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Like a Möbius strip, but with knots. This is how we have
come to characterize the insides of this issue. What lies
outside these works become their insides as well, but the
transitions aren't seamless. The categories of "poetry" and
"prose" are too tidy to delineate the works in this issue.
We like to consider the works as they appear—as shapes.

These works shape our pages into statues, painted sur-
faces, shards, threads, episodic blocks—sometimes all at
once. Boundaries, lines, and walls become fluid and hurt
and smooth. The rhythms of these dissolutions make
for strange loops: non-sequential counting, traumatic
stammers, machine glitches, life’s final flashes upon the inward eye, unfamiliar-familiar histories.

By opening this issue you are including yourself into its shape. We’re excited to welcome you in. And out. And et cetera.

Thanks to everyone who helped.

Much Love,

Ava and Sophia
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Francis Bergen Prize for Poetry judged by Nancy Kuhl
ELECTRIC PHILODENDRON

after Dugan

I make my own attention and irradiate the room.
No flowers, no flowers, none for all these years
Flowers flower no-nos all year for these none.
Some songs do sound better hummed.
I feared surviving alone in empty spaces
so I glazed dead blue faces onto live bodies
until none was left in the room.
Instead of soft roots that might clutch,
instead of soil to grow, there are just plugs
to fill voids built into their frame-up.
I know because I am void.
Here's the plug: Ready?

I was a man on the arid plains; I was Liberty, Madeline
and the Magnificent Legends; sometimes I'd be beat
and beat a drum to take the hoofing from my head;
I fell in love, won many games; I grew without hedging;
I flew like a wren among the garden beds to whet scenes
and muddy teeth; I was a wolf; I howled at the gate;
I kept it shut, and no one knew the difference.

Now my lifeless bodies lie disparate;
I, the room, the no-nos, the none;
the only sparks celestial, with black wood
floors affirming dirtlessness. I notice
the doors and the windows are open.
And the walls are—what can I say?
The walls are as the walls were—
they are not important.

—Jake Orbison
GLOSS:

Occasionally a program will "hang" and you will not be able to quit out of it. In cases like this, there is a choice: you may force-quit the application or reboot the machine.

When you force-quit or reboot, there is a possibility that unsaved data will be lost. However, depending on auto-capabilities and features, you should be able to recover most things.

Hold down the "control" and "option" keys. Press "delete."
Niobe
Niobe, Niobe was full. Niobe was full and to be filled is, her fingers popped out like filled balloons, revealed, every single one. Niobe was full. Niobe was full, be careful, Niobe was full and to take a picture. I am Niobe and to take a picture. Why don’t you take a picture. Niobe was full and in the crevices of her, in her double chins, she was full overfilled she was full don’t take a picture. Hey, hey now. Hey don’t look.

When I went to Niobe I tried not to look. When I went to Niobe I tried to feel, crevices made by fullness. I closed my eyes like this. I closed my eyes like a boy with wide eyes who will not sleep, a boy with blue wide eyes who will not sleep, a boy with eyes on a wall without crevices and you tell him close your eyes. Niobe was full and my eyes were closed with folding details like double chins and my fingers! I had no tools, and my fingers were too plump and too round, with my eyes shut tight, too round for the stone creases in her neck. The stone creases behind her ears, the stone crease between her thighs.

When I feel bread it has white powder on its crusts. When I feel bread it is fleshier than Niobe. I roll its insides into balls with the tips of my fingers and I stick it in my mouth. It is the right kind of white, inside.

Beheld by bodies with eyes that cannot see, that is, I may as well be Niobe, and I want bread. Niobe eats bread, it is sure, in bundles. Niobe eats bread and when you give her designer shoes with white golden buckles she says neither yes nor no. She gives you natural causes. She gives you natural causes in exchange for these things, that, does she want them, well, well yes and no, well. Niobe wants bread.

