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Route
Rebecca Dinerstein

Roll for fields and fields
and then suddenly a town, a station—
why this grass for wood startings,
why these cows for company?

The castle dries.
The present leaves it on the ground
and the stone retakes its history;
the sun appears behind you
as a foreigner you’d seen once
down the other end of a road,
the vista so wide there are two weathers
and you walk down within the one light
still regarding low clouds
off the right eye.

The sky is very low over the fields—
not down from anywhere;
it is a sky come up from limestone
and the hovering mist is dust tracks.

Two horses with heads low
go through a pack of cows.

Stop at the small daisies
the uncemented stone walls
the excrement everywhere
of the animate upon the in—
a clearing of bay into line.

The seagulls have been screaming
for two days.
The ruins of Cromwell’s castle
point up from the hill
to the low cloud,
this uncelebrated ruin of a castle tower
tipping and populated by cows.

Let me be a stone wall
made of stones
that are balanced against themselves
with no cement.

Venus, Venus
and the great constellations of light in the dew on the grass

Strangest horses!
stretched necks and no middle,
elongated limbs about no center
an hour west of Dublin.

The pleasure of the bus:
in this stone square, sheep
in the next, horses
tall white flowers plenty as grass blades
purple stalks of lilac flower
and stone on stone—
the small house, the large sky
the rain on the window rushing back into
the meadow we’ve passed, like the meadow we approach.

Red grouse,
crake in the heather,
black hare.
Argument

Jacob Eigen

When I was alone with my life
it showed me photos
of other lives. Fated
lives full of words
like cruelty and attention
and difference and repose.

My life asked what are our words.
As lovers on television
ask questions that aren’t questions,
questions that mean I accuse.

Couples tended to be happy
in those photos: men and their lives
on the steps of museums, touching
the backs of their hands
in the late afternoon. My life asked

Why won’t you take me there.
Why won’t you say I don’t care
how cold it is, and buy me a hot dog,
and stroke my knees to keep them warm.

I said it’s not what I want.
My life said it is. I said I know
what I want. I want to be
the Hungarian mountaineer
I read about in the obits.
Under the ice twenty years.
Whose back became part of the earth.
Whose hands became part of his body.

My life was bored with me.
But sometimes it has more patience.
Sometimes it sits for hours after
my speeches, saying then tell me what to be.
Towards the end of June, Emma Brewster disappeared from the lake two towns over. It was all over the news. School had just ended and the days were so long that the dusk mosquitoes didn’t come out until well past dinner. According to the papers, Emma ended her shift as a lifeguard at the lake at eight, when shadows stretched across the water and it was too dark to see figures clearly from the shore. She was usually home by eight thirty, nine at the latest. When she didn’t come home that night, her family called the police and everyone from the area rallied together to find her. Posters, fund raisers, the works. My mother brought her name up all summer, even though I’d only met her once at a football game. August rolled around and she was still missing. I was sunburned and tired of not being allowed to stay out late at night because of Emma Brewster. When some hikers found her in the woods surrounding the lake in September, her body had decayed so thoroughly that the police couldn’t even report for sure how she’d died. That day, walking home from school, my friend Sarah and I decided to learn how to fight. We saw the world as a terribly dangerous place and we wanted to be ready for it.
We met in Sarah's backyard in the afternoons because her parents were still at work and because the grass in her lawn had withered and died, leaving a large, circular dirt patch that served as a ring. We based the rules off of boxing movies we'd seen: no stepping out of the ring, no scratching or biting, no kicking someone who's down, no crying. We didn't have boxing gloves so we improvised, knowing that when the time came for real, we probably wouldn't have gloves then either. We were both small - although I was a bit smaller - with slender arms and delicate fingers. Sarah had done gymnastics for a while back in middle school. Neither of us had ever been in a fight.

At first, Sarah was better than me because she had an older brother that used to pick on her sometimes when they were growing up. The first time, the day after Emma was found, we met in the middle of the dirt patch hesitantly. We weren't like boys who attacked each other with arms and legs wheeling, huffing and puffing, no matter how inexperienced. We were girls who had been raised to feel uncomfortable with our own strength. Neither of us wanted to hit first so we simply stood there, staring at one another.

