

Berner, David W. *Accidental Lessons: A Memoir of a Rookie Teacher and a Life Renewed*. Durham CT: Strategic Book Publishing, 2009.

Berner comes to teaching later in life, married, with two children of his own. His marriage is in tatters. Even if he's a proven journalist, he doesn't seem to have any other choices before him, so he chooses to teach in a middle school of a very poor Chicago district. Though he's older, he's still fooled by some students' tricks. He witnesses students who live amid some very difficult situations. He makes personal contact with a few, taking his sons to see one of his student's baseball game. It makes a difference with his rapport. Slowly . . . it's always slow . . . he begins to build rapport with all of his classes. He keeps the fact that he's completed a favorable interview for a college teaching position elsewhere in the city. When he finally tells his principal, and then his pupils, he feels as if he's betraying them. But even the principal is thinking of deserting, so she doesn't hold him at fault. He leaves feeling that he could stay in this building for the rest of his career; on the other hand college teaching is what he's always wished to do. Teaching people to work in radio is his field, not basics of grammar for adolescents. It is the dilemma that many teachers face. *I love the pure act teaching, but how can I support my family on this salary? How can I build a future? Can my nerves take this for a lifetime?*

The book has sort of a self-published feel to it—not because it is weak or poorly written. It's just that the time period seems not worthy of an entire book; it's only 170 pages long. One year of teaching, as Berner presents it, might have been better focused as a long article or essay. Tony Danza in his teaching memoir only covers one year, as well, (see my 2012 Reading Journal) but somehow he elaborates much more on his situation, much more on the relationships he has with students and teachers in the school where he's assigned; he relates it more to his past life as a TV actor. When I checked the website of Berner's publisher, I saw that it is very close to being self published. You must present the company with much more than just the manuscript. Check it out at <http://www.strategicbookpublishing.com/about.html>.

Bowden, Charles and Alice Leora Briggs. *Dreamland*. Austin: University of Texas, 2010.

I read this book, illustrated by my friend Alice Briggs, in 2010, when it came out, but for some reason, I did not make a note of it in either my blog or my reading journals. Perhaps it is too disturbing. Perhaps I could not fully grasp what Bowden & Briggs have accomplished. Both Bowden and Briggs spent months, if not years, researching their book, exposing themselves to the same dangers that the residents of Juárez do every day. To get the story of the informant who murders a man while US agents listen in and do nothing, to understand the dynamics of this and a thousand other stories, they both make themselves vulnerable to the ragged life on the border, where, because of a few political decisions made in the past, life is a constant battle between those who are selling drugs and those who would steal the contraband and/or the money it generates. It is a bloody war, one that the United

States quietly participates in with its insatiable desire for more and more illicit drugs. It is a war the US ignores as well, for it is a war so deeply entrenched in the two countries' economies, whose balance will be tipped if an "Immigration Policy" is ever brought to light. Bowden provides the illuminating prose, and Briggs the exquisite drawings that expand that which he cannot say with words.

The gist of Bowden's entire narrative might be captured in the following passage:

"One of the early priests after the conquest of Mexico, Fray Durán, knew the old tongue and listened to the old men and wrote down their tales of what their world had been and what it had meant to them. They had been very rich and feared by other nations. They told the priest of the tribute once brought to their emperor: mantles of various designs and colors, gold, feathers, jewelry, cacao, every eighty days a million Indians trudged in bearing tribute and the list was so complete that even lice and fleas were brought and offered. The tribute collectors told the emperor, 'O powerful lord, let not our arrival disturb your powerful heart and peaceful spirit, nor shall we be the cause of some sudden alarm that might provoke an illness for you. You well know that we are your vassals and in your presence we are nothing but rubbish and dirt.' ¶ That was half a millennium ago and yet the rich still get tribute and the people who give them tribute feel as dirt and rubbish. ¶ For years and decades, for almost a century, people have looked at this system and sensed change or noticed hopes of change. And yet they all wait for change" (67).

Bowden is well aware that this journey the Mexican people make is one that started long ago and continues, for all we know, far into the future:

"In the Florentine Codex, a record of the Indians' ways that Cortés crushed with his new empire, it is noted that men who die in war go to the house of the sun and then they become birds or butterflies and dance from flower to flower sucking honey. In the old tongue, flower is *xochitl*, death is *miquiztli*" (80).

The combination of Bowden's stunning and lyrical prose combined with Briggs's dramatic but subtle sgraffito illustrations make a powerful statement of our problems on the border. No wonder some want to fortify the barriers that already exist there. It is an ugly world, and we certainly don't want it spilling over into ours. Oops, too late.

Chamberlain, Richard. *Shattered Love*. New York: ReganBooks, 2003.

This is a strange memoir for a celebrity to write. Chamberlain alternately is forthcoming, then almost coy. For example, he holds forth about his early life. Dominant mother. Cold father. Favored older brother who can do no wrong. Ho hum. At the same time, he creates an emotional distance by which he almost bears it all, but then reverts to abstractions.

He is probably most forthcoming when he speaks of his acting career, in TV, film, and on the stage. These are the most articulate sections. He's probably inherently a nice guy, wanting to be liked. And he isn't going to say anything to upset anyone,

either living or dead.

Chamberlain's alcoholic father eventually becomes a member of AA and even works on behalf of the organization in a very zealously religious manner. Chamberlain breaks away from that position by studying (I deduce from his readings) Zen Buddhism. Much of it is familiar territory to those of us who have also studied it and/or meditation. It is in these sections that Richard Chamberlain is most abstract. It is difficult for any of us to describe "spiritual" experiences, and he tries, but they seem largely ephemeral. These occupy the last third of the book, in short two- and three-page chapters, and I found myself flipping through them, scanning them quickly because they seemed devoid of content, void of the vitality found in the earlier chapters—almost as if his acting career were the most vibrant aspect of his life.

Funny, when I was fifteen, there appeared an article about Chamberlain in the *TV Guide*. The accompanying photograph featured his lanky twenty-eight-year-old body in white swim trunks. I ripped that picture out and kept it in my stash of such photos for several years. I had no idea that he was gay like me. How wonderful it would have been to know then that he was. What a fine role model. Throughout the book, Chamberlain refers to his gay life: his yearnings, Martin his longtime companion. Yet one feels that he provided this part of his life as an add-on feature, not something integral to his life. So many creative people are gay! Even the one he played in a film, Tchaikovsky. Fewer abstractions, more concrete examples, please!

Codell, Esmé Raji. *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2009.

This title is a reprint of a 1999 publication with a foreword by author Katherine Paterson. Probably the most appealing aspect of this book is Codell's honesty, not to mention the genuine excitement she brings to the page about her first year of teaching. She's honest about her principal, a man who has a real flair for mediocrity. Threatened by her competence and verve, he's always on her about something. When she begins to win accolades, he tries to keep her on after her first year, not because she's a great teacher but because she'd be a feather in *his* cap. Codell's also honest about her abilities and efforts. She often wonders why others are so lazy when she gives so much to her classroom. She's also honest with her pupils, learning very early that she can't pity them, not if she is to help them to learn. When at the end of the year her below-par students actually gain a year or two in achievement on their tests, she is somewhat vindicated for her sometimes unorthodox but lively methods of teaching. Anyone reading this book would have loved to be in her class . . . if she had remained a teacher, that is.

One almost wonders why she chose to take the job, to teach or to write a book? The very next year, having trained for such work, she becomes a school librarian. As an American one could feel cheated, in a sense. Why is it that some of the most talented and competent teachers leave the field after such a short time? In Esmé's case it may be that she's just too good, not too good for her students but too good for the system. Why would anyone want to work in a place where there are so

many negative people including one's boss? How lovely it would be to work for a district that honors its teachers and pays them well. In a capitalist culture where corporations value their employees by way of the purse, why does that never translate to better salaries for educators, especially the gifted ones who are working harder than anyone else and yet get paid the same as someone next door who's only half as good and only expends a fraction of the energy of someone like Codell? It is a question worthy of extended thought and research.

Coward, Noël - *The Letters of Noël Coward: Edited and with Commentary by Barry Day*. New York: Knopf, 2007.

I may have read this in 2011 but forgot to record it. Do so now. Nuggets aplenty in this volume.

On grudges: "Woolcott was delighted. A man who was in the habit of falling out with even his closest of friends and who never met a grudge he couldn't bear, he never quarreled with Noël. Instead, they maintained a relationship of mutual teasing and mock insult for the next twenty years" (64).

On holiday friendships: "In the spirit that holiday friendships create, Noël rather rashly agreed to visit her [Marie Stopes] on their return to England, and did so more than once. He was to realize that no good deed goes unpunished when the lady insisted on reading aloud large amounts of her own fiction and sending him off with even more of it" (69).

From Edith Sitwell: "It was so good of you to send me your *Collected Short Stories*. There are no short stories written in England in our time that I admire more. I think 'Aunt Tittie', for instance, a real masterpiece. I am not a cry-baby but it brings tears to my eyes every time I read it—and I have read it over and over again. I can't think what you must have gone through, piercing into the hearts of those two forlorn human beings. The end of the story is almost unbearable. You have done more, so quietly, than most writers do by yelling at the tops of their voices" (85).

William James: "The plain truth is that people want war. They want it anyhow, for itself, and apart from each and every possible consequence. It is the final bouquet of life's fireworks" (176).

Suggestion vs. Statement: "In the years that followed more and more commentators came to understand the unlikely professional rapport between the two writers [Coward and Pinter]. The clue lay in two separate Coward lines: 'Suggestion is always more interesting than statement.'

And the speech in *Shadow Play* in which he has Gertrude Lawrence say, 'Small talk, a lot of small talk with other thoughts going on behind.'

Today a young playwright would consider it an accolade to be dubbed 'Pinteresque.' But Pinter could equally be called 'Cowardsque'" (244).

Hmmm: "I've had a lovely week here staying with Cary Grant and Randolph Scott in a little house right on the edge of the sea" (363). Lovely indeed.

On love: “As the abused but perspicacious Thornton [Wilder] says: when we are in love with someone it is not so much that we idealise their good qualities but rationalize their defects . . .” (442).

Dillard, Annie. *An American Childhood*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

My, my, my. What a fabulous childhood! Is this childhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the sort of childhood that helps create artists? I keep trying to compare mine to hers, and there simply are no comparisons. Parents who allow their children to be their own person have no equal:

“I had essentially been handed my own life. In subsequent years my parents would praise my drawings and poems, supply me with books, art supplies, and sports equipment, and listen to my troubles and enthusiasms, and supervise my hours, and discuss and inform, but they would not get involved with my detective work, nor hear about my reading, nor inquire about my homework or term papers or exams, nor visit the salamanders I caught, nor listen to me play the piano, nor attend my field hockey games, nor fuss over my insect collection with me, or my poetry collection or stamp collection or rock collection. My days and nights were my own to plan and fill” (149).

One time Dillard and the Fahey brothers form what they call iceballs and throw them at cars for sport. At one point she lobs one that hits a man’s windshield right by his head. He throws open the door of his Buick and leaves it agape as he chases them block after block until, breathlessly, he catches them:

“‘You stupid kids,’ he began perfunctorily.

“We listened perfunctorily indeed, if we listened at all, for the chewing out was redundant, a mere formality, and beside the point. The point was that he had chased us passionately without giving up, and so he had caught us. Now he came down to earth. I wanted the glory to last forever.

“But how could the glory have lasted forever? We could have run through every backyard in North American until we got to Panama. But when he trapped us at the lip of the Panama Canal, what precisely could he have done to prolong the drama of the chase and cap its glory?” (48).

