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For this issue I had the chance to talk to one of my favorite authors, the Danish fiction writer Dorthe Nors. On the role of humor in her work—which is by turns devastating and hilarious, often in the same paragraph—Nors said, “Engaging the smile in the reader will quite often mean that they accept the heartache that is also there.”

By the time I spoke with Nors our selections team had already read almost two hundred submissions, reread a few dozen favorites, and deliberated for hours to settle on the five poems and three stories featured in this magazine. And so it was sort of eerie to find in Nors’s words the summative insight of an epigraph. This issue is one of the most tonally diverse I can remember from my four years on the Lit. Some pieces—like Clio Byrne-Gudding’s “The Peacock,” which our staff was laughing too hard to read aloud during selections—feel like dazzling surfaces, clever and stylish in the best way possible. Others, like Oriana Tang’s wrenching story “Strangers,” tap into a place of urgent emotion, daring to say, boldly, the things we sometimes prefer not to hear.
Ordering the pieces in the magazine is always a puzzle, but in this one it felt especially tricky. How to make the whole thing feel coherent? In the end Nors’s words helped us embrace juxtaposition. We hope that, as you’re shuttled between passion and wit, between pieces that appeal primarily to the mind and others that speak straight to the soul, the experience will feel less like whiplash and more like life itself, full of smiles, heartache, and everything in between.

—Tom Cusano, Editor-in-Chief
The cat Baobao noticed first, licking itself in the dust in front of the door to the station, its tail flicking up and down rhythmically like the palpitations of a clock’s hands. She kneeled down to stroke its back. Under her fingers its fur was oily and its small body radiated a nervous, touchable warmth. Baobao tapped her lap to encourage the cat to jump up, but instead it pulled away and began to pace, swilling eddies of yellow-brown dirt around its knobby paws.

Baobao stood up too. The train would be arriving soon. She clicked her tongue at the cat until it turned its face toward her, and she saw that its eyes were a blank, clouded blue, crusted red around the edges: blind, most likely. She stared at it. The cat swished its tail once, twice, and then it turned and walked away.

The station was mostly empty. Baobao’s shoes slipped over the linoleum as she walked past the ticket counter toward the third terminal. A few men in dirty white wife beaters squatted against a wall smoking cigarettes and mumbling among
and skinny jeans as she reached to open a high cupboard, the taxis that careened wildly onto curbs as they sped down the four-lane roads packed end to end with vehicles—and when she returned home she flinched every time her father pulled a scrap of napkin from his pocket to blow his nose during dinner.

Baobao rubbed the ticket in her purse as the train rattled into the station. She would transfer at Guangmingcheng to one of the high-speed bullet trains to Guangzhou. She would talk to no one. In her purse she had the address of the clinic that her mother had found, the address she would give to a taxi driver smacking at a dry wad of gum, the name of the procedure she would want drilled carefully into her head. It was a plan, as planned as everything else hadn’t been. The doors of the train clanked open and she stepped onboard.

Baobao had been to Guangzhou once before, a year ago, to visit Xiaoyue after she left the village for university. Xiaoyue had met her at the train station with her newest boyfriend, and afterward they’d gone to the supermarket together, the boyfriend loping ahead, his hands wrapped around the straps of his backpack, elbows protruding from his sides like underdeveloped wings. He’s a child, Xiaoyue had said to Baobao, standing among the sterile lumps of melons. Her eyes were shiny under the grocery store lights and Baobao understood that what she meant was that she loved him. They had telephoned less and less after that trip until eventually they had stopped talking, but Baobao had not forgotten the city’s glamour and bustle—the stretch of fish-white abdomen that emerged between Xiaoyue’s t-shirt and the...
was from America and emphasized the wrong words when he spoke. He had hair tipped with silver even though he was Baobao’s age, barely eighteen. Later, after they’d met but before it all happened, she’d asked when his hair had begun to turn gray like an old man’s and he said that it had always been that way and that perhaps he would die young, and she looked at him to see him laugh and saw the rest of her life in the lines around his eyes.

When Xiaoyue still lived in the village she had been the pretty one, with hair that flipped neatly over her shoulders in one motion like a sheet of water. They had sat on the rumpled white sheets of her bed eating slices of watermelon with their legs spread talking about boys and everything Xiaoyue knew they wanted to do to her. At twelve, standing in the back of Mrs. Liu’s funeral ceremony, Baobao had turned around to see Xiaoyue kissing Long with her eyes closed, their two mouths like a single swollen creature pulsing blindly between their faces, and when she cried later it was for Long and not Mrs. Liu, because Baobao had told Xiaoyue how much she liked him, his sly smile, the glasses that she saw had fogged a milky white during the kiss. At the time that Xiaoyue left, Baobao had not yet kissed anyone, although Xiaoyue had tried to train her with cherries, pursing her lips around the sweet dark fruits. Like this? Baobao had asked, and Xiaoyue had nodded and said I think, yes.