"This is something we have to do," I said finally. I waited, arms dangling at my sides, shuffling from bare foot to bare foot. I expected her to agree, or to disagree, or even to start talking about the boy in math class who wrote her secret notes and had sat next to her that day. Mostly I expected her to say something, so I could say something back, and we could get this whole fighting thing over with. Instead, she hit me in the neck and I reeled backwards, choking.

"I was aiming for your shoulder!" she cried, rushing towards me in fear. She grasped my shoulders to steady me and wiped the tears from my cheeks. My throat felt like it was burning and it took me a long time to catch my breath. Then we went inside to wash our hands and faces and spent the rest of the afternoon doing our homework and watching TV.

After that day we got better. We learned how to punch with our fists tight and our thumbs on the outside and not tucked under so we wouldn't dislocate them. I cut my nails short so they didn't cut into my palms. We learned how to block with our shoulders and how to duck from punches to the face. We sat down to the dinner table with bruises up and down our arms, on our collarbones. Thumb imprints speckled my wrists from being grabbed. I liked the way they looked like a bracelet, almost, of overlapping brown ovals. At nights I stood in front of the mirror, admiring the new curves of muscle around my shoulders, on my upper back. Sometimes my mom cried when she saw me, like when I came home with my left cheekbone a dark purple, but after a few weeks she only shook her head and wiped rubbing alcohol on my cuts. She wasn't proud of me, that's for sure, but she
had other things on her mind.

"People look at us," Sarah told me one day after a fight. It was late October and still hot - hot enough to wear t-shirts and walk around barefoot. An Indian Summer, we called it. The leaves hadn’t started to change yet and even the Berkshire mountains, usually covered in snow, were still green. We sat on the grassy area in her backyard, drinking lemonade and catching our breath. I looked at her. She sat cross-legged, brushing dirt off her shirt and inspecting her shins and forearms for new bruises.

"They think there’s something wrong with us," she continued. I looked down at my own legs. She was right, of course, and I knew it.

"Kari told me all the boys talk about us and think it’s really weird." I didn’t know what to say so I stayed silent. I didn’t like to speak unless I had something important to say and Sarah knew that. I picked at the grass but when I looked up Sarah’s face was pinched so I tried to make a joke.

"Is that a forfeit?" I teased, smiling and tossing some blades of grass at her.

"I’m serious Charlotte. My mom is so upset she won’t speak to me, no one’s going to ask me to homecoming and I’m just not sure why we’re doing this anymore."

After that, we stopped for a while. I went straight home after school where I sat on the couch until dinnertime, eating popcorn and watching soap operas with my mom. We combed through the wanted-ads in the newspapers, circling jobs we thought were funny. "Zoo keeper wanted: must be able to form intimate connections with large cats." Or, "Mime wanted for ten-year-old’s birthday. Frenchman/woman preferred." Silly things like that. We rarely found anything serious so we crumpled up the pages and used them to wipe the butter off our fingers. She never mentioned the fighting, except to say once that I looked prettier now that all my bruises had faded. I wondered if that that was true. Kyle from our math class had asked Sarah to homecoming and she was thrilled. I told my mom that I needed to buy a dress, in case someone asked me too, and she looked at me sideways.

"You know things are tight around here, Char." I nodded and tried to drop the matter by asking if she wanted me to make any more popcorn. I grabbed the red plastic bowl without waiting for a reply and leapt from the couch and into the kitchen. It was an extra-buttered pack situation, I figured. I wanted to distract her before she could start talking about dad and
money and the child payment that hadn't come in the mail this month. I was in luck. When I raced back to the TV room and plopped the bowl in between us on the couch she was staring at the screen and said nothing. I reached for the remote and flipped to my favorite channel, The Discovery Channel. She hated watching the specials on medieval cathedrals or Iditarod racing, but I loved that stuff. The show playing was about extraterrestrial life and we'd both already seen it, but it didn't matter. I could tell she was thinking, but as long as she didn't say anything I didn't care.