One year, a man who lived next door to my elementary school in Wichita had stacked dead branches in the area of land between the sidewalk and the street. When a kid picked one of the large branches and began to drag it down the street, the man raced out and dragged the boy toward the school to report him to the principal. Just witnessing that act of violence had frozen me to the sidewalk. I could never have thrown a snowball at a Buick traveling haplessly down the street. Perhaps Dillard’s childhood equipped her with a certain courage the rest of us have never been equipped with. Parents who leave you alone can produce results that go a variety of ways. For Dillard it seems to have helped to produce one of the most creative writers in America. I’ll read it again.

Gray, James. *Teachers at the Center: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project*. Berkeley: National Writing Project, 2000.

James Gray, founder of the National Writing Project, writes of his many experiences with teachers who are also writers. The idea he develops is to send teacher/writers back to their classrooms to teach writing, not just English grammar. The earlier part of the book—filled with personal anecdotes about his own development as writer, anecdotes about teachers—seems more interesting than later sections about the political nuts and bolts of the organization’s formation.

Some nuggets from James Gray:

“I had thrived in Miss Popham’s class because she was in charge of her own curriculum. She had a wonderful idea and freedom to teach as she wished. I still think hers is the best way to organize a literature class in high school if the goal is to encourage wide reading and the love of books. My own best teaching in high school reflected my attempts to replicate the spirit of that 1943 class” (2).

“When teaching or learning new skills like reading Shakespeare or writing well, a teacher needs to keep at it. One way we learn to read and write is by reading and writing regularly and frequently” (15).

“This was a teachers-teaching-teachers idea, rare for its time [1961] and transparently sensible. Effective and experienced classroom teachers, rather than professors, did the job of teaching and supervising beginning student teachers. I accepted, and every year for the next fourteen years I taught fifteen beginning English teachers how to teach and visited them in their student teaching classes. Year after year, I had groups of gifted young teachers who, I always thought, could have chosen any career, but chose teaching because teaching is what they had always wanted to do” (25).

“I was thinking that I should have listened to my parents and gone to law school. The thought of facing thirty-four sixth-grade students on Monday without the slightest notion of what I was going to teach was terrifying. In frustration, I kicked at a rock partially buried in the mud. Out scurried several small green crabs. One half-dollar-size specimen picked the edge of my shoe as its next hiding place. I carefully kneeled down without moving my foot to take a better look. The obtuse angle of the setting sunlight caused the crab to light up. She was blowing phosphorescent bubbles from her gill slits. I crouched in the mud absolutely transfixed. Each cell of that animal was illuminated in flame. I momentarily lost my breath . . . as if I had been jolted to consciousness. I knew then that if I could share this type of feeling with my students, I would be teaching them something worthwhile” (74).

“During the summer institutes, BAWP [Bay Area Writing Project] works to maintain a balance between knowledge gained through practice and knowledge gleaned through research and literature in the field. As teachers prepare for their demonstrations, they are asked to describe not only what they do but why they do

it” (95).

“From the outset, the writing project adopted a different take on inservice. We believed that if school reform was to be effective, inservice programs must be conducted by the folks on the ground. Classroom teachers are the linchpin of reform. School reform can’t happen just by passing laws, publishing mandates, requiring courses, or reading one more book. But real school reform can happen when teachers come together regularly throughout their careers to explore practices that effective teachers have already proven are successful in their classrooms. Inservice of this sort equals professional development, two terms that, alas, have not always been synonymous” (103).

I was heartened by this book even though I left teaching some time ago. Gray helps to reinforce the idea that I may have done a fairly good job of teaching. If nothing more, his book helps me to see that teaching composition was not a waste of time. Instead, it may be the most important thing that I did with my life, topping, in terms of consequence, anything that I’ve ever written.

Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1927, 1955.

This slim tome was arrived at by transcribing a series of lectures to written form. How fortunate for those students at Cambridge University’s Trinity College to hear one of the foremost authors of their time. Even today, his voice seems so fresh, authoritative.

Some nuggets:

Story

“We are all like Scheherazade’s husband, in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal and that is why the backbone of a novel has to be a story” (27).

So daily life, whatever it may be really, is practically composed of two lives—the life in time and the life by values—and our conduct reveals double allegiance. “I only saw her for five minutes, but it was worth it.” (29).

People

“Food in fiction is mainly social. It draws characters together, but they seldom require it physiologically, seldom enjoy it, and never digest it unless specially asked to do so” (53).

“*Moll Flanders* then shall stand as our example of a novel in which a character is everything and is given freest play” (61).

“We may divide characters into flat and round” (67).

“The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way” (78).

Plot

“Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality” (86).

His talk of fantasy and prophecy didn’t interest me as much.

In discussing *Pattern and Rhythm*, Forster borrows from painting to explore the former and music to explore the latter—although he admits neither is a very good analogue for what he is trying to say.

Conclusion

“But we must visualize the novelists of the next two hundred years as also writing in the room. The change in their subject matter will be enormous; they will not change. We may harness the atom, we may land on the moon, we may abolish or intensify warfare, the mental processes of animals may be understood; but all these are trifles, they belong to history not to art. History develops, art stands still. The novelist of the future will have to pass all the new facts through the old if variable mechanism of the creative mind” (172).

I picked this paperback up for \$4 at Hester’s Books in Lubbock. Funny where you can find little treasures (the book having belonged to one C. J. Thorvilson).

Hertog, Susan. *Dangerous Ambition, Rebecca West and Dorothy Thompson: New Women in Search of Love and Power*. New York: Ballantine, 2011.

Both of these women were born in the early 1890s, same as my grandmothers, but neither one of my grandmothers lived even a tenth of the excitement that these women did. Yet my grandmothers had something these two women didn’t: men who loved them and stayed with them a life time. Rebecca West, British and Dorothy Thompson, American, were both writers and became fast friends. Early on West was married to H. G. Wells and gave birth to his son, but the marriage did not last. Though West did remain with another man for over thirty years, in the end it was not a satisfying relationship. Dorothy was married to Sinclair Lewis, and though she was thrilled by his career and lived in support of it, she didn’t receive exactly the same enthusiasm in return for her award-winning work. Both women gave birth to a son, both of whom would be troubled largely, they said, because their mothers pushed them away in favor of their careers. West’s son would go as far as to profile his mother in a novel that she did not sanction. They never spoke after its publication. Hertog does a fine job of comparing and contrasting the women’s lives by way of alternating chapters. Even better is her assessment of the

place these women hold in literary history, plowing the way for women of succeeding generations. They must never forget, never.

Some nuggets.

“Perhaps it seems facile to connect her loss of H. G. to the abrupt abandonment by her father, but Rebecca would always espouse Freud’s theory of unconscious responses that fan out from a traumatic core connecting one’s past to one’s present” (41).

West’s “female protagonist concludes that ‘Every mother is a judge who sentences the children for the sins of the father’” (79).

West said, “‘I love America and I loathe it.’ She loved its land, lakes, and rivers but loathed its phony materialist culture” (88). Hmmm.

“Rebecca refused to say ‘obey’ as part of her marriage covenant, and Henry, perhaps at her behest, substituted ‘share’ for ‘endow’ when he pledged his bride his worldly goods” (129).

“To deride was to deflect vulnerability. To write was to wield power and control. From ten in the morning until one in the afternoon, Rebecca sat in her study with a series of writing tablets, one designated for each draft of her book and a pen to suit each stage of its evolution” (174).

Dorothy “was convinced that ‘every worker needed a wife’” (204).

“‘The whole nation lived on futures, mortgaging tomorrow’s wages for today’s automobile or radio and the feverish turnover of goods was called prosperity,’ she wrote. ‘Our finest cities are disfigured by dark, unhealthy, crime-breeding slums. We admire success and are callous to achievement’” (239). Who, even today, could argue with Thompson?

“Like Rebecca, Dorothy was deemed an androgynous creature, with ‘masculine’ tastes and ambitions. Out of sync with their time, yet deeply, longingly feminine, neither knew how to be a woman” (260).

“Rebecca and Dorothy were delusory when it came to love. They projected idealized stereotypes onto their men, and demanded more of them than any man could fulfill. Given their emotional deprivation as children, and their impulse toward social legitimacy, there was no amount of piety for Dorothy, or psychoanalysis for Rebecca, that could compensate for the emotional damage they caused and incurred. And the men they chose—Joseph Bard, Sinclair Lewis, H. G. Wells, and Henry Andrews—were equally crippled” (434).

Hertog’s selected bibliography includes West’s and Thompson’s work, if one should choose to read their works. I read West’s *The Fountain Overflows* because Jane Smiley included it in her *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*. I’m afraid

my 2007 assessment wasn't very substantive.

This Kindle edition had at least a couple of typos: "gossiping" and "latter." I wonder if the same typos can be found in the print edition.

Jewell, Andrew and Janis Stout, editors. *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. New York: Knopf, 2013.

Author Willa Cather was born in 1873 and died in 1947. Her family moved from Virginia to Red Cloud, Nebraska, when she was a child. Throughout her life, though she lived and worked in the Northeast, she would travel back to the plains and later to California to visit the family to whom she was devoted. Though she toiled as an editor and for a few years as a public school English teacher, she supported herself primarily through the sales of her own work.

Her letters reveal a powerful person, one in charge of her own life from beginning to end. She and her longtime companion lived in various quarters in the Northeast and in Europe in order for Cather to research and write her considerable oeuvre. Among her best selling works are *My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers*, and *Song of the Lark*. In 1922 she won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*.

I believe the perusal of such letters can give the reader yet another look at an author's life. In this case, Cather is addressing her publishers, editors, her parents (who live long lives), siblings, and dear friends. Much of what she writes is travelogue—as she spends much time on ships between the US and Europe, trains spanning the country from coast to coast—yet her letters are serious works of art themselves. The impression one walks away with is that she was an intelligent, business-savvy, and caring person. Yet she is no one's fool. In letters to Alfred Knopf, she gingerly weaves her way through all the issues as to why she should have more money for a certain book or why she needs an extension, and because she is such a fine communicator and person, she often wins the battle. However, if she doesn't, she gives in gracefully as part of the larger game. She moves on without holding a grudge.

The editors: "By positioning herself not as a 'popular' writer but as literary artist, she was able to give herself the space to *be* such an artist while also financially succeeding in the marketplace" (Loc 78, Kindle).

The editors: "The voice of Cather's correspondence is in many ways strikingly consistent with the voice of her fiction: it is confident, elegant, detailed, openhearted, and concerned with profound ideas without relying on heavily philosophical language" (Loc 201, Kindle).

Cather: "The first month of teaching is at an end and I have about decided to let some one else take up the good work for the rest of the year. I want to go home to Red Cloud and work for awhile. I know now that I can teach, and that better than I had expected, but I can't help taking the matter seriously and I doubt whether that pays in a High School where the salary means ultimate financial ruin" (59).

Cather: "Teaching school is a quieting, settling, ageing occupation, that makes one reliable and thoughtful and conscientious [sic], but it is not good for one[']s disposition" (77).

Cather: "But writing is a queer business. If one does anything that is sharp and keep enough to go over the line, to get itself with the work that is taken seriously, one has to have had either an unusual knowledge of or a peculiar sympathy with the characters one handles. One can't write about what one most admires always—you must, by some accident, have seen into your character very deeply, and it is this accident of intense realization of him that give your writing about him tone and distinction, that lifts it above the commonplace, in other words" (173).

Cather: "As long as one says 'will people stand this, or that?' one gets nowhere. You either have to be utterly common place or else do the thing people don't want, because it has not yet been invented. No really new and original thing is wanted: people have to learn to like new things" (222).

Cather: "Long ago, in my lonely struggling years when I was learning to write and nobody understood what I was trying to do, and I didn't understand myself,—I used to think bitterly, (oh so bitterly!) that no matter how well I got on, I could somehow never write the kind of thing that would seem interesting or true to my own people, and they would never know how much I had loved them" (323).

"It [*One of Ours*] has sold over forty thousand now and is still selling. I've had to take on a secretary to answer the hundreds of letters I get about it. The truth is, this sort of success does not mean much but bother and fatigue to me—I'm glad I never had it before" (336).

