are the moments right before the murder:

[A]s he sat in the shadows of the ruined garden on that August night [. . .] and heard the clock in the courthouse [. . .] strike ten and then eleven, he believed



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed [. . .] he did not believe. He was saying to himself *I had to do it **already in the past tense**; I had to do it.* (12.280, emphasis added)

From prospect to retrospect—even before he’s ‘jumped.’ My point is that Faulkner both inflates this man to tragic grandeur and represents him as never having chosen the deed that cost his life: “volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed [. . .] he did not believe” (12.280). We are given a moment of lethal consequence. But it is represented as a moment not of choice, but of non-choice: radical self-abdication.

By investing something it refuses to show, kairotic-moment narrative at once points and mystifies the moment it conceals—the decisive moment, the mythical turning point. Thereby, it keeps that moment at once real and never-here. I’ll sketch the cost I apprehend, invoking a specific instance.

The notion of a ‘point of no return’ fixes attention on the past (to which ‘there’s no going back’), distracting from the present in which mistakes could be revised. Such thinking enabled Nazi pedagogy. Those charged with implementing the “Final Solution” record considerable nervousness: would German recruits actually execute genocide? What was done to assure compliance? Nothing. And here, ‘nothing’ weighs heavy.

In fact, in-the-field executioners were not briefed at all (Browning 7.49-57). We can reasonably infer that Nazi planners decided to transform recruits into killers by means of “sudden initiation [. . .] *at their actual place of work*” (Sereny 2.2.105). Apparently, the idea was that “ordinary men” (Browning’s title), if kept unaware of their job until they “*saw what it was,*”



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

would—simply “by seeing”—“become implicated” (Sereny 2.2.106). This strategy assumes, for one wearing a uniform, even witnessing such horror would induce belief that—at some indefinite point—one *had passed* a ‘moment of no return.’ The chance to choose, to claim and assert agency, would seem already to have come and gone. Simply by having allowed oneself to arrive, one had already committed to staying. The sense of personal agency is thus utterly displaced—it is ‘fore-gone.’ Since the executioners had been kept ignorant of their impending task, the notion that they had already consented to it is entirely illusory. But that illusion has very real consequence: it helped induce compliance—in Browning’s “ordinary men,” for example.

Reserve Police Battalion 101 comprised some five hundred middle-aged family men, working and lower-middle class, hostile to the Nazis, and uninterested in war. But the expanding *Reich* needed manpower, and in June 1942, they found themselves in Eastern Poland. Three weeks later, they were transported to the village of Jozefow and, there—on site—first learned their mission. Choking with tears (Browning 2, 7.57-58, 18.174), their commanding officer delivered their orders: collect the village’s 1800 Jews, deport working-age men to a camp, and shoot all the others—women, children, the old people (2, 7.55). Major Trapp then made an extraordinary offer: if any man did not feel up to the task, he could step out. No more than a dozen men did so. Throughout the day, though, it remained possible to refuse this mission, either explicitly or tacitly, by request or evasion—and, given post-war testimony,<sup>2</sup> some men did: between ten and twenty percent (8.74). As Browning notes, this number is “not insignificant.” Still, though, it points the corollary: at least eighty percent of those ordered to shoot, complied—and “continued to do so, until 1500 [. . .] Jews had been killed.”



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

I think kairotic-moment thinking both shapes such behavior and helps explain it. For Browning’s “ordinary men,” their commanding officer framed a *kairos*, both imaginary and determinative. Visibly upset, Trapp both gave an order and offered an exit. The effect of this two-fold message—sudden and unprecedented in both elements—must have been radical shock (Browning 8.71). In mental lock-down, two things would have been intimately real: peer solidarity and the force of authority.

Major Trapp was himself a weak authority figure, genial and benign (Browning 18.174). But that tearful briefing—the manifest distance between his will and his command—both invoked a higher power and measured its strength. Against loyalty and awe, there stood only the inconceivable. What was to happen that day lay not only beyond these men’s experience, but beyond easy imagining—beyond foresight. We cannot foresee the unimaginable. Thus the choice Trapp posed—accept this order or decline it—is almost entirely specious. In retrospect, though: a choice had been offered—which would imply that a choice had been made. The power of decision is displaced to a moment that never was.