A few days later, Sarah knocked on my door during a soap opera marathon. I was bored of unrequited love and illegitimate children so I was excited to see her. She stood on the pathway leading up to the house, crumbled brown leaves underfoot. She looked upset and I asked what was wrong.

"Kyle dumped me." I stepped off the front steps and towards her to give her a hug, but before I could reach the last step she punched me hard in the face. It was a sideways uppercut that caught my nose and the blood started pouring immediately. I looked at her in disbelief.

"Hit me back," she said, so I did, and the whole thing started up again.

When the snow came, the winter brought all sorts of new challenges. The first problem was clothing. I only had one warm winter coat, and there was no way that I was allowed to get it dirty.

"Wear this instead," my mom suggested, pulling my dad's old jacket out of the closet. It was a tan workman's coat built for the cold even though my dad had worked inside as a janitor until he left. She swung it back and forth on the hanger and even smiled a little as if she wanted to get in on the game.

"No thanks," I mumbled. I doubted Sarah had one like it and I wanted to fight fair. We decided on sweatshirts instead. One t-shirt, one sweatshirt, that's all. No gloves or snow pants but hats were okay - they usually fell off quickly anyway. In the cold, our bones felt like the icicles hanging from the gutters and roofs of our houses. Hitting hurt as much as being hit. The days got shorter and sometimes we fought until it was pitch black. Then we went inside for hot chocolate and tea and ran our fingers under warm water.

The cold was good in some ways too. It was easier to hide the marks under long sleeves and pants. At school no one ever noticed, unless our faces were cut up which was rare, or all the stalls in the bathroom were taken and we had to change in the locker room for gym. The second didn't bother me too much, though, because I knew all the girls already talked about us when we weren't around. Sometimes I changed in the locker room even if the stalls were
open, just for the hell of it. Just to make them stare at the green splotches on my chest above the cup of my bra. I didn't used to act like this - I used to be so shy - and I wasn't sure if the change was a good or a bad thing.

After winter break, Sarah came back with a new year's resolution. She was tan from her family vacation to Mexico where she said she mostly screwed around with her older brother while her dad talked on the phone and her mom drank piña colada after piña colada. The color showed off her muscle and I sat across from her on the floor of her room, wondering if I could still hold my own.

"I'm going to try out for the wrestling team," she declared. When I didn't say anything she continued, "I'm probably stronger than half of them already." Bad idea, I thought, but I held my silence. I needed to decide if I actually thought it was a bad idea or if I was just afraid of her becoming stronger than me.

"What about Kyle?" I asked to buy time.

"Did you forget he broke up with me? Plus, who knows if I'll even make it?" From her tone I could tell she didn't think that was even a question. She stared at me, forcing me to say something.

"Okay."

"Are you going to do it with me?" I knew this question was coming. I looked down and picked at my toenails. Fighting with Sarah was one thing but the wrestling team was another. I felt like Sarah had back in October: I was tired and I couldn't remember why we'd started this. It was the beginning of January and I wasn't sure I wanted to carry this into a new year.

"Maybe. You check it out first." Sarah smiled. She'd always been the more adventurous one and I knew it made her feel like she was better than me. I didn't care that I'd just given her another reason to think so. I felt like things were quickly slipping out of control and I wanted to steady them.

"We better get you ready," I said, leaning forward onto my knees and reaching for my sneakers. We practiced head butts and somersaults and all other sorts of things we imagined wrestling to be until the headlights of her family car illuminated the driveway and I raced home, afraid to see her parents who hated me for hitting their daughter. The snow and my hair was matted together like dreadlocks. When I walked in the door, my mom was asleep on the couch underneath the glow of the TV, so I tiptoed into the kitchen to make a sandwich and scurried upstairs to my room.
Sarah told me it was in the bag. We were at lunch later that week and the food was horrible. We sat side by side on the radiator outside the cafeteria because it was too cold and too crowded in there. We balanced our trays on our knees. I kept mine pressed together tight because I was wearing a skirt and tights; all my blue jeans were dirty.