"Nearly all my books are made out of old experiences that have had time to season. Memory keeps what is essential and lets the rest go. I am always afraid of writing too much—of making stories that are like rooms full of things and people, with not enough air in them" (392).

"You can never get it through peoples heads that a story is made out of an emotion or an excitement, and is not made out of the legs and arms and faces of one's friends or acquaintances. *Two Friends*, for instance, was not really made out of your father [James L. Miner] and Mr. [William Newman] Richardson; it was made out of an effect they produced on a little girl who used to hang about them. The story, as I told you, is a picture; it is not the picture of two men, but of a memory" (492).

Le Carré, John. *Call for the Dead*. Boston: Hill, 1961.

I've always been interested in the character George Smiley, and when I saw this title in a used bookstore, the first in Le Carré's series about the spy, I grabbed it. This kind of narrative involves so much *cold* information, facts and figures about murders, disappearances, betrayals, that I find it more difficult to concentrate on

than a narrative that flows of normal interactions between normal people. And that may be the point. Spies are not normal people. But I will read the next one, *A Murder of Quality*.

Le Carré, John. *A Murder of Quality*. Boston: Hill, 1962.

I think mysteries are sort of like road maps. You're meant to use the information as you travel along, but you can't study the entire map all at once. Only the writer can do that. This one is more of a cozy mystery, rather than a spy thriller, but Le Carré uses the same techniques. I'm not even sure what they are, such techniques. Withholding or minimizing or disguising information? Changing the POV here and there, away from the main character, George Smiley? Laying clues right before our faces, but because we're not sure what we're looking for, we don't see them? Are most mystery readers, like me, just along for the ride, waiting to find out whodunit? And yet Le Carré has a great command of the language. Why didn't he write literary fiction instead?

Le Carré, John. *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1963.

George Smiley is nothing more than a shadow in this novel, a figure whose name is mentioned several times, but he is not the main character, the protagonist—although he is responsible for a lot of behind-the-scenes machinations. Odd. No, the *protagonist* would be Alec Leamas, a down-and-out British agent. Although this narrative reads much more straightforwardly to me (and I don't much like this genre), it is much like the previous books in the series. Cold.

And yet Leamas is not cold:

“There was a girl standing on the beach throwing bread to the sea gulls. Her back was turned to him. The sea wind played with her long black hair and pulled at her coat, making an arc of her body, like a bow strung toward the sea. He knew then what it was that Liz had given him; the thing that he would have to go back and find if ever he got home to England: it was the caring about little things—the faith in ordinary life; that simplicity that made you break up a bit of bread into a paper bag, walk down to the beach and throw it to the gulls” (108).

And perhaps it is this softness that contributes to his demise, in the very last scene of the very last chapter—on a soggy, rainy night when he and Liz are shot as they try to escape East Berlin. Oops, spoiler.

Macdonald, Dwight. John Summers, editor. Louis Menand, introduction. *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*. New York Review Books. New York, 2011.

I became interested in this book when I saw it reviewed in *The New Yorker* (or was it *The Atlantic*?). From copy on the back cover:

“An uncompromising contrarian, a passionate polemicist, a man of quick wit and wide learning, an anarchist, a pacifist, and a virtuoso of the slashing phrase, Dwight Macdonald was an indefatigable and indomitable critic of America’s susceptibility to well-meaning cultural fakery: all those estimable, eminent, prizewinning works of art that are said to be good and good for you and are not. He dubbed this phenomenon ‘Midcult’ and he attacked it not only an aesthetic but political grounds. Midcult rendered people complacent and compliant, secure in their common stupidity but neither happy nor free.”

Some nuggets:

“This is a magazine-reading country. When one comes back from abroad, the two displays of American abundance that dazzle one are the supermarkets and the newsstands. There are no British equivalents of our Midcult magazines like *The Atlantic* and the *Saturday Review*, or of our mass magazines like *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Look*, or of our betwixt-&-between magazines like *Esquire* and *The New Yorker* (which also encroach on the Little Magazine area). There are, however, several big-circulation women’s magazines, I suppose because the women’s magazine is such an ancient and essential form of journalism that even the English dig it” (59). 1960

“The nearest approach to a ‘center of consciousness’ in our magazines is in the Midcult ones like *Harper’s*, *The Atlantic*, *The Reporter* and the *Saturday Review*, and the trouble with theses is that the editors consistently—one might almost say on principle—underestimate the intelligence of the readers” (62). 1960

“Books that are speculative rather than informative, that present their authors’ own thinking and sensibility without any apparatus of scientific or journalistic research, sell badly in this country. There is a good market of the latest ‘Inside Russia’ reportage, but when Knopf published Czeslaw Milosz’ *The Captive Mind*, an original and brilliant analysis of the Communist mentality, it sold less than 3,000 copies. We want to know how what who, when, where, everything but why” (208). 1957

“The objection to middlebrow, or petty-bourgeois, culture is that it vitiates serious art and thought by reducing it to a democratic-philistine pabulum, dull and tasteless because it is manufactured for a hypothetical ‘common man’ who is assumed (I think wrongly) to be even dumber than the entrepreneurs who condescendingly ‘give the public what it wants.’ Compromise is the essence of midcult, and compromise is fatal to excellence in such matters” (269). 1972

I was fascinated with this man’s informed opinions because essentially little has changed since he made these statements (when I was but a child or youth). If anything, such conditions have worsened. What can be more Masscult than *People Magazine*? And has even *The New Yorker* slipped a bit?

Rigsbee, Cindi. *Finding Mrs. Warnecke: The Difference Teachers Make*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Rigsbee returns to her own first-grade experiences to describe the teacher she is first placed with, a rather uncaring, older woman whom she can't seem to please no matter how hard she tries. Because the class is too large, the principal forms another one and Cindi counts herself lucky to prance outside and down the sidewalk to her new classroom . . . in the basement of the gym! But there she encounters Mrs. Warnecke, a very caring young teacher who treats Cindi and all the students as if they're really something special.

Rigsbee continues to keep in touch with Mrs. Warnecke for the next few years until the Warneckes move out of town. Much of the book's structure is built around key moments when Rigsbee asks herself what Mrs. Warnecke would do in such a situation, the departed teacher serving as sort of an absentia mentor. The rest of the book, probably its greatest strength, covers specific lessons or activities that Rigsbee developed for her middle school English classes. These unique activities give a reader insight into what a really strong teacher is like, always thinking on her feet, always planning for better learning. And yet Rigsbee is not afraid to confess her mistakes, those that she makes early on, as well as the ones she makes late in her career, just before winning National Teacher of the Year in 2008.

The latter part of the book explains the machinations of how Rigsbee and Warnecke are united once again on national TV by way of ABC's *Good Morning America*. Though it is exciting—such reunions can be exhilarating—I found myself reading faster and faster because I realized what was going to happen. There was little surprise. I think it's difficult to write about your own successes; we're taught by society not to do that, particularly people in the helping professions. People in more commercial fields toot their own horn all the time. Still, there are times when it seems that Rigsbee is boasting just a little bit. But why not? It's a very fine award, and she must certainly deserve it.

Another feature of the book that is interesting, although distracting at times, is the statements of teachers who have won various teaching awards. Rigsbee places them in boxes, sometimes in the middle of a chapter, most effectively at the end. I enjoyed reading some of these, but again, they seemed to interrupt the movement of her narrative. Might she have chosen only a few and placed them, according to thematic material, at the end of each chapter? Might she have placed them all at the end of the book?

The book is published by Jossey-Bass, a company that “publishes books, periodicals, and other media to inform and inspire those interested in developing themselves, their organizations and their communities. Jossey-Bass's publications feature the work of some of the world's best-known authors in leadership, business, education, religion and spirituality, parenting, nonprofit, public health and health administration, conflict resolution and relationships.”

Sáenz, Benjamin, Alire. *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*. El Paso: Cinco Puntos, 2012.

The Kentucky Club is a bar on Avenida Juárez in Juárez, the twin city to El Paso, Texas. Most of these seven stories reference a number of things in each one: The Kentucky Club itself, bourbon (or some other strong liquor), stout coffee, fathers who fail their sons in a variety of big ways, and mostly men who fail each other in love.

Sáenz's style is deceptively simple, strong on declarative sentences and plenty of pages with a lot of white space because his dialog is, if not terse, then spare, lean. Most of the characters, gay men of various ages, live in Sunset Heights, a neighborhood in El Paso, but plenty of them cross the bridge between the two cities, the two countries as easily as most of them switch from Spanish to English—as if they are two forms of the same language. That's life on the border: with its own lingo, its own culture, like many of the men in these stories, crossing easily from one life to another, but not without a price.

And one must not construe that this is a narrow book of gay men's fiction, many of which made their way onto the shelves in the late eighties because gay men were hungry to read about themselves. It is *not* one of those books. Some of the protagonists are straight, some gay, some are bisexual. Each one is his own person, whether he is yet whole or not.

In the final story, "The Hunting Game," the main character, a high school counselor, speaks of one of his students, who has been abused all his life by his father. Sáenz's metaphors, like his prose, are deceptively simple:

"We grabbed a bite to eat. He ate as if he'd never tasted a burger before. God, that boy had a hunger in him. It almost hurt to watch. 'I'll be eighteen in three months. And I'm going away. And he'll never be able to find me'" (209).

The image is so simple, yet so profound, the hamburger that symbolizes a future that might just satisfy the boy's hunger to be loved. It has little to do with food; it has to do with hunger, the hunger of the human spirit to find meaning.

On the same page, Sáenz demonstrates through "dream" how the paths of these two males (one older, one very young) will cross one another by virtue of the pain both have suffered at the hands of their fathers:

"I wanted to tell him that his father would always own a piece of him, that he would have dreams of his father chasing him, dreams of a father catching him and shoving him in a car and driving him back home, dreams where he could see every angry wrinkle on his father's face as he held up the belt like a whip. He would find out on his own. He would have to learn how to save himself from everything he'd been through. Salvation existed in his own broken heart and he'd have to find a way to get at it. It all sucked, it sucked like hell. I didn't know what to tell him so I lied to him again. 'He'll just be a bad memory one day.' He nodded I don't think he really believed me, but he wasn't about to call me a liar" (209).

This PEN/Faulkner award winner has written seven striking stories I believe I

should read again and again because I sense there is much I may have missed the first time around. This book is one that my friend Alice Leora Briggs gave me. In a way, it is a bookend to the one she illustrated along with Charles Bowden, *Dreamland*. This one gives the reader yet another view of life along the border between Mexico and Texas. Men in power can easily change borders on maps with the quick exchange of currency, but borders that exist in people's hearts are much more difficult to move. (See Bowden above.)

Sotomayor, Sonia. *My Beloved World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

I became enamored with this book before I ever opened it by way of hearing Justice Sotomayor's televised reading on C-Span's Book TV. With authoritative control over the English language, not to mention her native Spanish, she enthralled everyone with the elements of her life, what led her to write the book in the first place.

Sotomayor jumps right in telling of her lifelong battle with diabetes that begins at age eight, one that frightens her a bit at first. "But the disease also inspired in me a kind of precocious self-reliance that is not uncommon in children who feel the adults around them to be unreliable" (11). She describes with great detail her upbringing, living with an alcoholic father who dies rather young, a mother who must work as a nurse outside the home to provide income, and a brother with whom she is close and who will eventually become a doctor. She introduces the reader to all her Puerto Rican family, both in the South Bronx and those back on the island. "Since those years, I have come to believe that in order to thrive, a child must have at least one adult in her life who shows her unconditional love, respect, and confidence. For me it was Abuelita" (16), Sotomayor's grandmother, who lives close enough for Sonia to make overnight visits that help shape her character.