Step by step, the course of this day—like those that follow—confirms these “ordinary men” in a choice they never made. As sociologists observe, “human beings resolve cognitive dissonance by reconstructing reality” (Marden). At first, these men engage in varying degrees. But having begun to execute genocidal commands, they adapt belief to action: “You adjust your attitudes to be congruent with the actions you’re taking. People learn to become killers, even to enjoy it” (Browning, qtd. Shatz 55). The moral of this story—the Holocaust story—has been stated thus: “people make their own nightmares, but they don’t announce their decisions, least of



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

all to themselves, with a big bang” (Shatz 55). No, they don’t. The evidence—actual and imaginative—says that, instead, they habituate themselves to a course of action they’ve been led to follow, sometimes by a tactic of brutal shock (Sereny 2.2.105-06). That fact ought revise our tendency to think in terms of kairoic moments—moments of no return, beyond which our course is determined and from which there is no going back. It privileges as decisive, shocking and revolting actions to which we have never consented and would never stand had we not come to believe ourselves already implicated.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Stanley Milgram observed and analyzed a “high degree of [. . .] obedience to a non-coercive authority” (Milgram 135-47). Browning summarizes:

seemingly voluntary entry into an authority system ‘perceived’ as legitimate creates a strong sense of obligation. [. . .] The notions of “loyalty, duty, discipline” [. . .] become moral imperatives [. . .] (Milgram 135-47). Normal individuals enter an “agentic state” in which they are the instrument of another’s will. [. . . They] no longer feel [. . .] responsible for the content of their actions but only for how well they perform. (Browning 18.172-73)

Just so at Josefov. “After [its] sheer horror”—initiation and implication, deliberately conjoined (Sereny 2.2.105-06)—the policemen experienced a profound sense of “detachment”: a “sense of not really participating in or being responsible” for their actions (Browning 18.163). Having divested themselves of themselves, they became zombies, not persons.

The fatal seduction of no-return thinking is sustained by narrative that reduces all time to a single line that splits only once—toward disaster. That story is lethal. We need a different kind



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

of narrative, a story that opens, and opens us, into multi-dimensional space. A “space of possibility” (Garber 11), in which, always, we retain the power of meaningful choice. I close by invoking one such story: Jeanette Winterson’s *Art and Lies* (1994).

The man stood up, and . . . began to walk towards the sea. [. . .]

He began to sing. He sang from the place that had been marked; the book, his body, his heart. The place where grief had been hid, not once, but many times. His voice was strong and light. The sun was under his tongue. He was a man of infinite space. [. . .]

Held in the frame of light, was not the world, nor its likeness, but a strange equivalence, where what was thought to be known was re-cast, and where what was unknown began to be revealed, and where what could not be known, kept its mystery but lost its terror.

[. . .]

It was not too late. (205-06)

To narrative that collapses time into a moment like matter into a black hole, writers like Winterson retort, “The river runs [. . .] without stopping” (*Sexing* 167). Not even matter, that thing “most solid” and “real,” is dense with determinative weight. Actually, it’s “mostly empty space. Empty space and points of light” (epigraph). We might defy foreclosure. The trajectory of words like Winterson’s carries us beyond them. And not laden with dread, but charged with energy: the energy of potential. As she says, “I don’t know if this is a happy ending but here we are, let loose in open fields” (*Written* 190).



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

## Notes

1. We neither hear “*What sister?*” nor tend to notice the omission. Begged questions, however looming, can be deftly obscured by narrative, in which—as Greenblatt notes—“the pressure of linked events and the assumed coherence of the tale help pull the reader past the awkwardness of incommensurable positions and silenced voices” (“Marvelous” 61).
2. Browning works from testimony gathered during pre-trial judicial interrogations: “The investigation and prosecution of Reserve Police Battalion 101 [was] a decade-long process (1962-1972) conducted by the Office of the State Prosecutor [. . .] in Hamburg” (Browning vii).

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## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

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# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

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# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---



## **Armful**

Molly-Rose Arnstein  
40" x 30"  
Chromogenic Print, 2010



## **Handholding**

Molly-Rose Arnstein  
11" x 14"  
Chromogenic Print, 2010



## **Toss**

Molly-Rose Arnstein



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

11" x 14"  
Chromogenic Print, 2010



## **The Boys**

Molly-Rose Arnstein  
11" x 14"  
Chromogenic Print, 2010



Cover Art:  
"Floating" by Molly-Rose Arnstein  
40" x 30"  
**Chromogenic Print, 2010**