“They don’t even have a boy in my weight class.” She explained that the coach didn’t want her on the team, but that he couldn’t get rid of her because there wasn’t anyone else her size for her to fight. She was perfect for the 112 pound slot, she said.

“So you’re in?” I was jealous, but I tried to hide it.

“He said he’d throw me in at the match next Friday since he has no one else anyway. If I win, I’m in.” She grinned.

That next week was a frenzy. We fought every night after dinner since Sarah had wrestling in the afternoons. She used me to practice the moves she had drilled on her own during practice because she didn’t have a partner on the team. Things called the “fireman” and “the Russian” and the “three-quarter nelson.” We squared off, knees bent and arms extended with our elbows tucked into our waists. I thought we looked like the raptors from Jurassic Park, our chins jutting out as we shifted our weight from our front legs to our back legs. Mostly I ended up with my face planted in the snow because I didn’t know any defense moves although sometimes I managed to wriggle away. After my skin was red and I’d had enough playing the dummy, we’d fight for real, me vengeful and her staggering under the weight of hours of exercise. She’d still put up a fight though, and I started to believe that she was right, she did have the match in the bag.

“You girls are causing quite the stir,” my mom said when I came home one night that week. I was surprised she was awake; it was well after ten o’clock.

“Some of the mothers have been talking about Sarah.” I looked at her, confused. My mom didn’t talk to the other mothers very often. I wondered if Sarah’s mom knew.

“Good thing it’s not me,” I mumbled and hurried to my room.

“I didn’t - ” but I was already gone, bounding up the stairs two at a time on toes still numb and tingling.

And just like that, it was Friday. I woke up so nervous that for a moment I feared it was
me who had to fight. When I got to the gym at four, there were already clusters of parents leaning against the walls, chatting or trying to get their boys' attention. The opposing team was warming up on the blue rubber mats that had been rolled out over the basketball court. They grouped into pairs, practicing a drill a few times and then switching roles. They wore spandex and head gear and looked strong. I overheard that our team was still in the locker room weighing in, and I wondered if Sarah had to get naked before she stepped on the scale. I imagined her standing there in her bra and underwear or in her yellow bikini that she wore when we sunbathed in her backyard.

Finally our team ran out single file, circling up for some jumping jacks and layouts before they settled on the bench on the far side of the room. There was one weight class before Sarah's but neither team had a wrestler that small. The referee called a forfeit.  

"One-hundred twelve!" he yelled and Sarah leapt off the bench. She wore a pair of her brother's old lacrosse spandex and a t-shirt because coach had told her that she had to make the team before she got a uniform. She hopped over to the middle of the ring and stood on one side of the referee. From across the mat, a small, dark-haired boy sauntered out. He was a few inches shorter than Sarah and he slouched which made him appear even smaller. He scowled and evidently already knew his opponent was a girl. At the referee's signal, the two of them shook hands and the whistle sounded. Immediately, the boy started circling, hunched over even further so that he was almost bent double with his chest approaching his thighs. He kept his arms tucked in tight and his chin out. In this stance, and with his hooked nose and beady eyes, I thought he looked like a somewhat menacing rodent.

The clock ticked down the two minutes of the first period and almost nothing happened. He faked a couple of times, throwing his weight onto his forward foot and pretending to shoot for her, but mostly he just shuffled clockwise around the ring. Sarah followed him calmly, bent over in her stance, until the bell sounded. So far, wrestling seemed pretty boring. In the next period, Sarah started down on her knees and he kneeled above her, resting his chest against her upper back. She had explained that if she got up from this position, it was an "escape" and she scored one point. We had practiced this position over and over in her backyard the past week. When the whistle sounded, she shot up and escaped easily. I cheered as the referee held up one finger towards the scoring table but the rat boy looked unfazed. He glanced over at his coach who nodded. Then he turned back towards Sarah, dropped to one knee as he dove forward, and swept her legs out from under her. She hit the ground with a thud and the gym was silent. She began squirming on her belly immediately but he was too strong. He laced his right arm under her armpit and around her neck and with a
quick jerk he levered her onto her back. Both shoulder blades pressed against the mat and a few seconds later, the match ended.