In speaking of her upbringing amid the multicultural arena of the Bronx, Justice Sotomayor says, "The differences were plain enough, and yet I saw that they were as nothing compared with what we had in common" (103). This understanding, early on, may then lead Sotomayor to do something with her life that will bring humanity together rather than tear it apart.

Justice Sotomayor then tells of her schooling, a Catholic high school, Princeton for undergraduate work, Yale law school. Far from boasting, she always relates candidly her struggle with the language, the struggle against class and racial prejudice. "I honestly felt no envy or resentment, only astonishment at how much of a world there was out there and how much of it others already knew. The agenda for self-cultivation that had been set for my classmates by their teachers and parents was something I'd have to develop for myself. And meanwhile, there could come at any moment the chagrin of discovering something else I was supposed to know. Once, I was trying to explain to my friend and later roommate Mary Cadette how out of place I sometimes felt at Princeton" (135). The friend said, understandingly, that she must have felt like Alice in Wonderland.

Sotomayor continues by describing her career, how each step leads toward her

eventual nomination for the Supreme Court. Of her work in the district attorney's office, "It was in effect to see that mastery of the law's cold abstractions, which had taken such effort, was actually incomplete without an understanding of how they affected individual lives. Laws in this country, after all, are not handed down from on high but created by society for its own good" (212).

As I neared the end of the book, I found myself wanting the pages to stretch out; I wished for a delayed resolution to the narrative. Sotomayor—from work she does while at Princeton on behalf of others less fortunate than herself, to her work in the DA's office, to her work in a private firm where she earns a great deal of money and is befriended by important and wealthy people such as the Fendis of the fashion arena—stores up a broad set of legal experiences. In braving so many different worlds and mastering the language and rules of each, she positions herself to become a judge—one who can actually bring the law into focus for the rest of us. How many of the other justices, I wonder, have the breadth and depth of experience that she brings to the bench? If they know only the law and have little acquaintance with the full expanse of humanity, one wonders if their judgments aren't a bit tainted with a certain provincialism.

I finished the last page with great admiration for Sonia Sotomayor. She tells fully of her life, neither diminishing nor exploiting either the strong or weak elements of her character. When one writes with such candor, the reader feels a part of the story. *Maybe, I, too, can be as honest as I tell my children and grandchildren of my life.* I can't wait to read her next book. As this one ends with her first judiciary assignment, I am positive there will be another.

Updike, John. *Rabbit, Run*. New York: Knopf, 1960.

I'd never read any Updike before but thought that I would like to peruse at least the first book in his "Rabbit" series (set in 1958). I was surprised at the freshness of his language, over fifty years later. Surprised at the sensual/sexual nature of a young man's relationships with two different women. Updike may be among the first American writers to see that sex is like a sixth sense. To be honest, the writer must portray it authentically. I'm not sure I could have tolerated reading this novel when I was Rabbit's age, twenty-six, would have seen too much of my own fecklessness in the narrative, too much of my own wavering. This wife, that wife. This life, that life. Only after a lifetime can I read of such things and not be turned away, can wallow in them, because yes, I've been there, to some degree, and arrived somewhat unscathed.

The death of Rabbit and Janice's baby girl was completely out of the blue, as most of life's terrible events are, but at the same time, Updike had prepared the reader for such an event. The baby girl, Rebecca, has been crying for a long time, is hungry, but Janice, the mother, is dry, has no milk for the moment. Both parents are exhausted, the little older brother Nelson is worn out, too.

"The noise makes Nelson fretful and whiny. As if, being closest to the dark gate from which the baby has recently emerged, he is most sensitive to the threat the

infant is trying to warn them of. Some shadow invisible to their better-formed senses seems to grab Rebecca as soon as she is left alone. Rabbit puts her down, tiptoes into the living-room; they hold their breath. Then, with a bitter scratch, the membrane of silence breaks, and the wobbly moan begins again, *Nnh, a-mmmmi!*”

Yes, the “warning” is somewhat abstract, but this dark shadow is cautioning the young couple to be careful. They are not. Rabbit encourages his alcoholic wife to have a drink to calm her nerves. She takes down several. Rabbit leaves the apartment. In bathing the child, the slippery little baby, in a tub that is filled with too much water, for even an adult, Janice lets go, the baby falls away from her and drowns.

Updike has warned us, even if abstractly, and yet we are shocked. Shocked that something like this, even in a novel, could happen. That the carelessness of a young couple could result in the death of their child. And yet the death is so much more. It seems to be *the* symbol for their failing marriage. By not caring for one another enough, they kill off what little love is left, and the tangible sign of this death is the baby’s death, isn’t it?

I shall be reading *Rabbit Redux*, the next novel in Updike’s series.

Updike, John. *Rabbit Redux*. New York: Knopf, 1971.

This novel seems to have a couple of parallels with Updike’s first book in the series—the saga of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom. One, the novel focuses on a fairly short period, but the author takes the reader through events in what seems like real time. Nevertheless, the speed is never too slow. By taking his time, Updike takes the reader deeper into the characters’ psyches. A second parallel is the placement of an important death about two-thirds of the way through the novel. In *Rabbit, Run*, it is the death of Janice and Rabbit’s infant daughter, that awful drowning. In *Redux*, the death is not a family member, but it might as well be. When Rabbit’s wife Janice leaves to live with another man, Rabbit allows Jill, an eighteen-year-old girl, and Skeeter, her black male friend, to crash at their house. This causes a lot of problems for Rabbit, given the Republican point of view that he has adopted by 1969. The novel, in some ways, seems like a vehicle for thrashing out the Vietnam War, race relations in this Pennsylvania city. Jill eventually becomes Rabbit’s lover, and she also manages to seduce, in an emotional sense, Rabbit’s thirteen-year-old son, Nelson. When Skeeter ostensibly sets the house on fire, Jill dies, and her death nearly destroys Nelson. It is a powerful scene.

“The cop casually allows, ‘Anybody in there was cooked a half-hour ago.’

“Two steps away, Nelson is bent over to let vomit spill from his mouth. Rabbit steps to him and the boy allows himself to be touched. He holds him by the shoulders; it feels like trying to hold out of water a heaving fish that wants to go back under, that needs to dive back under or die. His father brings back his hair from his cheeks so it will not be soiled by vomit; with his fist he makes a feminine knot of hair at the back of the boy’s hot soft skull. ‘Nellie, I’m sure she got out. She’s far away. She’s

safe and far away” (323).

Of course, Nelson knows better. He’s tired of being treated like a child, a female child, at that, with such a feminine nickname as Nellie. He virtually disappears for the rest of the book, which winds up being a sort of reconciliation between Janice and Rabbit.

They find a cheap room, neither wanting to return to her parents’ house nor his parents’ place. Talk eventually turns to Jill’s demise.

“Did you love her?” [Janice asks]. For this her eyes leave his face and contemplate the trampled lawn. He remembers that this gray coat originally had a hood.

“He confesses to her, ‘Not like I should have. She was sort of *too* nice.’ Saying this makes him feel guilty, he imagines how hurt Jill would be hearing it, so to right himself he accuses Janice: ‘If you’d stayed in there [their bedroom], she’d still be alive.’

“Her eyes lift quickly. ‘No you don’t. Don’t try to pin *that* rap on me, Harry Angstrom. Whatever happened in there was your trip.’ Her trip drowns babies; his burns girls. They were made for each other” (395).

Though Janice seems horny, Rabbit, too, they do not have sex. The book ends very lazily in their motel bed, the two bodies in familiar positions, yet not quite—with the reader wondering where this ambiguity will lead.

In another decade, the reader would be able to read *Rabbit is Rich* and find out. Luckily, this reviewer won’t have to wait that long. I’ve already checked out the library copy and am ready to continue Updike’s saga of Rabbit Angstrom.

Updike, John. *Rabbit Is Rich*. New York: Knopf, 1981.

This book, of the first three of Updike’s tetralogy, is said to be the most popular of the four. I wonder. Yes, Rabbit matures a bit now that he’s fifty-six. His wife Janice, who was such a little mouse in the first book, especially blossoms into a forty-three-year-old woman who knows her mind and isn’t afraid to tell Harry where to get off. Their son Nelson returns, after three years at Kent State, to live with them. Instead of remaining at school to get his degree, he insists on taking a sales position at the Toyota dealership where Rabbit has worked since his father-in-law gave him a job years ago. Rabbit, the basketball hero, has allowed himself to get fat and sluggish. His fantasies of women are tempered with the idea that they wouldn’t probably find him very attractive.

Updike develops several strands of the Angstrom saga. Rabbit continues, throughout the book, to return to the home where his former lover Ruth lives. Rabbit believes that he has a daughter there, that Ruth’s eldest is his. At the end of the book, he is told that such is not the case. We sense that she’s lying, but Updike does nothing to confirm it; we may only feel that way because Rabbit doesn’t

believe her. He thinks the child's photo looks like him and not Ruth's husband. He may just want a daughter, after experiencing the death of baby Rebecca so many years prior in the first novel.

In a second strand, Nelson quarrels on and off with his father, who now really can't stand to be around his opinionated son, who won't finish college. When a woman named Melanie shows up and wants to stay with Nelson in his room at Janice's mother's house, where they all live, things begin to liven up. Then when a second woman, a pregnant Pru, Nelson's lover from Kent State, shows up, Nelson hangs around and even marries Pru. Melanie leaves to have an affair with one of Rabbit's colleagues.

Updike, in his usual exploration of contemporary culture (1979), takes three couples, including Harry and Janice, to a wild week in the Caribbean. They all swap partners one night. In a tender scene, Harry is paired with a woman who's been smitten with his fat self for quite some time, a woman who has been diagnosed with lupus. Instead of being put off, he succumbs to the charms of the plump woman who allows him many liberties Janice won't even entertain. The week is shortened, when Janice's mother calls to say Nelson has disappeared.

In the final twenty pages, Nelson calls from Kent State to say he's going to finish his degree, while living with Melanie who'd come to see him, although he promises to return to his wife Pru and the baby. Harry and Janice, now comfortably *rich*, buy their first home in an area that some perceive as Nob Hill. Harry now covets the small den as being his, where he might have a few books. But Janice, unwilling to populate the large living room with furniture, overtakes the den, to watch TV.

In this book, at the two-thirds mark, as in the first two novels, we think a third child will die as a pregnant Pru accidentally falls over a set of stairs. *Oh, no, Updike, not again*, we think, but it is a trick. In sort of a deus ex machina move (Updike must realize he just can't kill off another young person to create the climax), Pru and the baby both turn out to be fine—even if such an accident would normally hurt the mother and kill the baby.

In another nine years, Updike would publish *Rabbit at Rest*, Harry Angstrom, Rabbit, in his sixties, now living in Florida. Luckily, I don't have to wait that long. However, reading will have to wait until 2014!

The New Yorker Readings

[Each year I read every short story in the magazine and post brief profiles at my blog. Since this task is the equivalent of reading perhaps three collections in a year, or 250,000 words, I'm electing to list them below in a special section of my reading for 2013.]

Rivka Galchen, "The Lost Order," *New Yorker*, January 7, 2013.

The anonymous narrator apparently resigns from her job as a corporate lawyer and has trouble handling unemployment. ¶ The reader is drawn in by the narrator's apparent honesty. Okay. Why is she on the couch almost pretending to be a carry-out Chinese place when she's gets a wrong number? All the answers are delivered in the last three columns of the narrative. Certain stories are successful because their authors break the rules (like giving a reader all the answers in the last few paragraphs) and get away with it. To write this story any other way would be to make it a non-story. To learn of her unreliable-narrator problems at the end is the only way . . . or is it? Author of *Atmospheric Disturbances*.

William Trevor, "The Women," *New Yorker*, January 14, 2013.

In an earlier time perhaps, a young girl is spied on by two older women: Miss Keble and Miss Cotell. ¶ The women dare approach Cecilia with gifts after they see her in a school performance. One woman reveals a secret of Cecilia's past, a secret that puts her entire life in a new perspective. Trevor provides a beautiful layering of the story, to which the readers are privy to two alternating points of view, making it more novel-like. I quite enjoyed Trevor's *My House in Umbria*, both the novel and the film.