She wants bread and when I try to feel her with my eyes puckeret shut, with my hand reaching between her thighs, she says, baby. Baby look at those boys. Baby honey look at those boys looking for natural causes look at those boys they want to give you the shoes with the white gold, look at all those boys baby open your eyes sweetheart, pretty girl, my pretty girl, you are giving yourself wrinkles pretty girl, with your eyes like that. Darling baby would you like some bread because God knows I don’t need any more.

Ah aha I say, aha, aha, hey, Niobe, Niobe I feel you. Niobe will you give me designer shoes. Niobe my eyes are forming creases like the crease between your thighs, like the creases around your cunt, you dirty fucking cunt you, hey, Niobe, can I please have some designer shoes because I can’t give you natural causes but maybe shoes can give me, give me them, maybe shoes can give them to me, but hey, maybe I could just open my eyes and have them, hey, hey I’ll take a picture, aha, hey I’ll buy you shoes, ha, hey Niobe you’re full you fucking cunt hey Niobe! Niobe I am full with my eyes like a boy’s holding in everything blue and wide but what do I have blue and wide I have nothing, hey Niobe, hey, what you got for me. Even sticks of fingers you know. Because I am losing my fingers like bread in your crevices. Hey Niobe I am you, of course. Niobe when eyes are shut. Niobe I am the devil cunt of you when eyes are shut, Niobe and when they are open.

Hey cunt girl look because I gave out natural causes once. I did once to a boy whose eyes were closed like a little boy’s. I had urges to tousle his hair like he was a little boy, his eyes were blue, and his fingers were not sticks to feel into my crevices. Okay two fine two boys, eyes shut. Fine three okay miss fucking cunt, three. Maybe four, it is possible. Four or five or perhaps six, okay, they offered me designer shoes with their eyelids covering and I said oh yes! I did. Thank you sir. Open your eyes darling. Hey. Hey. Hey now. Hey open your eyes.

Niobe I am you when eyes are shut do you understand, I want to be clear. Me to eyes shut is you, but to eyes open, hey Niobe I am not falling into your trap, cunt. One boy tripped on the way to the shoe store and when he fell down a car ran over his
pumpkin head and that was a cause and another boy, these silly little boys, he breathed in the wrong chemical from the street’s air on that walk and asphyxiated, and another boy, he filled up with the accepting, he filled up until the space above his eyebrows turned blue and until crevices formed between his fingers no matter how far apart he held them and until out from behind his eyes and then out from the hair follicles on his head and then out from his erect blown up dick came a blue that was almost as white as the sky, naturally. Another boy brought me back the wrong size and I beat the shit out of him Niobe! Niobe I’d like to open my eyes.

Niobe I’d like to open my eyes because maybe they’re all wrong, right, and maybe you’re like bread. Maybe someone told them to close their eyes one day when she was exhausted and ready for sleep, maybe they forgot, maybe their eyes were closed the whole time. Would you know, Niobe? Can you see? Can you see when you are so full? Niobe how are your lids. Niobe when I feel them, with my sadly rounded fingers of which I cannot keep track with my eyes all squeezed in, there are no crevices. You’ll look young forever, girlfriend, pretty girl.

Niobe if you tried to touch me it wouldn’t matter that your full fingers were round, because my skin would give. My flesh like bread would move with your stone fingers and it would caress them for their pushing, hug them, feel them. The creases under my breasts would part into something smooth like your eyes. And the creases around my cunt too, and the crease between my lips would easily slit, and the crease between my thighs would not even exist because unlike a certain boy’s full fingers and your full bits of chin my thighs are not so full that they cannot separate.

Niobe I think I would let you fuck me, with whatever stone thing you have, if I loved you a little less. Hey Niobe. I love honesty and beauty and the color blue and that is how I love you, girl. I want to be clear. I don’t think I could let you near me and not because you’re not made of bread. Niobe I didn’t know those boys weren’t made of bread until they were gone like pumpkins, no, I could not let you near me in spite of your sexy stone. Yes, no, even if you’re stony and full to the point of pushing me apart, girl, even if you’re full and with nowhere for it to come out, no eye sockets or hair follicles and certainly no dick, for that shit that is definitely not blue and even more definitely not a blue that’s white like the sky, to come out, still, Niobe, I don’t care devil fucking cunt what you say, I do not, Niobe, hey, can you hear me, hey, do you see me girl, hey, are your eyes open, are your eyes open and what, what do you see.