I left the match after that, but I think Sarah stayed until the end, until the heavyweights tumbled all over each other and both teams lined up to shake hands. I'm not sure what she did, exactly, but I know that she didn't get home until after six because I was waiting for her on her front steps. When she finally walked up the driveway with her backpack and sports bag slung over her shoulder, I had been sitting for almost a half hour and I was freezing. She dumped her stuff on the top step and didn't say anything. Then we fought for the last time in her backyard and I let her beat the shit out of me. I only hit back once and her body was so tense that I doubt she even noticed. It didn't go on too long because it wasn't really a fight at all - just one girl punching another girl who only bothered protecting her face. After a while I sat down in the snow because my body hurt all over and there was a ringing sound in my ears. She gathered her bags from the steps and went into the house. I walked home in the cold, feeling lightheaded and strangely satisfied. The sky was clouded over and there were no stars. And although I haven't been in a fight since that day, sometimes I've wanted nothing more than to feel the rush that comes with the first blow, when your whole world drowns in blood, and it's as quiet and peaceful as in a warm bath when you lean your head against the porcelain enamel, bend your knees, and duck your head underwater.
Bridge

Lauren Henry

over the starving river at Rhinecliff
after we canceled the wedding
three burbling serving trays
steamed wetly in the back seat
and our trunk sat, strewn with unraveled garlands.

the cold road broke against the treetops
and you flickered the defroster
my hand casing your thigh
each fingernail hooked
into the dark furrow of your trouser seam.

we watched our windows
the humpbacked Catskills
snow-shrugged, sleep-wrecked
slumped back against the horizon
wordless in their dismay.

I don’t know which of us saw him first – the man alone,
a splash of green parka seventy yards out on the span
beyond the guard rails. oh god, I thought, he’s going to jump
and you and I will be the only people who saw it
one dark packet of flesh hurrying down
with the seconds ticked out
by the bumps of our wheels
eating the pavement.

he didn’t jump as we passed
a courtesy; maybe
the wind snagged his jacket
puffing it out to match the clouds
his arms stretched to their fullest span.

the same way we’d left your mother in the church
gesturing at the altar boys on their cell phones
at the guests unmoored from their pews
crossing the white lawn
like ticks on a dog’s back.
Before my mother visits
we sweep out the kitchen and bedroom,
shooing a dusty nest of hair and cornsilk
just beyond the threshold. We clear the air
of fever and other bodily smells. We devise
a system of bolts and locks so that when she appears
finally, we can make a show of squeaks and groans
as each mechanism whines its cryptic welcome.
Despite our good housekeeping, she spots a mouse—
a black fact, like the human shadow,
but still just a light-trick to my mind.

A month later, and our careful treasury of lentils
has not dimished, the wheel of yellow cheese
serene as the full moon. The cold wakes me at night,
creaking from my ear down into my jaw. I cannot imagine
that the scrambling in the boiler is heat,
so it must be a small life caught—
the mouse announcing its secret
so that it might be saved.
"Does my sexiness come as a surprise that I dance like upset you? I've got diamonds in my thighs?"

"If it had grown up, she thought to herself, it would have made a dreadfully ugly child; but it makes rather a handsome pig, I think."

"The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman with neat ankles and a turned foot into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon."

"If I deserve to have it all, then how come stupid Yale hasn't let me in yet?"

"I knew shit wasn't easy for him. I was callous, but not that callous. I saw how it was. You think people hate a fat person? Try a fat person who's trying to get thin."

"Then, towards the South, the sky took on the rose color of leopards' gums."

"That moment of naturalness we the crystallizing feathertouch shaken flirtation into love."

"Her brother was — and no doubt still is — a prominent, pasty-faced, suspenders-and-painted-tie-wearing politician, mayor and booster of his ball-playing, Bible-reading, grain-handling home town."

"It hasn't always been that way, she told herself. When they first met, they had thought each other rather plain."

"Oh, Bear," her dad sighed in his manly—but-motherly voice that made both men and women fall in love with him instantly. "They will, dammit. They will let you in."
The Problem with Creation

Christine Kwon

She created the world: I was five and observant.
Her bright mouth was tacked onto the sky
and cast all my shadows.