Tessa Hadley, "Experience," *New Yorker*, January 21, 2013.

Forty-year-old Laura stays as a guest in the house of Hana, an older woman who's out of the country, and she encounters the departed woman's troublesome boy friend. ¶ Hadley is imminently resourceful. This story so easily could have slipped into being something else, yet she masterfully allows this character Laura to find her way in Hana's house, with Hana's supposedly discarded boy friend. Some delicious moments in which Hadley cites the concrete so that she can move on to the abstract with authority:

"Then my eyes fastened on two protruding screws, one on each side of the interior of Hana's letter box: in their functional ugliness they were reassuring" (65). "People seemed to take me more seriously—as if I'd been initiated into something after all, although nothing had happened" (65).

Hadley's novel *Clever Girl* will be out early in 2014.

Kevin Canty, "Mayfly," *New Yorker*, January 28, 2013.

On a trip from Utah to Colorado, a couple in their thirties—James and Molly—drive their car through a migration of Monarch butterflies to visit another couple who

have three children. ¶ This is a great yarn in that it doesn't spell out everything: what a "dun" is if you don't happen to know, that Molly may be a playwright, *the cup is already broken*. You must be ready to infer that the cup of their marriage is so broken it can't be mended, though these two marriages will probably continue. Canty passes easily from the concrete to the abstract, the former earning the right to use the latter. The fragility of butterflies, their death on the highway symbolizes the fragility of a marriage, how you must keep moving forward. If some force doesn't strike you down on life's highway, you can, you can just keep on moving forward. Canty's most recent novel is *Everything*.

Nicole Krauss, "Zusya on the Roof," *New Yorker*, February 4, 2013.

This is a compressed story of Brodman's life, steeped in Hebrew tradition to the point that it squelches him. ¶ Like a poet, Krauss travels back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, in a manner in which the result is delivered like a beautiful child:

"When he left the apartment, he locked the door quietly behind him, and on his back he carried his mother, with her blue ankles, and his stooped father, and their parents, too, dead in a trench at the edge of a pine forest" (64). The crux of Brodman's life: "He had allowed himself to be crushed by duty. He had failed to fully become himself, had instead given in to ancient pressures" (65).

From the specific, concrete details, Krauss limns the abstract universality of millions of readers, whether they see this story or not. They will live it. Krauss is the author of *Great House*.

Zadie Smith, "The Embassy of Cambodia," *New Yorker*, February 11 and 18, 2013.

Fatou, a young woman is employed as a maid in Northwest London and is treated in a rather cavalier manner by this Pakistani family. ¶ Oddly, Smith uses the first person plural ("we, the people of Willesden"), the manner in which Hawthorne does in *The Scarlet Letter* or as Cheever does in his *Wapshot* novels, but why? one wonders. It seems to bear no great purpose. ¶ The story is so full of rich contradictions—like one sees in everyday life. The richest may be when Fatou performs the Heimlich maneuver on the eldest daughter in the home, thus saving the wretch's life. Yet, on the very same day, when Fatou confesses that she has forgotten to remove lamb from the freezer for the evening meal, the woman of the house is furious. Fatou eventually loses the job, but she doesn't much care. Smith is the author of *NW*.

Paul Theroux, "The Furies," *New Yorker*, February 25, 2013.

Ray Testa divorces his wife and marries Shelby, a young (thirty-one) assistant from his office; together they attend his fortieth high school reunion, and all the women the man has ever wronged begin to appear before him as hags that haunt him. ¶ A very simple story by comparison to many of the finer ones this year—the sort of

story perhaps you might think a good amateur could write. (Can I say that?) Intriguing idea, but Theroux seems so obvious about his purpose. He tells more than shows what he wishes to convey to the reader. Theroux's latest book is *The Lower River*.

Colm Tóibín, "Summer of '38," *New Yorker*, March 4, 2013.

Montse, an old woman, when confronted with the idea of seeing a man who was the father of her eldest child, tells the story of how they first met during war time. ¶ This is a very tightly written narrative that, though it covers a long period of time, seems brief. The reader is relieved that Montse and Rudolfo do not meet in the end. Montse does *not* reveal to daughter Rosa that her real father was a soldier, instead of Paco the man who posed as her father all those years. Probably millions of women have found themselves in Montse's position following a period of war, but Tóibín makes it seem as if it only happened once—this time. His most recent book is *Testament of Mary*.

Will Mackin, "Kattekoppen," *New Yorker*, March 11, 2013.

Soldiers in Afghanistan search out and bring back two bodies of their fallen comrades. ¶ Mackin does a phenomenal job of representing the Dutch dialect on paper (as one with Dutch relatives I can attest). It is this eye and ear for detail that brings this story alive. Why do some of us avert our eyes upon hearing a war story, and others of us eat it up as if it were a piece of rotten-tasting candy? Some may be envious that this is Mackin's first story in a major magazine, but he tells a tale that no one else can tell, and we should hear it, read it, taste it in its fullness.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Checking Out," *New Yorker*, March 18, 2013.

A Nigerian man living in London after his visa expires, Obinze, plans to marry a London woman in a "sham" marriage that will provide him citizenship. ¶ This story, like Will Mackin's narrative set in Afghanistan, is absorbing, in part, because the reader is plopped down in a world most Americans know nothing about. Obinze (aka Vincent) lives in a London *he* knows little about. Each day, to avoid the authorities, he must live invisibly in plain sight. He seems to do so until the very end, when he is apprehended and held in jail until he can be deported. It must be the story of tens or hundreds of thousands of Africans or other "foreigners" in England. Oh, the pain of being where one is not wanted! Adichie's latest book is *Americanah*.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, "The Judge's Will," *New Yorker*, March 25, 2013.

An old judge in Delhi bequeaths money to his longtime mistress, Phul, and his wife Binny must determine whether she will carry out his wishes. ¶ The story's significance seems to be lost on me. Is it that the jealous wife, finally, in the end understands that she must care for the helpless Phul (flower)? There seems to be no fanning out from there. The son Yasi's growth as a character? The judge's growth? Is it only Binny who, almost begrudgingly, agrees to care for Puhl after the judge's death? And perhaps that is the point, the strong tie to the title of the story. The judge's will—not just his written document, but his utter desire—is what is all

important. Not any other person's. The late author was a Merchant/Ivory script writer and novelist of *Heat and Dust*.

Sarah Braunstein, "Marjorie Lemke," *New Yorker*, April 1, 2013.

A young woman with a baby works as a maid in a motel, where she meets a man who becomes her lover for a short time. ¶ This is one of the more significant stories the magazine has published in some time. Why? It seems that the author has lived and lived to tell about it—even if none of these events really happened to her. You as the reader believe it is sort of an autobiography. The abuse Marjorie suffers as a child, the abuse she suffers at the hands of her druggy lover, the abuse of elementary school kids, being stuck with a baby and a crummy job. The motel man she has the affair with wants a child. One senses that Marjorie doesn't really want her baby Della and would be willing to give away her Della—just to provide her with a better life—although Braunstein never outright says so. One senses it. The best kind of story. Braunstein's most recent work is *The Sweet Relief of Missing Children*.

Tessa Hadley, "Valentine," *New Yorker*, April 8, 2013.

A young teenage couple in 1970s London—Stella and Valentine—become enamored with one another. ¶ Sometimes it is so difficult to capture the past, yet Hadley does manage at times to make this story fresh, though we've all read or even lived it somewhere before. Hadley's novel *Clever Girl* will be out early in 2014.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, "The Night of the Satellite," *New Yorker*, April 15, 2013.

A young couple argue over whether to intervene in a lovers' quarrel and help a young woman, and, along with the descent of an old satellite, it colors their relationship one hot summer in the Midwest. ¶ Boyle certainly knows how to reel you in. The sensory details. Emotions. Visual clues. He manages to make the falling debris of the satellite intersect with the fighting couple—a catalyst of sorts—but his denouement seems as heavy-handed as a bus-sized satellite:

"Space debris that collides in two wide bands of low Earth orbit, at six hundred and twenty and at nine hundred and thirty miles up, can fragment and fragment again—things as big as satellites and rocket boosters and as small as the glove the astronaut Ed White lost on the first U.S. space walk. Eventually, it's all going to come down, and whether it'll burn up or crush a house or tap somebody on the shoulder in a dark field on a dark night is anybody's guess" (69).

This narrative about the petulance of a young straight couple, while being utterly familiar, seems overwrought. Read Boyle's *When the Killing's Done*.

Roberto Bolaño, "Mexican Manifesto," *New Yorker*, April 22, 2013.

The male narrator and his girl friend Laura frequent Turkish baths in Mexico City for the purpose of titillating themselves into a sex life, or so it seems. ¶ Homoerotic in spite of Bolaño's efforts to make this a *heterosexual* story, this tale reveals the

dehumanizing yet comforting nature of the Turkish bath, where people become part of the hard yet melting landscape:

“The color of the pool’s rocks, doubtless the saddest color I saw in the course of our expeditions, comparable only to the color of some faces, workers in the hallways, whom I no longer remember, but who were certainly there” (101).

Joshua Ferris, “The Fragments,” *New Yorker*, April 29, 2013.

Via a cell phone call with his wife, Katy, a man overhears a conversation she is having with another man and concludes Katy is having an affair. ¶ When she fails to answer her phone and come home the next night, the nameless man begins to pay attention to the fragments of life around him, bits and pieces of people’s conversations as he passes by. The couple’s things are fragmented into his, hers, and theirs, and the narrator stumbles around their apartment night after night staring at those items, like flotsam from their marriage. Finally, he begins to shout from his window and give away these bits and pieces of her life, his life. We don’t see the confrontation to follow as Katy comes home and sees her luggage rolling up the street, her husband looking at their wedding album with a stranger, but we know it’s coming. ¶ A great, unique handling of a worn-out but universal theme. Who hasn’t experienced infidelity, one side or the other? Ferris’s debut novel, *Then We Came to the End*, was launched in 2007.

Jonathan Lethem, “The Gray Goose,” *New Yorker*, May 6, 2013.

Miriam, raised by Communist parents until her father returns to Germany, seeks to continue their rebellion. ¶ This is an absorbing, enjoyable story with a great deal of information. Much of the narrative occurs on one night in which Miriam tries heartily to lose her innocence, and if her mother wouldn’t burst into Miriam’s room as her boy blurts **“his goop into her palm,” (70)**, Miriam might accomplish her goal. But perhaps not, given her boy friend’s sensitivity to touch. ¶ A Burl Ives song about the gray goose seems to be the author’s choice for a certain motif. Miriam finally, at age seventeen, realizes the gray goose is emblematic of her mother, the Communist revolutionary, Rose Angrush Zimmer: *And the knife couldn’t cut ‘em, Lord, Lord, Lord! And the fork couldn’t stick ‘im, Lord, Lord, Lord.* Lethem’s most recent novel is *Dissident Gardens*.

Fiona McFarlane, “Art Appreciation,” *New Yorker*, May 13, 2013.

Henry Taylor, twenty-eight, believes his ship has come in when his mother wins £10,000 in the Australian lottery, circa 1961, and he seeks to marry a young woman in the insurance office where he works. ¶ In this story the world of art seems to collide with that of materialism. Ellie, Henry’s fiancée, attends Friday night art appreciation lectures and is from an educated family of modest means. Henry is now counting money before it has been given to him. With such a windfall and in light of Henry’s otherwise good fortune, he finds it difficult to see who likes him for himself and who likes him for his money. ¶ The situation colors how he views women, his mother, his mother’s fiancé. The story ends with Henry’s acceptance of his lot: a mother who more than likely will not share her wealth with her son but

with her newfound mate. Even though this is an Australian story, funny how the British notion of class still seems to seep into the narrative, as if it just can't be helped. McFarlane's novel *The Night Guest* was published in October.