—Theodora E.
SIX SWANS

after Ferdinand Hodler
A person can see six swans when they look to the edge of the wasabi-smeared lake.

The second swan turns its head into the water as its protruding body gets whiter.

The first swan tilts like a Chinese spoon thrown down onto the surface of a soup.

The mountains reflect as the color blue. Lake-inverted rectangle, two dark bars.

The fourth and fifth are absolutely sure; their necks glow with passionate erasure.

The third swan glued to the thin varnish—the stem bends in and the head vanishes.

The final swan points its eyes out to sea, the great gazpacho of eternity.

—Andrew Kahn
Catiline's Virtues: A translation of Sallust by Nick Levine
all men who would eclipse the other animals must struggle with perfection. or else shuffle through life in silence, like cattle, which nature set prostrate & servile to their bellies. all our power is nested in the mind & the body. the mind we use to rule. the body more to serve. the one we share with the gods. the other with the beasts. so it seems right to me to seek glory through intellect not force. & since the life we are granted is short, to extend the memory of our lives far into the future. for the glory of riches & beauty is fleeting & fragile, VIRTUE is held to be illustrious & eternal.
but for a long time there was a great dispute among mortals as to whether military success arose from the strength of bodies or the VIRTUE of the mind. for starting requires planning, & once you have a plan it must be carried out. thus each, deficient in itself, needs the help of the other. in the beginning, kings—this was history’s first name for a sovereign—were opposed in this great dispute. some relied on intellect, some on strength. envy did not yet rule men’s lives. each was satisfied with his own lot. but after cyrus & the spartans & athenians began to conquer nations & cities. to consider lust for domination a justification for war. to find the greatest glory in the largest empire. only then, after hostile experimentation, was it discovered that in war intellect routed.
but if the VIRTUE of the mind of kings & generals 
thrived in peace as it did in war, human life would be 
so pleasantly tranquil. you wouldn’t today see one 
thing borne into another & everything transfigured 
& everything mixed up. for power is easily held with 
the same means by which it was acquired. but when 
sloth overtakes hard work, & lust & pride moderation 
& fairness, then fortune is transfigured along 
with mores. power is always transferred to the best 
men from the lesser.
whatever men accomplish—e.g. in farming sailing building—is indebted to VIRTUE. but many mortals, servile to stomach & sleep, unlearned & uncultured, shuffle through life like tourists. whose bodies are for pleasure, their soul a burden. their lives & deaths weigh equally little on me, since silence surrounds each. he alone seems to me to really live & breathe life who, absorbed by some pursuit, seeks the glory of a noteworthy (mis)deed or tectonic good will. but in such a richly varied universe nature sets different people on different paths.
it is a noble thing to act well for the republic. still, it is by no means meaningless to speak well for the republic. one can become famous in peace or in war. of those who have acted & those who have written down the acts of others, many are praised. even if the glories that follow the author of deeds & their actor are not equal, nevertheless it seems particularly difficult to write history. first, because deeds must be matched by words. then, because when you criticize, people think you do this out of resentment & jealousy. & when you recount the great VIRTUE & glory of good men, the deeds that your audience think they could do they accept. everything else they think is fabricated.
when a boy, i, like most, was propelled by a zeal for politics. there i was, bounded by hazards. for instead of modesty instead of restraint instead of VIRTUE, hubris extravagance & greed bloomed around me. even though my mind, unschooled in the ways of evil, spurned these things, nevertheless my tender age, wedged between such vices, was choked by ambition. & though i rejected the evil mores of those around me, no less did i fall victim to that same lust for honor, that same infamy & resentment that tormented my peers.
eventually my mind found shelter from all those miseries & dangers. & i decided to keep myself at a distance from politics for the rest of my life. but it was not my plan to grind away my days into a leisured nothingness. nor to spend my life farming or hunting: slavish occupations. but returning to those studies from which wicked ambition had led me astray, i resolved to write down, piece by piece, the history of the roman people. at least write down the pieces that seemed worthy of memory. all the better for me to do it, since my mind was free of hope of fear of partisanship. so here i will briefly unleash, as truthfully as i am able, myself on catiline’s conspiracy. for that (mis)deed i consider particularly worthy of memory because of the originality of its wickedness & danger. but i must say a few things about the mores of the man in question before i begin the narrative.