I didn't tan evenly despite living in a sandcastle
for ten years. Understanding inevitability, she had built it in the water,
its diamond turrets beckoning from the waves.

In real life, she was more beautiful than my father described.
I wanted to kiss her but she was too tall.
She had to be, to light the earth.

Horses were my favorite animal. When she discovered this,
I woke up in a stable; she had it all arranged.
Such shows of love staggered me.

In the taxi to school, I spotted an attractive Italian
selling ice cream on the street. Mother turned him away.
But for months her lips were berry red.

When she decided to leave for good, she put me to sleep.
Smoothed my hair—hand missing and hitting the headboard.
The sounds were not lonely; I trained them to be affectionate.

Every night ended with a dream. Even as her lungs filled with ocean
she enunciated each word. We are only water in water, understand?
Yes, I know exactly.
Translation

Tyler Theofilos

The original was lost in a house fire.
I remembered as much as I could
and wrote everything down methodically.

My favorite poems are translations
that feel so unnatural in English
they must have some separate life.

After I have written something down,
I forget it, and I have to read it again.
It is the slowest process in the world.

I have an apartment inside the city now.
Everyone was so happy to help me.
There is nothing more that I could ever want.
Imitation

Adam T. Gardner

Taking off my pants, throwing my hands in the air, I find myself in a mirror across the room. Naked, squinting, the figure I see is almost too little like me to recognize, and as I watch it pick up a cup and drink, I shiver and grow thirsty. It is strange. I want to become the thing in the mirror, at once accessible and forbidden like a walled town I can see but never reach. Bringing my eyes to its eyes, I try to discover what it is that makes us different, but as with the lover I had who shared my name, my sudden devotion to another brings with it only a selfish need for defense. I pull my hands into fists, I squint fiercely, I ready myself for a fight. Understanding this as tragic, I close my eyes and fall to the floor. When I wake, I find myself for a second time, although I have become much less interesting in the interim, my posture more mechanized, my legs hairless and pale.
The Yale Literary Magazine Interviews Junot Díaz

Born in Santo Domingo and raised in Parlin, New Jersey, Junot Díaz has emerged as one of the young century's most important young novelists. Selections from his first collection of stories, Drown, have been widely anthologized, but it was only with the publication of 2007's A Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao that Díaz began to receive the acclaim his work had long deserved. The novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award, was named by both New York Magazine and Time as the year's best novel, and in April won the Pulitzer Prize. Díaz has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the PEN/Malamud Award, and a Eugene McDermott Award. The winner of a Rome Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he is currently on sabbatical from MIT, where he teaches creative writing.
YLM: It seems in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao that there is no division between "adult" and "juvenile" literature, or more broadly, between "literature" and "pulp literature." All is fair game: Elements of fantasy, sci-fi, and comic book lore intertwine with Dominican history to form a sort of inclusive cross-cultural patois, a reference point from which each of the story's narratives gains authority and insight. You clearly never abandoned pulp culture as "juvenile," and instead valued it by integrating it into a seamless worldview. How have such narrative forms—comic books, role-playing games, science fiction, fantasy novels—informed your life as a child, an adolescent, and an adult?

Do you read such texts—many of which you must have first encountered as Oscar did, as an adolescent or pre-adolescent—differently now, as an adult? Do you view A Brief Wondrous Life... as a continuation of any of these traditions?

JD: You're very generous, but I didn't really learn to value what Oscar calls the Genre explicitly until I wrote Oscar Wao. The process of being in the head of a young person who loved genre as much as he loved anything taught me how to love again forms that I had put away as 'kid's stuff'.

When I was young genre forms were my everything. I loved sci-fi, fantasy, horror, apocalypse, whether in books, comics, tv or movies. The extreme narratives found inside these forms corresponded with the extreme narratives that seemed to have made up a larger part of my life. (Immigration, life in the Caribbean, First World Poverty.) Many of these stories became lenses, epistemologies, that helped me to interpret the world and what it meant for me, a young Dominican immigrant, to live in it. I've said this a million times: I never understood my immigration from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey until I read H.G. Wells' Time Machine. Until I read Doris Lessing's Shikasta in which her characters travel between the Zones.