Ben Marcus, "The Dark Arts," *New Yorker*, May 20, 2013.

A young American man, Julian Bledstein (hm), spends a cold February in Düsseldorf, Germany, taking experimental treatments for an inexplicable autoimmune disease that has been untreatable at home. ¶ The clinic doctors suck his own marrow out and in some way inject it back into his body, perhaps among other procedures, all failing to make him, Julian, feel better. His female companion, Hayley, has sent him ahead, probably to evade, for a while, his misery, which includes staying in a male hostel, where other young men crawl into each others' cots for comfort in the dark. One day Hayley appears, and Julian can't bring himself to tell her that now there is a *tumor* inside his head. The doctors can do nothing for him. He walks off and leaves her standing in a frigid German wind with nowhere to go. Marcus's story collection *Leaving the Sea* is out soon from Knopf.

Steven Millhauser, "Thirteen Wives," *New Yorker*, May 27, 2013.

Man recounts his thirteen wives with whom he (apparently) lives simultaneously. ¶ I say "apparently" because one is really not sure. At the outset the story seems quite literal, though one's credulity is stretched by the fact that in most Western cultures polygamy is disallowed. Then one wonders if the thirteen wives aren't all different aspects of the same woman. After all, how could he find time to *do* all the things he must do with each wife, including make love to her? When one sees that wife number eleven is quite ill (but not near death), maybe each "wife" has been the same woman but at a different stage of her life. ¶ Frankly, the story seems to be one of those exercises that writers design for themselves to keep themselves interested, though the exercise may not mean much to the rest of us. Or am I being lazy? Millhauser's *We Others: New and Selected Stories* was published in 2011.

Akhil Sharma, "We Didn't Like Him," *New Yorker*, June 3, 2013.

Manshu is a self-centered boy, who continues his ways into adulthood, where he cheats friends, family, and strangers alike. ¶ The reader learns much about Hindi customs in this story: rituals for death of family members, mostly. The narrator doesn't care much for Manchu, his "**father's sister's husband's sister's son**" (57)—quite a distant relationship by comparison to Western culture. ¶ The narrator covers nearly an entire lifetime as the reader watches Manshu continue to cheat the family. So strong, however, are the bonds of family and ritual that the narrator continues to allow Manshu to use him—even though he doesn't like Manshu. ¶ So different is this tale about duty, compared to our own culture, where often siblings and first cousins can easily fade from our care, certainly from our memory. But no matter who you are it is instructive. Sharma is the author of *An Obedient Father*.

Dashiell Hammett, "An Inch and a Half of Glory," *New Yorker*, June 10 and 17, 2013.

Earl Parish, age thirty, saves a young child from a non-threatening fire before the fire fighters arrive, and his story is awarded an inch and a half of space in the next day's newspaper. ¶ No one could publish a story similar to this today, one that

features hubris as a theme, at least not in this manner. It would seem too preachy, eh? But as a matter of history, Hammett did write such a story. Written in the 1920s long before word processing, this story is air tight. One would love to see the rough drafts. ¶ A few coincidences might seem a little too convenient, but isn't that the way of fiction? One probably would not literally run into *two* fires in one's life time, but Earl Parish does, each one with a different literary purpose: the first one to make him a hero, the second one to shake him to his senses so that out of the flames might rise a new person. As this is a previously unpublished story, one must ask if it should have been? Would Hammett have wanted it published? Is it as good as his entire oeuvre? *The Hunter and the Stories*, a mix of published and previously unpublished stories, was released in November.

Annie Proulx, "Rough Deeds," *New Yorker*, June 10 and 17, 2013.

Duquet, eighteenth-century Canadian logger and entrepreneur, out of a kind of mercy, kills a teenage boy whom he has captured as bounty from a raid on his land. As he returns to camp one day, he senses that it has been disrupted, but he cannot tell what it is. When Duquet later hunts down McBogle, the interloper who has cut into his forest, his own rough deed is rewarded by a rough deed McBogle bestows upon him for having killed one he calls his boy. *C'est tout!* ¶ When I first begin reading this story, I think to myself that it is more like a novel, and when I catch the *New Yorker's* "This Week in Fiction" blog, my suspicion is confirmed. It is but a strand of Proulx's novel-in-progress, yet all the pieces of this narrative fit together perfectly. It could be a novel whose print has been miniaturized and stuffed into one of those tiny books and sold as a novelty. ¶ Proulx cannot publish anything bad or mediocre. Her vocabulary is extensive yet germane to the fabric of the novel. *Magnifique*. Her novel *Bark-Skins* is due out in 2015.

Jhumpa Lahiri [JOOmpuh LuhHEERee], "Brotherly Love," *New Yorker*, June 10 and 17, 2013.

This fourteen-thousand-word story is one of two brothers born in post-war Calcutta, whose love for one another never falters—though they are as different as night and day. ¶ In Part 1 Udayan, the younger by thirteen months, convinces Subash to scale a wall and enter a posh golf course. A policeman later catches them and uses a golf club to beat the back of Subash's legs. They go to college and Udayan becomes a revolutionary. ¶ In Part 2 Subash receives a visa to study for a doctorate in Rhode Island. Then he receives word that Udayan has been killed. ¶ Subash returns to Calcutta in Part 3 to comfort his family; he is unhappy with the way his parents treat Gauri, his brother's widow, who was not their parents' choice for a bride. ¶ In Part 4 Gauri tells Subash how his brother was executed in view of his parents and wife, the police staging it to look as if Udayan had been trying to escape. ¶ Subash decides to ask the pregnant Gauri to marry him in Part 5.

"It was all he could do to help her, the only alternative he could provide. And the only way to take her away was to marry her. To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love her as Udayan had. To follow him in a way that felt perverse, that felt ordained. That felt at once right and wrong" (88). In the end Gauri

says, “[Udayan] once told me, because he got married before you, that he wanted you to be the first to have a child” (89).

This last sentence renders the title ironic, not ironic, tied by a sturdy thread to the entire story. Lahiri can do no wrong. Her novel, *The Lowland*, was published in 2013.

Ed Park, “Slide to Unlock,” *New Yorker*, June 10 and 17, 2013.

The persona of what seems like a prose poem ponders the efficacy of passwords in contemporary life, when someone with a gun stands behind you at an ATM. ¶ A very *impersonal* story, with no protagonist unless it is the ever-present “you.” A very chilling tale, however, because it could happen (if it hasn’t already) to any of you. Always thinking of new yet clever and more powerful passwords so that no one can invade your private yet so public lives. The first paragraph says it all:

“You cycle through your passwords. They tell the secret story. What’s most important to you, the things you think can’t be deciphered. Words and numbers stored in the lining of your heart” (62).

Park’s debut novel, *Personal Days*, was released in 2008.

Sherman Alexie, “Happy Trails,” *New Yorker*, June 10 and 17, 2013.

The narrator provides a sort of eulogy for his late uncle, Hector, who has been dead for over forty years. ¶ The story is also a brief paean to the First Nations culture, Uncle Hector symbolic of all Indians who were (are) killed simply because they were (are) Indians. Alexie always amazes me at his fresh yet uniquely *Indian* turn of phrase and meaning:

“Then at the graveside, as the starlings pulled down the sun and the mosquitoes raised the moon, it was just my mother and me. She whisper-sang an old mourning song” (65).

And he ends with the proclamation:

“Standing in the cemetery, I felt like the only Indian that mattered and the only Indian that didn’t. I was alive, damn it, and I planned to live longer than every other Indian in the world” (65).

Alexie’s *Blasphemy: New and Selected Stories* was released in October.

Thomas McGuane, “Stars,” *New Yorker*, June 24, 2013.

Jessica Ramírez, a female astronomer/professor, antagonizes nearly every person with whom she comes in contact in the mountainous university town where she lives. ¶ McGuane, unlike some male writers, is quite capable of occupying the center of a female character. Though we do not learn immediately the source of Jessica’s anger, we certainly see its alienating effects. Early in the story Jessica witnesses a man about to shoot a wolf he’s trapped, and it angers her. Later at the

dog park, she's ired by the passive nature of the canines found there. These both may be Jessica: trapped by having to work among civilized beings, discontent because she has always been wild like the wolf and she always will be.

"She stopped to listen more closely, to see if she could hear something new through the wind. A pure singing note rose, high and sustained, then another, in a kind of courtly diction. ¶ Wolves" (68).

The author's *Driving on the Rim* was published in 2010.

Joyce Carol Oates, "Mastiff," *New Yorker*, July 1, 2013.

A man and woman hike up a mountain and near the end of their trek down are attacked by an English mastiff that breaks from its young owner's grasp. ¶ I've not read much of Oates's writing since her novel *Blonde* came out in 2000 (which I found fascinating), and I realize why. Something about this work seems overwrought: too much detail, even an essence of deus ex machina immediately following the dog's attack:

"But a hiker, who had witnessed it from a distance, had alerted the rangers and taken down the plate number of the young man's Jeep" (62).

Why is this bit of knowledge necessary? It seems inserted to make the story become part of a civilized culture, which is truly incongruous in this tale. Justice concerning the dog's owner, who allows this to happen, is another story—irrelevant to the one Oates is relating about two lonely adults reaching out yet not reaching out to mean something to one another. ¶ With even the subtle use of the omnipotent narrator, Oates wishes to leave no stone unturned, but is it not a bit too much? One likes to feel that a story unfolds, not that it is so hermetically sealed that it winds up with not a breath of air. Oates's *The Accursed* was released in 2013.

Tobias Wolff, "All Ahead of Them," *New Yorker*, July 8 & 15, 2013.

A newly married couple—Thomas and Arden—apparently spend their honeymoon in Italy, but the husband is unsettled when he discovers his wife has lied about the cost of her bridesmaid dresses. ¶ The story seems to be concerned with the idea of perceptions. Thomas (called Bud since childhood) has previously viewed his new wife in one light, and yet he realizes at some level he's always known. And what does Arden (Nedra spelled backward, a name of her making) think of him? Is he weak? A patsy? That neither one of them has ever been called by their real names may be symbolic of how they perceive one another—particularly Thomas. Yet he seems to view the future as if it is a dream and realizes he desires to save Arden from the pain of telling him the truth. No matter what happens, he will protect her from herself, because he loves her. Wolff's last book was *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories*, published in 2008.

David Gilbert, "From a Farther Room," *New Yorker*, July 22, 2013.

After an evening of self indulgence shared with an old buddy, Robert Childress, a fortyish man "vomits" up a baby-like being. ¶ At first I'm put off by the fantasy-like nature of Childress trying to bury then save this "baby." But then the story dawns before me . . . this "baby" is Bobby, Robert Childress's childish form—somewhat amorphous and arrested in his development:

"Then he saw his old name on the lid and his mood darkened. Was he so different from that easily injured boy? Sometimes it seemed that the only point to life was death. Dirt slid from the shovel back into the hole. Robert hoped it sounded like peaceful rain, because after that the rest was a storm" (65).

Some part of Childress wishes to rescue this Bobby, return to his blue collar roots in Michigan, and allow Bobby to *mature*, but as he is entrenched with his wife and three children in the safety of Westchester County (so Cheever-like), he can only move ahead—the glacial yet fleeting forward motion of life on earth. This may be *The New Yorker's* most significant, most complex story of the year. Gilbert's novel *& Sons* came out in November.

Daniel Alarcón, "Collectors," *New Yorker*, July 29, 2013.