Lucius Catiline, of noble birth, had great strength of both body & mind. But his character was evil & crooked. As a pubescent boy he pleased himself ogling civil wars slaughters extortion political strife. He spent his whole youth this way. There he was, a body unreasonably tolerant of hunger of thirst of sleep deprivation. A mind fierce cunning technicolor. Could resemble & dissemble whatever he wanted. Grasping at what was not his, he poured out his own property. As if others’ intestines. Burning with lusts. Some eloquence—not enough wisdom. His desert mind was always lusting after the unbounded the unbelievable the not quite reachable the antipode. After Lucius Sulla’s dictatorship an inescapable desire to take over the republic seized Catiline. He did not care how, as long as he was assembling a throne. His wild mind was prodded more & more each day by
his family’s poverty & his guilty conscience. each of which was exacerbated by the aforementioned qualities. he was also spurred on by the state’s corrupt mores—mores that had been unhinged by the worst & most contradictory pair of vices, extravagance & greed. the subject seems to demand, since the mores of the state have been mentioned, that we go back further in time & briefly discuss the policies of our ancestors at home & abroad, how they governed the republic, how powerful they left it, how gradually it was transformed from the most noble & best to the worst & most depraved.
fortune rules over everything. it extols & obscures. out of love for itself, not truth. the triumphs of the athenians, in my estimation, were fine enough, but a little less great than is imagined. only because they produced so many writers of such genius are the athenians’ deeds celebrated throughout the world as the greatest in history. an actor’s VIRTUE is only as great as illustrious intellects extol it in writing. but the roman people never had such a wealth of writers, because its wisest men became leaders. none exercised his intellect without his body. the best men preferred acting to speaking. preferred their own deeds to be praised by others—to themselves recounting the deeds of others.
but when the republic had developed its economy &
laws, when great kings had been subdued, & wild
nations & unruly peoples put down by force, carthage,
the rival to roman power, was eradicated to death. all
the seas & lands were lying open. & fortune began to
rave & rage & fuck up everything. whoever had eas-
ily tolerated hardship, danger, capricious & adverse
conditions—to them, leisure & riches, desirable in
other circumstances, became a misery & a burden.
but lusts, first for money, then for power, swelled.
they were as if the begetter of all evils.
greed overthrew integrity honesty & the other noble principles. & in their stead installed hubris, cruelty, to slight the gods, to see a price tag on everything. ambition made many mortals fraudulent. imprisoning one thing in their heart, prodding another to dance on their tongue. judging friendships & enmities not for themselves but for their convenience. keeping their clothes clean instead of their conscience. these customs at first grew little by little & still were occasionally punished. later, when the contagion had invaded like a plague, the state was transfigured, & a government, the most just, the best, was rendered cruel & unbearable.
but at first ambition more than greed tormented men’s minds. ambition, although a vice, was nearer to VIRTUE. for the good man & the lazy equally long for glory honor power. but the former lumbers up the true path. the other, because he lacks character, strives with treachery & deceit. greed aims at money, which a wise man never truly longed for. greed, as if imbued with an evil potion, emasculates the body & the virile mind, it is forever infinite insatiable, not plenty nor poverty contains it. but after lucius sulla violently seized the republic & from great beginnings brought about evil ends, everyone stole, everyone plundered, one craved this house, they craved his fields, the victors showed no restraint. sickening cruel (mis)deeds they committed against the citizens.
also sulla treated the army he had led in persia luxuriously & liberally, in order to earn their favor, contrary to the custom of our ancestors. sunny & sumptuous pleasure-domes easily softened the once-brave minds of reclining soldiers. it was there first that an army of the roman people really got a taste for fucking drinking gazing in wonder at painted statues at ornate tables at embossed vases, stealing such treasures from public places & private, plundering temples, defiling all things sacred & profane. those soldiers, after they achieved victory, left nothing behind for the vanquished. success exhausts the minds of wise men. so much less can the corrupt qualify victory.
after wealth became a source of honor & glory authority power followed, VIRTUE grew flaccid. poverty came to be thought shameful, innocence insidious. extravagance greed & hubris, sprung from wealth, ambushed the youth. valuing their own things little, they craved others’, stole, squandered, hadn’t a second for shame for chastity for distinctions between divine & human, no scruples or moderation.
is it hopeless to try to seal this all in memory? no man would believe it, not unless he’d been there. mountains overturned by private citizens? the same ones who’d had the seas paved over? they made a game of their wealth. what they could have managed honorably they raced to squander basely.