Of course I am no longer a child so these texts are not the same texts which I loved and lived inside 20, 30 years ago. How to describe how I've changed in those decades? Impossible to do in so short a time. Take my word for it: The Lord of the Rings I remember is not The Lord of the Rings I now read.

Hey, I believe OscarWao is a genre novel. I have no idea what kind but in my heart and mind it is. It's not only a text, though—it's also a game. As a reader you have to put the book together in your head, but you could only do so by answering some important questions for yourself: why is Yunior telling THIS story? Who is the Man without a Face? But I've said too much.
YLH: You are obviously a maniacally voracious reader—your writing is dense with a range of allusions the sheer lot and
variety of which few of us have access to. The two epigraphs with which you open Oscar Wao—from Walcott and
The Fantastic Four—span that range and also, in a funny way, make your book work like an interpretation of them,
which, like any great interpretation, willfully becomes a story of its own. Here at the Lit we've read a lot of interviews
with you, and it's hard to come up with questions that might be fun and fresh for you as well as fun and fresh for us. So,
since we've been inspired by the way you read, we thought we'd present you with a few passages, imaginary epigraphs, if
you will, that seem to relate to, resist, or rhyme with things you've written. We'll begin with Bloom:

“There are so many tiresomenesses going on. Everyone is so desperately afraid of being called a racist or a sexist that
they connive—whether actively or passively—the almost total breakdown of standards that has taken place both in
and out of the universities, where writings by blacks or Hispanics or in many cases simply women are concerned…
it is clearly a time in which social and cultural guilt has taken over” —Harold Bloom

JD: I love how these conservatives idiotas seem to think the problem in our society is a breakdown
in standards brought on by political correctness. Oh yeah, Bloomy, that's the real problem. Not
the utter onslaught on reason, on logic, on humanity, brought on by our political machine
and their corporate masters. No, the problem is that we're reading too many women and
lesbians! Not that our entire school system is gutted and No Child Left Behind has wounded
a generation of young minds. It's the Hispanics! Not the fact that almost all arts education
has vanished from the public school systems! It's the special interest groups! Not the fact that
almost ALL literary prizes go to white men! It's the Samoans! Not the
fact
that white supremacy
(despite the rumors of a brown take-over) has only increased in power and in insidiousness
since our dear friend Bloomy uttered those words. We've real problems in our society for a
superb mind like Bloom to do battle with; instead he wants to tilt at the phantom windmills
of his crypto-racist mind.
YLM: There is obviously a great tradition of writing in exile, or as an expatriate, including—perhaps especially—black writers in Europe. Do you feel yourself to be an inheritor of that tradition? Specifically, as a Dominican writer currently in Rome, has your time in a culture to which you do not directly pertain—Italian—inspired any reflection upon or reconsideration of the cultures to which you do pertain, or of the idea of "pertinence" in general? Or as Alfonso Reyes would have it, "viajero: ¿has llegado a la región más transparente del aire?"

JD: I'm in Rome because I couldn't turn the American Academy down. But believe me, I'm not in exile and I'm certainly not writing. I hate to be lame but there's nothing about living as a Dominican in Italy in the main that living as a Dominican in the US hasn't taught me or shown me. I've been an immigrant my whole life. Which is quite different from being in exile. The area code might be different but a lot of the concerns, pressures, anxieties and heartaches remain.

—Samuel R. Delany

JD: Who on the earth says shit better, smarter, and more humanely than Delany? He is in my book the God of American letters, could break McCarthy and Morrison (who are my other Gods) over his knee. What's sad is that no matter how many times a genius like Delany tells us we're in the Matrix, we prefer our consensual hallucination over what really is nine times out of ten.
YLM: Foucault—pardon the dirty theory name—says that he "writes in order to remain faceless." Whether or not we believe Foucault, we can say that a person of color is not permitted to accomplish facelessness through writing, which may be just as well; most people of color don't have to do much "in order to remain faceless" in our general culture. How do you feel about the fact that your face is constantly photographed, circulated, and asked to speak for a multitude of other faces? Do you write, in part, anticipating this situation as an opportunity—as a part of your creative work—or as an unfortunate consequence of how the literary world handles race?