This is the life story of a dyslexic young man Rogelio, who is placed in perhaps a Peruvian prison for carrying drug contraband for his brother and then makes friends with a playwright. ¶ The prison is named *Collectors*. It does. It collects men. It is like no other prison I've ever read about. Inmates must "purchase" (more like "rent") a cell and otherwise live outdoors or on the floor until they can afford to buy one. *Collectors* is run by a man, Espejo, who has worked his way to the top of prison life. Rogelio arrives first and then Henry, a playwright, whose play *The Idiot President* angers the government. Delicately, not really in a homosexual manner, they become lovers—first fantasizing what it might be like to make love to the women of the inmates who have, that afternoon, fucked on their cell beds:

"Espejo rented out their cell, and in the evening, as they lay on their bunks, they could still feel the warmth of those phantom bodies. Their perfumed scent. It was the only time the stench of the prison dissipated, though, in some ways this other smell was worse. It reminded them of everything they were missing" (61).

This narrative is absorbing primarily because it is so alien to even prison stories in the U.S.—which give the illusion, at least, that our prisons are under the control of authorities. This fictional prison, like an insane asylum, is in the hands of the inmates, the collectors. Alarcón's *At Night We Walk in Circles* was published in October.

Shirley Jackson, "Paranoia," *New Yorker*, August 5, 2013.

A Manhattanite, on his way home from work, believes he is being pursued by, among others, a man in a light hat. ¶ Compared to contemporary stories, this one, most likely from the 1940s, does not *move*. Oh, yes, it has a plot. Mr. Beresford moves from place to place. But what of it? Jackson may be attempting to demonstrate his *paranoia*, but I think she fails. Moreover, we're supposed to believe, I think, that, in light of the very last line spoken by Mrs. Beresford, she is somehow complicit in his difficulties in getting home for her birthday. ¶ This story was discovered by Jackson's children and obviously submitted to the magazine. Like Hammett's story, there may be a reason why Jackson never saw it published in her time; perhaps she didn't wish to have it published. Perhaps she felt it wasn't up to snuff. Perhaps it was even rejected. ¶ There is something disconcerting about publishing a story that is clearly inferior to the author's best stories, say, "The Lottery." I believe it may dishonor Jackson and her entire oeuvre.

Zadie Smith, "Meet the President!" *New Yorker*, August 12 and 19, 2013.

Bill Peek, fifteen, citizen of the future (in maybe a hundred years), meets an old woman and young girl, the latter of whom he escorts to the "funeral" of her sister, "a real girl." ¶ Drones the size of gulls? (I think.) The White House now in Scotland, presumably because the U.S. has sunk beneath the ocean? Tsunami season? The "reconstruction" of an original animal, one known as a reddish fox? We're definitely in the arena of sci-fi or speculative fiction, never a place I'm very comfortable, primarily because I cannot seem to relax and believe what the writer is telling me. It is a language only Zadie Smith knows, and while she reveals the "etymology" of some of her vocabulary, the rest is up to us. ¶ On the face of it, Bill Peek meets the President briefly before a blackout occurs (this image can never leave Brits who've seen even one WWII movie)—to what end, I'm not sure—then attends, in the same location, ostensibly, the funeral of the little girl, Aggie's sister. I rather enjoy speculating, along with Smith, what might happen in this dystopian future, but as with all good fiction, I like to feel that the narrative consists of more than plot. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* both provide something about what might *become* of the human race. I admire Smith for making the effort and the magazine for adding this story to the repertoire of literature presented in 2013, but I think this piece might work better if it were expanded as a novella, at least. If there were ever a story that needed to be covered in the "This Week in Fiction" section of the magazine's Web site, this is it! Smith is the author of *NW*.

Yu Hua, "Victory," *New Yorker*, August 26, 2013.

Lin Hong discovers that her husband Li Hanlin has been seeing another woman (ostensibly without sex), and sets out to punish both of them. ¶ However, Li Hanlin rather turns the tables by acquiescing to all of Lin Hong's demands and punishments: sleeping on the sofa, eating out instead of expecting her to cook for him, not watching the TV, sleeping in a chair (instead of their bed) when she decides to sleep on "his" couch. Finally, Li Hanlin says he can no longer endure the situation and asks for a divorce. Lin Hong is shocked but agrees. On the way to the courthouse, they stop at a café where they'd gone after registering for their

wedding. One of fiction's coincidences: the "other woman" happens to be there and Lin Hong figures it out. Her "victory" occurs when she convinces Li Hanlin to kiss her quite passionately in front of the other woman. ¶ The ending allows both parties to save face. Lin Hong has punished the woman and exacted a promise of fidelity from Li Hanlin, calls him back from the cold. Hua's *Boy in the Twilight: Stories of the Hidden China* comes out this month.

Robert Coover, "The Colonel's Daughter," *New Yorker*, September 2, 2013.

The Colonel of an unstated country's army is planning a coup to remove the current President from office, and he engages his voluptuous daughter to serve refreshments to his fellow conspirators. ¶ Coover, interestingly enough, passes the point of view from conspirator to conspirator—none of them a very savory personage. It is a shrewd move because otherwise the reader might not be aware of the betrayal that is brewing.

"The Colonel himself, who seems increasingly removed from the events around him, as if, with a placid smile, communing with the beyond, would, should things go wrong (does he hear a whimper? A slap?), undoubtedly disavow his involvement and betray his own conspiracy" (65).

Yes, deftly Coover causes the Colonel to leave the room, and when he returns he is executed. When his daughter enters, she's wearing black, so is the President, who publicly eulogizes his targeted assassin in a positive light. The chronology seems to be a bit skewed here, with her entering in black *before* the execution, or is this my misreading?

"But we are characters who do not exist, in a story composed by no one from nothing. Can anything be more pitiable? No wonder we all are grieving" (65).

Indeed. In spite of the great strength of this story—the daughter's actions and apparel providing the reader with a metaphoric blueprint of the betrayal—a lack of specifics about nationality seems to strip the story of a certain flavor, as if a chef has omitted oregano from the lasagne. Ultimately, the Colonel is deceived by one of his conspirators, just as he has predicted in the beginning.

Coover's *The Brunist Day of Wrath* is recently out from Dzanc Books.

Dorthe Nors, "The Heron," *New Yorker*, September 9, 2013.

The story seems to be a first-person monologue in a stream-of-conscious fantasy that considers all the elements of the narrator's life: a pond in Copenhagen's Frederiksberg Gardens, a murder from his childhood, a friend Lorenz, young mothers with their prams, a heron. ¶ The narrative is so brief and yet confounding in its impenetrability. Is it because it's a translation, and I find translations wanting? Is it because the symbols never seem to translate into something else, quite? Provide feeling or emotion for the reader? Am I poor reader? Nors's *Karate Chop* is out in February.

Tahar Ben Jelloun, "By Fire," *New Yorker*, September 16, 2013.

Mohamed, thirty, college graduate with no prospects for a job, attempts with great difficulty to earn a living for his family by selling fruit, using his late father's cart in a corrupt Tunisia. ¶ No matter what direction Mohamed chooses to move, he is thwarted by greed, graft, and other evil acts performed by crooked government officials. Mohamed is a rare character in fiction: a true victim of all that is wrong with the world—yet with no way out; often literature gives a character *some* escape besides death. ¶ Of course, the basis of this narrative is not fiction. Yes, a certain bell went off in my head when I reached the part of self-immolation. Jelloun has brought to life the story of the Tunisian man who, in 2011, to protest against the horrible events of his life, ends it in a slow and painful manner, but surely, with the hope that things might change, might get better for everyone. Jelloun's *A Palace in the Old Village* was published in 2011.

Tessa Hadley, "Bad Dreams," *New Yorker*, September 23, 2013.

A nine-year-old girl wakes from dreaming and on a whim upsets the living room furniture of her parents' basement Victorian flat. She has read and re-read a certain book so many times that she may conflate it with her "daytime" life.

"Perhaps it would be funny when her parents saw it in the morning. At any rate, nothing—*nothing*—would ever make her tell them that she'd done it. They would never know, and that was funny, too" (103).

The point of view shifts to the mother who rises to find the mess in the living room. She believes it is her husband's doing, a kind of rebelliousness against *her domestication*.

"Nothing—*nothing*—would ever make her acknowledge what he'd done, or the message he'd left for her, although when he saw the room restored to its rightful order, he would know that she knew" (105).

The very last section of the story pulls back as the camera would do in a film. *A young wife fries bacon for her husband*. The child is once again interested in reading her book, the very thing that may have set her mischievous mind to working.

"The child was insistent, though, that she needed to start reading it all over again, from the beginning. Her mother took the book away and chivvied her along" (105).

Hadley employs POV effectively in her writing, as she does charmingly in 2012's "An Abduction" (six characters)—a writer's tool that is often ignored or forgotten. By shifting the POV twice, Hadley moves the narrative to one about a little girl's dreams to one with much wider implications: about the married relationship of a young couple, their subterranean life in an old Victorian house in England. Hadley's novel *Clever Girl* will be out early in 2014.

Joshua Ferris, "The Breeze," *New Yorker*, September 30, 2013.

Sarah asks her husband Jay to come home early so they can enjoy the first nice day of spring in New York City. ¶ As near as I can tell, this is a story of the roads not taken—with each section serving as a version of how this evening might turn out. Sarah longs for a better marriage, a better life, a better, more meaningful *everything*. Sections of idealized love and dining are alternated with the mundane, how things might *really* be with the couple. It would otherwise be a very short story. Ferris bothers to explore something as fleeting as a breeze, *maybe a dozen in a lifetime*, which in turn serves as a metaphor for this couple's fleeting life. This story—nonlinear to the max—may be the magazine's most ambitious of the year, and perhaps the most fully realized in terms of artistry. I greatly admire it. Ferris's debut novel, *Then we Came to the End*, was launched in 2007.

Paul Theroux, "I'm the Meat, You're the Knife," *New Yorker*, October 7, 2013.

A man returns to his home town of Medford, Massachusetts, to attend his father's funeral, but also makes regular visits to his former high school English teacher who is dying in hospice. ¶ Theroux weaves two strands together, along with a number of shorter narratives (mostly from Africa, where the character has lived in the past) into one fascinating story. Jay, almost as a distraction from his father's death and funeral, visits his dying teacher, a man who apparently molested the boy in high school. Theroux limns Jay's anger without denigrating the humanity of either character. By relating "stories" to the stroke victim, who can do little but listen—all oblique—Jay is able to torment the man with his anger. A few days after his father's funeral, when Jay's mother announces that his teacher Murray Cutler has died, Jay falls apart.

"I had begun to cry, sniffing, then sobbing with an odd hopeless honk of despair.

'He thought the world of you,' she said. 'Dad knew that. He used to talk about it to me.' And then she was comforting me. 'Go on, let it out, Jay. I know how much he meant to you'" (73).

This story is admirable for a number of reasons. Theroux uses narrative as a tool to build yet more narrative, yet more subtext. He uses indirection to relate a difficult tale in such a manner that the reader is hungry to know what happened. One has already guessed, but one wants the exact truth. And the reader gets it, if obliquely. This is the type of story one *expects* to see in a literary journal. It is a much better one than his story, "The Furies," published earlier this year in the magazine. Theroux's latest book is *The Lower River*.

Lara Vapnyar, "Katania," *New Yorker*, October 14, 2013.

Two young girls in 1970s Soviet Russia become friends until they fight over a male doll with a broken leg. ¶ The story seems to do so many things at once. First, it makes us witness to a place most of us have never been before: the physical and

cultural poverty of the USSR. Yet there exists a richness to the inventive nature of the girls' play, the same inventiveness that allows them to survive their poverty. Second, we are also invited to enter the world of these girls, with their broken or maimed or otherwise incomplete dolls. ¶ As adults who meet later in America, via Facebook, one woman seems to have matured. She smiles to herself when the other woman proudly shows off her large house in the Berkshires, photos of her beautiful family, including a handsome husband. Katya doesn't actually get to meet Tania's husband, but she watches from her car as he emerges from his, a fine physical specimen except for the fact that one leg seems defective—like the male doll, over which they had fought as girls so long before. Vapnyar has determined a fine, O. Henry sort of irony that is almost as satisfying as a headful of hair and a watch fob. Vapnyar's *The Scent of Pine* is out in 2014.