after seeing the mansions & villas built to the size of cities, it is worth remembering the temples our ancestors, devoutest of mortals, built. those men decorated shrines with their piety, their homes with glory. & they stole nothing from the conquered but their power to harm. these new men on the contrary, these laziest of men, so wickedly took everything even from their allies, which the bravest men, when they were victors, had left behind. as if abuse were power’s only use.
but promiscuity gluttony & other such refinements had no less reach than extravagance & greed. men assumed the role of women, women put a price on their chastity, the world was explored to stock kitchens. they slept to dream, never to rest, no longer waited to feel hunger or thirst or cold or fatigue, but alluded to them in their excess. all of which incited the youth, when their families’ wealth was exhausted, to (mis)deeds. their minds, imbued with evil proclivities, could not easily be unbound from their lusts. thus all the more extravagantly were they given over to getting & spending.
in so great & corrupt a state catiline did the easiest thing for him to do. surrounded himself in riots of perverts & (mis)deed—as if they were body guards. everyone: the shameless the adulterous the glutton. who disemboweled their birthrights with their hands with their stomachs with their cocks. who kindled great debts buying back their own perverted (mis)deeds. everywhere: murderers blasphemers the convicted & merely indicted. nourished by hand & tongue, by perjury & roman blood. everyone who was moved by perversity by poverty by guilt. these were the intimate associates of catiline...
Sick of lullabies. 
The outer wall is the one thing left of the world.

From my bed I wander the palace: the Emperor in slumber; the chambermaid with the silver tray of perfumes; the night gardener who deadheads the peonies, erases the bamboo's hourly growth.

Somewhere morning comes already, white men trawling fish. Dreams tell you how to live in the absence of life. Life tells you nothing.

Where is the Duke of Chu?

My slippers are made of silk so fine I cannot feel that I walk at all.

Heat lightning across the sky. The form of a satisfied insect.

If I was glib, if I was wrong, at least I had visions.

The only sound in my palace of silent acts is the Emperor turning over.

—Eli Mandel
This page: *Untitled* by Jacqi Lee
Booklet: *Cocoon* by Johanna Flato
At 19, Denis Johnson published his first book of poetry, *The Man Among the Seals*. A couple of years after that, he got a BA from University of Iowa and an MFA from the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, where he studied under Raymond Carver. Johnson is prolific. Johnson has published plays, nonfiction, five books of poetry, eight novels, a short story collection (*Jesus’ Son*, a cult classic without the cult) and a novella (*Train Dreams*, which won the 2007 National Book Award for Fiction). Johnson is also charming, though he’s known not to give many interviews—("I haven’t said yes to one in many years," he told us).

We corresponded with Denis Johnson over e-mail while he was traveling in Arua, Uganda. "I’m thousands of miles away, and you can’t get to me," so he signed off his first email. And so it began.