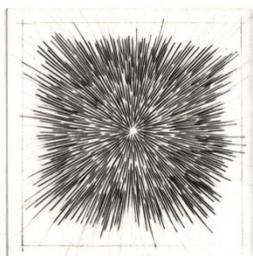


# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

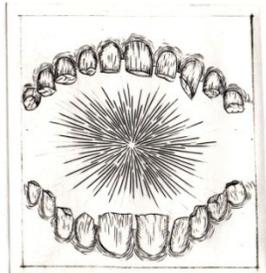
2011

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**The Big Yawn 1**

Mark Rice  
3" x 3"  
Engraving on copper, 2010



**The Big Yawn 2**

Mark Rice  
3" x 3"  
Engraving on copper, 2010



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

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## The Big Yawn 3

Mark Rice  
3" x 3"  
Engraving on copper, 2010



## Origin Story Series 1

Mark Rice  
6" x 6"  
Engraving on copper, 2010

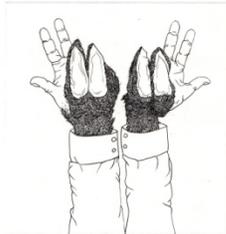


# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

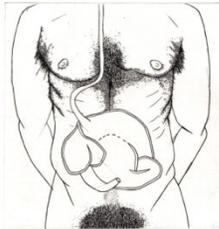
2011

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## Origin Story Series 2

Mark Rice  
6" x 6"  
Engraving on copper, 2010



## Origin Story Series 3

Mark Rice  
6" x 6"  
Engraving on copper, 2010



## Origin Story Series 4



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

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Mark Rice

6" x 6"

**Engraving on copper, 2010**



# PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

## Contributors' Notes

**Maureen Alsop** is the author of *Apparition Wren* (Main Street Rag, 2007) and several chapbooks, most recently *12 Greatest Hits* (Pudding House, forthcoming). Her recent poems have appeared in various journals, including [\*AGNI\*](#), [\*Blackbird\*](#), [\*Tampa Review\*](#), [\*Action Yes\*](#), [\*Drunken Boat\*](#), and [\*Kenyon Review\*](#).

**Molly-Rose Arnstein** is a fine artist living in Chicago, Illinois. She graduated from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland with a Bachelors' Degree in Fine Arts. Her work has been exhibited at the Maryland Art Place, the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore, as well as the Uptown Multi-Cultural Art Center in Chicago, Illinois. Various photographs and designs have been featured in the Washington Post, the Baltimore Sun, CBS News, IMDB, C-SPAN, and the cover of Cell magazine.

**Russ Brickey** holds an MFA in poetry and a PhD in literature from Purdue University. He currently works as the Coordinator of the Writing Center at University of Wisconsin-Platteville. His poetry can be seen at *Earthshine*, *Mannequin Envy*, *Sheepshead Review*, and *Avocet* among others.

**Gillian Conoley's** most recent book is *The Plot Genie* with Omnidawn. She is the author of six collections of poetry, including *Profane Halo*, *Lovers in the Used World*, and *Tall Stranger*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

**Christina Cook** is a poet and translator whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in a number of journals, most recently including *Prairie Schooner*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Sojourn: A Journal of the Arts*. Her manuscript, *Out of the Blue*, was shortlisted for the 2006 Dorset Prize. Christina holds an MFA from Vermont College and an MA from the University of Cincinnati, and she is a poetry editor for *Inertia Magazine*.

**Cynthia Cravens** is currently completing a PhD in English Studies and Creative Writing at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her work has appeared in *ArtsMedia*, *The Bloomington Voice*, *She* and *Playgirl*.

**John Estes** teaches at the University of Missouri and lives in Columbia. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *AGNI*, *West Branch*, *Southern Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Tin House* and other places. He is the author of *Kingdom Come* (C&R Press, 2010) and two chapbooks: *Breakfast with Blake at the Laocoön* (Finishing Line Press, 2007) and *Swerve* (Poetry Society of America, 2009), which won a National Chapbook Fellowship.



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

**Hafizah Geter** is a South Carolina native currently living in Chicago, IL. She received her MFA in Poetry from Columbia College Chicago and is a Cave Canem Fellow. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Arsenic Lobster*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *RHINO*, the *New Delta Review*.

**Bernadette Geyer** is the author of the poetry chapbook, *What Remains* (Argonne House Press, 2001) and the recipient of a 2010 Strauss Fellowship from the Arts Council of Fairfax County. Her poems have appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Verses Daily*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *American Journal of Nursing*, and elsewhere.

**Peter Grimes** holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Florida and is pursuing a PhD in English and comparative literature at the University of Cincinnati. His fiction appears in *Mid-American Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Lake Effect*, *Copper Nickel*, and other journals.

**Chelsea Rebekah Grimmer** is a student at Oakland University in Michigan. Her work has placed twice in the OU Annual Flash Fiction Contest, and once in the OU Annual Poetry Contest. Her work has been in publications such as *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, and she is currently working on her thesis about the impact of writing in marginalized communities.