Alice Munro, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," *New Yorker*, October 21, 2013.

Grant is forced to place his wife Fiona in an institution to treat her apparent dementia. ¶ Having read this wonderful story at least three times (first published in the magazine on December 27, 1999), not to mention viewing the film based on it (a fine performance by Julie Christie as Fiona in *Away from Her*), I stand with my opinion that, while this is a distinguished story by a revered writer, publishing it a second time aces another writer out of one of the fifty-one spots in the magazine in 2013. It might have been more desirable to publish a *new* Munro story honoring her recent Nobel status. Munro's *Too Much Happiness* was published in 2009.

Haruki Murakami, "Samsa in Love," *New Yorker*, October 28, 2013.

Gregor Samsa, having existed previously as a bird-fearing beetle, is transformed into a man one morning in Prague. ¶ Kafka may have done it better in his novel *The Metamorphosis*, by transforming Gregor into a beetle. *Clever by half* seems an appropriate description of this story, for there exists a problem with point of view. First of all, how is it that the transformed is familiar with the language the story is written in? Okay, one might cite suspension of disbelief as a tool, a great feature of magical realism. Still, it is disconcerting that Gregor is able to name all the items in front of him, call foods by their proper names, speak so fluently with the hunchback woman—and at such a glacial pace. Oh, yes, perhaps it is the author who is using an omniscient POV, not Gregor's POV at all. Yet, for a moment, the POV shifts to the woman hunchback, to affirm in some way this *new* creature's humanity. Perhaps Murakami relies too much on the reader's suspension of disbelief and . . . perhaps he hasn't given the reader anything that is worthy of suspending his or her disbelief. Perhaps the conceit of playing off a famous novel has failed. For me it's always a toss-up with translations. Is the reader getting the real story? Murakami's three-volume novel *1Q84* came out in 2009-10.

Thomas McGuane, "Weight Watchers," *New Yorker*, November 4, 2013.

An older man who refuses to meet his wife's demand that he lose weight travels to stay with his middle-aged son, a bachelor contractor. ¶ McGuane spares no detail with regard to building character—backstory galore—even minor personalities, and yet there are no first names for the primary characters or the son who narrates the story. His dry wit sets the tone, a way, I should think, of processing what bitterness

might survive. On the one hand, he claims to hold no grudge against his embattled parents though each in his or her own way has abused him through their dysfunction. Yet at the very end, the son tips his philosophical hand:

“I’ve always enjoyed the idea of nonexistence. I view pets with extraordinary suspicion: we need to stay out of their lives. I saw a woman fish a little dog out of her purse once, and it bothered me for a year. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with my ability to communicate: I have a cell phone, but I only use it to call out” (99).

By accepting no incoming information, the son maintains a very careful control over his life—one that is neither happy or *un*, just hermetically sealed. McGuane’s *Driving on the Rim* was published in 2010.

Chinelo Okparanta, “Benji,” *New Yorker*, November 11, 2013.

Benji, a Nigerian man of forty-two, short in stature but wealthy and an astute business man, becomes involved with Alare, an older married woman. ¶ The story slowly reveals via carefully laid clues that Benji has been taken for a lot of money by Alare and his gardener, Godwin, no less! What’s most remarkable about this narrative may be the ending. Okparanta avoids the most satisfying solution in Western literature, that of revenge. Instead, Benji decides that his days shall continue as before the one on which his mother had introduced him to Alare.

“He would walk around to the front door. He would take a seat at the mahogany table. The house girls would place his breakfast before him, and he would eat it zestfully, the same way he always ate it, the way he would have eaten it if today were just another ordinary day” (71).

There is no emotional need for retribution on Benji’s part. And yet this ending could also be very un-African, as well, considering all the plots of hatred and revenge that have been taken out by one tribe on another. Perhaps it is the author’s way of making peace in the midst of all the continent’s turmoil, her way of creating an ending that is satisfying on its own merit. Benji has no need for Alare before he meets her; he has no need of her *after*. Okparanta’s *Happiness, Like Water* was published in 2013.

Jeffrey Eugenides, “Find the Bad Guy,” *New Yorker*, November 18, 2013.

Charlie D, sixty-year-old Houstonian (by way of Michigan) marries Johanna, a German woman, in a “green-card” marriage that lasts until it can no longer bear the weight of failure. ¶ Eugenides can do very little wrong, although some of his Texas stuff is a bit out of kilter. The Lübeck/Lubbock joke (69) gets old to those of us who actually live in one of those places, and I don’t think any home in Houston has a “boiler,” (77) as most houses are equipped with forced-air central heating/cooling. After all, winter in Houston is not a real season, more like a reprieve. ¶ Throughout the story Eugenides employs a number of tropes: 1) In couples therapy, Charlie D and Johanna discover that *Finding the Bad Guy* is a game most couples play: *You left the cap off the toothpaste; you left the front door wide open. Again.*

“What you have to realize, as a couple, is that there is no bad guy. You can’t win an argument when you’re married. Because if you win, your spouse loses, and resents losing, and then you lose, too, pretty much” (72).

2) Another trope is Charlie's honesty, the kind that hurts, cuts through all the crap, the kind a reader finds hard to forgive, like Charlie’s abusing the family dog, porking the live-in babysitter who’s nineteen. But such honesty also endears the reader to Charlie D. 3) The author also employs strong metaphors: Ötzi, the Ice Man discovered in Switzerland, for example.

“That’s what Johanna and I were doing, going to marital therapy. We were living through an Ice Age, armed with bows and arrows. We had wounds from previous skirmishes. All we had if we got sick were some medicinal herbs. There’s a flint arrowhead lodged in my left shoulder. Ouch. But we had this ember box with us, and if we could just get it somewhere—I don't know, a cave, or a stand of pines—we could use this ember to reignite the fire of our love” (74).

Wow. But even Charles D. realizes the marriage has been a sham in spite of all that he admires and loves about Johanna. If you fake marry someone, what can you really expect to happen in the end? And what keeps couples together? Charlie D recommends the following:

“It’s just checking in with each other. Doing little kindnesses for each other. At breakfast, you pass the jam. Or, on a trip to New York City, you hold hands for a second in a smelly subway elevator. You ask ‘How was your day’ and pretend to care. Stuff like that really works” (76)

Can we believe him? Eugenides’s most recent novel, *The Marriage Plot*, was published in 2011.

Lionel Shriver, “Kilifi Creek,” *New Yorker*, November 25, 2013.

A young American woman, Liani, invites herself to visit *friends of friends of friends* in Kenya, nearly dies during a swim in Kilifi Creek that feeds into the Indian Ocean, and yet fails to learn what should be the most important lesson of her life. ¶ The entire story is contingent on Liana’s close call with death. Before straying too far from the shore, before cutting her foot open on a rock, before crawling back to her hosts’ house in the dark—Liana is one way. Selfish. Overconfident. Arrogant. After the incident she seems changed.

“It was funny how when some little nothing went down you played it for all it was worth, but when a truly momentous occurrence shifted the tectonic plates in your mind you kept your mouth shut” (115-6).

Liana is smaller. Quieter. More circumspect. ¶ The story jumps to when Liana is thirty-seven. She is in marketing in New York City. She is a runner. When the locale of the story shifts to an evening party on the roof of her stylish apartment, your stomach flops from the vertigo. You *know* what is about to happen. And a certain part of your psyche is not disappointed. Which part it is may be difficult to determine: the part that is watching yourself go over the edge or the part that is about to hit rock bottom. Shriver's *Big Brother* came out in 2013.

Romesh Gunesequera, "Road Kill," *New Yorker*, December 2, 2013.

Vasantha, a Sri Lankan taxi van driver, transports a young pregnant woman and her husband on an eleven-hour trip with an overnight stop at the Spice Garden Inn. ¶ In part, Gunesequera's tone is witty: Michael Ondaatje meets E. M. Forster, perhaps. Yet it is a story about a certain darkness. Vasantha is intrigued with the assistant manager of the inn, Miss Saraswati, her marksmanship with regard to killing a rat a nine paces with the toss of a beer bottle—with little blood or beer lost. But he also observes a darkness in her, a darkness brought to bear by her surroundings:

"Blackness is like ink seeping through my eyes and into my head."

The stop at the inn causes Vasantha to wonder further, all humor aside:

"It is only when you come to a stop like this, in a black night in the middle of nowhere, that things wobble a bit and you wonder about the purpose of roads. You sit in the dark, frightened at the life you've led and the things you've left undone. You can only hope that in the long run it won't matter, but that in itself is no consolation."

So much of this story is beneath the surface: a dark comedy on top because one must laugh at the daily absurdities of life anywhere on earth to survive, including the civil war that the people of this country have survived; the blackness of night may stand in for the darkness of the human spirit, a blackness we all fight to overcome along our own war-torn journeys. Gunesequera's book, *Noontide Toll*, is due out soon.

Rivka Galchen, "The Late Novels of Gene Hackman," *New Yorker*, December 9, 2013.

J takes Q, her late father's wife, on a trip to Key West to speak at a writers conference. There J does a poor job of presenting and perhaps a poor job of presenting herself to the group of mostly older writers. ¶ Using initials in place of characters' names creates a secret, a distance. I know; I've done it in my own work. I wonder why Galchen does it here. If it is to create a gulf between the story and the reader, perhaps she does so to reflect the impersonal way society treats older people, as if they are invisible—no longer viable, incapable of being a proper person. ¶ The group discusses Gene Hackman—not present at the conference; he lives one island away—repeating the news, quite impersonally, that he was hit by a truck but that even at eighty-one he is doing fine. He's co-written almost four novels, the last one aptly titled *Justice for None*. The story contains some one-line

zingers, but I don't think this is a particularly "happy" story. Galchen (see link attached to photo) states that she modeled this after a Roberto Bolaño story, one I have not read. Her short-story collection *American Innovations* will be out in May.

Steven Millhauser, "Coming Soon," *New Yorker*, December 16, 2013.

Levinson, a forty-two-year-old man, moves from the city to a nameless suburb, where constant change is so ubiquitous that he ultimately doesn't know where he lives. ¶ Seems that Millhauser has delivered a small satire of suburban progress. The adage—the more things change, the more they stay the same—seems true even if you say it backwards. Levinson has left the city to experience small-town life, its familiarities, its friendliness. But then, as in the city, things begin to change, ostensibly overnight. His favorite shops disappear and he must find new ones. At the end—we've all been there—he enters a six-line freeway he never knew was there until it's too late. And we have the feeling he'll never find his way home again. It is a bitter irony, Millhauser gets the taste just about right, of capitalism gone way wrong. Capitalists, conservative by nature, create much that is apparently new, but underneath all the glitz, all is the same. Coming soon to a town that used to be yours. Millhauser's *We Others: New and Selected Stories* was published in 2011.

Rebecca Curtis, "The Christmas Miracle," *New Yorker*, December 23 & 30, 2013.

The narrator relates to K, a Russian Soviet, her story of spending Xmas with a houseful of relatives in which a certain miracle—odd and bizarre—does ensue. ¶ In this mountainous locale, cats are being killed by coyotes. A houseful of nutty relatives, also the narrator, who has a disease whose symptoms include a hunger for sugar—seeks to stop the cat killing, and in the end it happens! A certain cat character turns the tables on the coyote. ¶ This is my kind of Xmas story, snidely satirical—poking fun in a lambasting manner at everything Xmas, and yet in the end, a miracle does occur. The evil lump that has been invading their lives for years seems to be destroyed. Most important, there is never a drop of sentimentality, unless it thrown out on a fully dressed table to ridicule thoroughly. Perhaps the best Xmas story ever! Curtis's latest book is *Twenty Grand: And Other Tales of Love and Money*.