—Ava Kofman and Sophia Weissmann
You mentioned you just landed in Arua, Uganda. What are you doing there? If that answer is a secret, how was your flight?

My flight from JFK to Entebbe was uneventful, and my flight from Entebbe to Arua was short and quick. I’m making my second visit to the region. My purpose here isn’t a secret. I’m gathering background—local color, sights and sounds—for a novel that takes place in Sierra Leone, and here in Uganda, and also partly in the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose border lies just a few miles west of Arua. It’s kind of a spy story with what we might call serious intentions, on the order of Graham Greene. I told my editor Jonathan Galassi at FSG, “I’m not trying to be Graham Greene. I think I actually am Graham Greene.”

Any Greene novels you would recommend?

The Power and the Glory.
The Comedians.
The Heart of the Matter.
Also a sad spy story, The Human Factor.

I haven’t re-read A Burnt-Out Case recently, but I remember admiring that one too. Or is it “Burned-out”?
What appeals to you about the CIA and the FBI as material? In Tree of Smoke your characters are disillusioned with their work for the CIA. How do you feel about novels that glorify espionage?

So you moved around a lot growing up, you occupy multiple residences, and your nonfiction work sends you abroad. Are the rhythms of what you are writing influenced by where you are in space and/or how fast you are traveling?

Tree of Smoke, I think, takes its first impulse from my early background. My dad was with the US State Department, and we lived among that community in Tokyo, Manila, and Washington, DC—diplomats and military folks, including CIA and FBI.

As for novels glorifying espionage, I enjoyed James Bond when I was a kid, but I prefer the more realistic, complicated approach—Le Carré particularly, and some of Eric Ambler.

My projects tend to develop over years, beginning with scattered notes; then I start putting and tinker- ing with ideas, voices, descriptions, and then I progress to some serious fooling around, and in the latter stages I settle down and try to produce a couple of pages every day, with an occasional day off. I’m in the latter stages with this novel, whose title (today) is The Laughing Monsters. I’m really just living for a month at the White Castle Hotel and trying to write every day on this book. It’s due in January. I might finish on time.
You also move across genres...Jesus’ Son was adapted into a movie, and one of your plays, Shoppers, uses a TV. Have you considered writing screenplays or TV? Are there genres you haven’t yet tried that you are interested in exploring?

I’ve done a little of that from time to time, not with any success. During the 1980s I wrote several screenplays under commission, most of them adaptations—one from a Jim Thompson novel, A Swell-Looking Babe, one from Paul Bowles’s Up Above the World, also two from books of my own (Angels, The Stars at Noon)—nothing got produced.

Just a couple years ago I took a flyer at TV, working with three producers to design a drama series and write the pilot episode, all on speculation—that effort went pretty much nowhere. This January I’ll write a pilot for HBO, a one-hour drama that takes place in a ward for amputees returned from our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Genres I wouldn’t try...I think I’ve tried them all, except maybe technical writing, or self-help books. If I get through life without tackling either of those, I won’t be sorry. Oh—it might be fun to do the libretto for an opera (although I know nothing about opera).

“Voice”—I don’t think of it as under my control. I like Fuckhead’s voice, I liked it the minute I heard it, and I enjoy its doubleness—he seems to be immersed in his era, and then also looking back on it from years afterward—but that’s all I can tell you about that.

When I was an undergrad I took courses from the poet Marvin Bell, who said, “Don’t be committed to one voice.” I don’t remember if he said it once or if he said it often; but it stuck with me, and I stick by it. I try to forget what I’ve already written, and forget what it sounded like, and treat each attempt as if it were my very first.

How does the way you think of voicing differ in writing a play, like “Soul of A Whore”, as opposed to writing a story cycle like Jesus’ Son? Do you see your first-person narrators (Fuckhead, namely) as having written the stories themselves?
Speaking of the writer’s education, in a 1997 article for Salon, you wrote about the benefits of homeschooling your children. How does your philosophy of education and “unschooling” apply to writers? Do you think formal academic training or MFA programs are useful to young writers?