**Thomas Heise** is the author of two books, *Horror Vacui: Poems* (Sarabande, 2006) and *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (forthcoming, Rutgers University Press, 2010). His poetry has been anthologized in *Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century* and has been published in numerous journals. His essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *African American Review*, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on a poetic memoir titled *Moth; or how I came to be with you again*. He teaches American literature, creative writing, and critical theory at McGill University in Montreal.

**Colleen Hollister**'s stories have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Conjunctions*, *Quarterly West*, *The Southeast Review*, *Versal*, and elsewhere. A novella, *Collage with Girl and Rooftop*, was published by Burnside Review Press as the winner of their 2009 Fiction Chapbook Competition. She lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

**Clark Lunberry** is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, where he is also a visual artist and poet. For the past several years, Lunberry has been engaged in large-scale poetry installations on both water



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

VOLUME THREE

2011

---

and windows. For more information about these installations, go to [www.unf.edu/~clunberr](http://www.unf.edu/~clunberr).

**Angie Macri** was born and raised in southern Illinois. Her recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Cave Wall*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Quiddity*, and *Redivider*, among others, and will be included in *Best New Poets 2010*. A recipient of an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council, she teaches in Little Rock.

**Michael Martone** was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, the home, then, of Eckrich Meats. Martone ate sandwiches constructed with Eckrich cold cuts: Bologna, Old Fashioned Loaf, Olive Loaf, Honey Loaf, and Pickle & Pimento Loaf. As Martone chewed, he hummed the famous Eckrich jingle: *Talk about good as good can be it's Eckrich with a big, big E*. And then swallow.

**Christopher Munde** was born in Queens, New York, and completed his MFA at the University of Houston in 2008. He has received an Academy of American Poets Prize, and was a finalist for the Hudson Book Prize. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Cider Press Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Ozone Park Journal*, *Pebble Lake Review* and *Tribeca*.

**Simon Perchik** is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. For more information, including his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" and a complete bibliography, please visit his website at [www.simonperchik.com](http://www.simonperchik.com).

**Carl Peterson** lives in Alabama, where he teaches and brews beer. He does not know what became of the man you hired to drive you home.

**Donna Pucciani** has published poems in the U.S., Europe, Australia and Asia, and in such diverse journals as *International Poetry Review*, *The Pedestal*, *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Spoon River*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and *Iota*. Her collections of poetry include *The Other Side of Thunder* (Flarestack, 2006), *Jumping Off the Train* (Windstorm, 2007), and *Chasing the Saints* (Virtual Artists Collective, 2008). She has won awards from the Illinois Arts Council and the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, and is a three-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize.

**Mark Rice** was born and raised in Indiana. He attended Indiana University and graduated with a BFA in printmaking in 2003. Mark co-founded an art gallery and music space in Bloomington



## PACKINGTOWN REVIEW

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called *Art Hospital* and performs in many bands. Mark is currently in his second year of an MFA in printmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design. For more on Mark, visit [www.goatmother.com](http://www.goatmother.com).

**F. Daniel Rzicznek**'s books of poetry include *Divination Machine* (Free Verse Editions/Parlor Press, 2009) and *Neck of the World* (Utah State University Press, 2007). A recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for 2010, he lives and teaches in Bowling Green, Ohio.

**Elizabeth Wade** holds degrees from Davidson College and the University of Alabama. Her poetry and nonfiction have appeared in or are forthcoming from such journals as *Oxford American*, *Arts & Letters*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Pank*, and *Poet Lore*. She often walks her dog on one of the Civil War battlefields near her home.

**Jackie K. White** has a PhD in English from UIC. Her poems and translations have appeared in *ACM*, *Bayou*, *Court Green*, *Natural Bridge*, etc. She has also published two chapbooks (*Petal Tearing & Variations* and *Bestiary Charming*) and Chairs the English Department at Lewis University. Cento lines acknowledgements include *RHINO* generally and, for "Year 7," poets Carl Adamshick, Maureen Alsop, Greg Grummer, Jared Harel, Peter Harris, Claire Hero, Joseph Hunt, Ioana Ieronim, Clay Matthews, Art Nahill, Jennifer Perrine, Geri Rosenzweig, and Justin Vicari; for "Year 8," poets Cynie Cory, Wendy Drexler, Paul Legault, Taylor Loy, Scott MacPhail, Christopher Malpass, Jalina Mhyana, Matthew Murrey, and Josh Rathkamp.

**Lisa Haines Wright** earned her PhD from Indiana University and now teaches at Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin. Her fields include medieval literature, narrative of all periods, critical theory, history of the English language, and gender studies. Her special interest is the relation between individual consciousness and the social world as that relation is mediated by language.