JD: Am I really asked to speak for a multitude? If I have, I have never accepted that invitation. I am no politician, I am an artist. I think that people of color in this society tend to be confused for multitudes, denied our inviolate individuality—one person of color is all people of color—or if a black man does something it reflects on all black folks—but if a white person does something it's just that individual whitefolk, not all whitefolk. But beyond this argument there is no question that an author publishing a book in a mainstream press must do a certain amount of publicity. I don't see it as an opportunity to do writer's work per se but I do see it as an opportunity to meet with readers, to share ideas, to do that one thing that writing alone in a closed room denies me: to connect.

"People can cry much more easily than they can change."—James Baldwin

JD: Ain't that the truth, Jimmy. Crying is something you do for yourself. Change is what you do for the collective. Politicians and abusive folks are swell at crying, but change? Nah, they ain't too hep on that.
YLM: You’ve said in interviews that Yunior in Drown and A Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is as close to an autobiographical sketch as your books can offer. And Oscar himself is also clearly a labor of love, a character whose chief interests you (and Yunior) seem to share. How do you approach or prepare for such self-representation, even if it is fragmented, in your fiction? Any writing is of course a vehicle for the author’s personality, for his or her voice, but how do you balance the expressly fictional (and often fantastical) worlds of your fiction with the desire for the text to act as a sort of mirror to your own personal reality?

JD: The autobiographical is a good frame of reference for me, a way to keep my scale consistent, a beautiful level, but not much else. I work desperately to alter my characters in ways that preserve (for me) what is most interesting about the writing process: invention. If you’re simply jotting down your own life, if you’re only transcribing, then you don’t get to invent, you don’t get to play. My real life is useful only in that it allows me to sketch out some tools, some boundaries, and allows me to play and invent. If I didn’t want to play and invent I’d be a memoirist.

"Superheroism is a kind of transvestism; our superdrug serves at once to obscure the exterior self that no longer defines us while betraying, with half-unconscious panache, the truth of the story we carry in our hearts, the story of our transformation, of our story’s recommencement, of our rebirth into the world of adventure, of story itself."—Michael Chabon

JD: I love Chabon but I always thought that superheroism was a way of dealing with that twin kid thing: the powerlessness of childhood and the fantasies of ultimate power that adulthood would bring. Superheroism seems to me a glib adventurous way of marking the pain of those powerless days without having to abandon the hope of real power that the adult world scuttles the moment we find ourselves in it. Gee, looking back over this I see I’ve made even less sense than Chabon did. Such is the life of a nerd.
YLM: What question do you wish people asked of writers, or of you, more often? What question do you think is most worth asking?

JD: "What is the first ‘real’ book you read five times?” For me the first ‘real’ book I read five times was Skyblazers. Hard to find but an adventure at the dawn of commercial aviation.
Burning Man

Eric Ward

Setting himself against the regularity of streetlamps and sidewalk squares he sought to light his heart beyond civilization's half-erotic frescoes.

A month later, dour on a French beach in evening he watched hundreds copulate madly in the coming tide, as if the world was sure to end before the teeming women came to term.

Their frantic hands grasping each other like sailors at the edge of the map embracing in pairs, waiting to slip off the horizon.

He wants a new return to grouped climaxes a time before the navigator's heavy lines patterned the screen. He wishes every star were a north star, every birth a rebirth.

He wants to be guided by local noises the sad applause of water dashing itself on river rocks.
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The winner of the Frances Bergen Memorial Prize for Poetry is "Burning Man," by Eric Ward.

The winner of the Frances Bergen Memorial Prize for Fiction is "Self-Defense," by Laura Gottesdiener.

Jonathan Safran Foer judged poetry.

The editors judged fiction.

The text face is Joanna. Headings are set in Gill Sans. Both were designed by Eric Gill.

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