I’m no expert on education. I was a terrible student. I hated school, every minute of it, from the first day of kindergarten until I got a BA. I tried to raise my own kids to be ignorant savages, but they rebelled and got college degrees. As for graduate writing programs, my own very limited experience with them has been uniformly happy. While I was a grad student at Iowa I felt a great deal was offered me and not much was asked, and now I teach here and there—one-semester appointments—and the same holds true. I get a lot of joy out of “teaching”, mainly because I do it seldom, and when I do, I have only a few students, most of whom are smarter than I am. I don’t know how I’d like it if I had to do it all the time and pretend to take it seriously.

Dylan Thomas first of all, during my high school. In fact, it was the poem “Fern Hill,” because it sounded so much like a person—and then Walt Whitman and the beat poets shortly after that. And Bob Dylan’s lyrics, and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and then, when I was a college freshman, “The Lost Pilot” by James Tate. I yearned to talk like them, I ached for it. I still read poetry all the time. Just lately it’s Eugenio Montale, and Michael Burkard, and John Clare. Often I return to Franz Wright, and W.S. Merwin. I’ve recently been impressed by the young poet Carl Adamchick, though I might be misspelling his name. James Tate still. John Logan I return to as well. I’ve been re-reading “The Salt Eustases” by James L. White, too. Last winter was the winter of Fernando Peso.
We've been thinking a lot about the glow of some of your poems, the visionary language seeping through parts of Angels, and the electric way in which the border between Fuckhead's consciousness and the outside world is always being dissolved throughout Jesus' Son. Could you talk a bit more about Whitman's influence in your poetry and prose?

I'm not sure I could trace the lines of his influence on my language, particularly, or the way his work affects the strategies in my work, or anything like that. His expansive spirit, his generosity, his eagerness to love—those are the things that influence me, not just as a writer, but as a person. His introduction to Leaves of Grass I take as a sort of personal manifesto, especially the passage:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body...

You've discussed with critics how your work trades in spiritual themes. How would you characterize the theological questions you ask about religion or to God in your work? Have these questions changed over time?

Ah, now—this is a question I've learned to run from, and it's the chief reason I avoid giving interviews. If I've discussed these things in the past, I shouldn't have. I'm not qualified. I don't know who God is, or any of that. People concerned with those questions turn up in my stories, but I can't explain why they do. Sometimes I wish they wouldn't.
We were going to ask if you had an ideal or unideal reader but saw that you’d answered that question a couple years ago, telling an audience, “I write for my wife, my agent, and my editor.” Can you tell us a bit more about what each relationship in this trio means to you—as you relate to them as friends, readers, collaborators, etc?

On an episode of The New Yorker Fiction podcast, Tobias Wolff reads your short story “Emergency.” When he discusses the story with Deborah Treisman, Wolff says, “It’s like the story wants to jolt us into looking around and seeing the miraculous all around us and, in a sense, wanting to take that knife out of our eye.” What do you think this knife obscures?

In the film adaptation of Jesus’ Son, you have a cameo as the peeping husband retributively stabbed in the eye by his wife. Is it the writer that gets stabbed in the eye for seeing too much?

Last but not least: what is your favorite mass cultural product?

My wife Cindy reads everything first, and she’s allowed one of three categories of response—“Genius,” “Shakespeare,” or “Elvis.” It happens my agent Bob Cornfeld and I admire many of the same writers, so if he likes something I give him, I’m very happy. He’s usually very muted in his criticism, hardly ever negative. My editor Jonathan Galassi, unfortunately, feels obliged to express himself honestly. When he’s kind, that makes my day.

I don’t know what the knife obscures, but I feel in general agreement with what I think Wolff was saying. And I go along with Joseph Conrad, too. In the intro to his novel The Nigger of the Narcissus he said he wanted “by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything.”

Hold on now. Remember, the writer is only creating an illusion. That knife was fake.

I love McDonald’s double cheeseburgers and I don’t care if they’re made of pink slime and ammonia, I eat them all the time because they’re delicious.