Then this boy, who touched Baobao on the shoulder and looked at her when he spoke. He told her he was surprised that the village had electricity, that small children dragged around stuffed Hello Kitty toys. I can’t get this dirt off my feet, he said, it gets in my shoes no matter how tightly I lace them up. He wore shirts with the sleeves rolled up and layers of sunburnt skin peeled off his nose and the back of his neck. Baobao said, Did you think we were barbarians? She bought extra cherries from the Wednesday market and sucked the flesh off their stems.

The train lurched back and forth like a drunken woman’s handbag. Baobao sat down in the first empty seat by a window and pressed her cheek to the dirty glass and tried to breathe. At first everything turned her stomach—that was how her mother knew—but now it was only certain foods: boiled eggplant, overripe melon rinds, fried pumpkin seeds. In those early weeks Baobao spent hours each day scrubbing her clothes in the huge chipped basin of the kitchen sink. Only with her hands busy and nothing but the crisp flat taste of soap in her mouth could she hold down the nausea squirming inside her throat,
the sudden overwhelming dizziness that fractured the world like a broken mirror when she moved her head. The boy was gone by then.

A man leading four pigs by a leash shuffled down the aisle and disappeared into the next car. He did not see Baobao, but she watched his back departing, the skinny shoulder blades tenting the fabric of his shirt, the hooves of the pigs scrabbling against the floor of the train, slipping on the straw scattered in corners. Men did not look at her. She told Xiaoyue once that she did not think she could be married because men did not look at her and Xiaoyue had scoffed because, Baobao thought, she could never understand when she already had their gaze. At home, of course, but even in the streets of Guangzhou Baobao watched the eyes grazing her friend up and down, Xiaoyue’s fingers linked lazily with her boyfriend’s and metallic sunlight crowning her hair, and wondered if Xiaoyue had always known how to walk with her hips. That was talent Baobao could never learn: not only to have a body but to know how to use it.

Later, the boyfriend gone, they sat on the fire escape of Xiaoyue’s apartment with their legs dangling between the bars and looked down at the glittering lights of the city below. The sky was a vibrant pollution-tinged orange, shimmering, something you could scrape your teeth on. Xiaoyue rubbed her mascara off in black circles around her eyes. Do you like him? she asked, and Baobao watched her shrinking back into something recognizable, the same girl whose hand she gripped as they sprinted down the pathways between the rice paddies they would later help tend. The night before she had lain awake listening to the liquid sounds of their sex coming from the next room. Xiaoyue had to have known. The walls were not that thick.

What does it matter? Baobao said. Out in the air her voice sounded harsher than it had in her mind. You’ve already given yourself to him.

Don’t be so old-fashioned, Xiaoyue scoffed. But that hadn’t been what Baobao meant. She glanced at Xiaoyue, the plane of her face tilted at the moon, beautiful even with her makeup smeared, pockets of light and shadow carving her features into an otherworldly mosaic. Sometimes in daylight she would look at Xiaoyue and believe that her beauty was attainable. At night she would realize that it was not. Baobao remembered once, fourteen or fifteen, climbing onto the roof with Xiaoyue to pick out the toothy glints of stars. There had been a full moon. They had moved quietly so as not to wake the chickens in the courtyard and Xiaoyue’s body had melted into
a fluid silver. Xiaoyue had whispered that she was going to kiss Dabei, but without tongue because she was saving that for Yang. At the time her telling had flooded Baobao with warmth. Now Baobao wanted to ask what it was like to be so wanted, so wanted you could choose what pieces of yourself to give away. She felt the words rolling around her mouth like the hard light pit of a fruit. But here, suspended above a cosmopolitan universe that belonged to Xiaoyue alone, the inches bridging their bodies seemed startlingly wide.

Something shattered on a lower floor, followed by a woman’s shrill and muffled curses. Baobao heard herself laughing, sharp and bright, the noise meeting Xiaoyue’s, and the air softened between them, collapsed. There was a pause. An ambulance roared by, the pitch of the siren rising and falling. Xiaoyue stood up. Good night, she said, and they smiled at each other like strangers.

Until her death Baobao’s grandmother had warned her never to undress in front of a mirror: an invitation for the devil to bring bad dreams, she’d said. But after the sounds of Xiaoyue running the sink had quieted, Baobao went inside and stood in front of the bathroom mirror and stripped, tugging the worn articles from her limbs. When she was finished Baobao looked at the figure before her: puddles of fat and skin, the ugly dark centers of her breasts, her shoulders and face bruise-green under the bare bulb’s glow. When the boy—months later—came for her, smelling of sweat and rust from scaling the fence, always in the dark because the electricity cut out in the night, she was grateful that he did not see what she saw.

In the end, she realized, she knew nothing about him. But until then there were his hands on her body, shoulder to waist to cheek to breast, her consciousness of each soupy softness beneath them, the loudness of her breathing. She noticed herself moving before him as though she were rediscovering the existence of her limbs. They met behind the hot stacks of bricks that lay broken along the dirt paths; he found her and put his nose against the sweet hollow of her neck when she was weeding in the fields. Don’t you have anything better to do, she said, why are you even here. He touched her coarse hair. Parents didn’t want me for the summer. That’s a reason to bother someone like me, she said, and he smiled with all his teeth and she imagined flying at Xiaoyue and saying I understand I understand I understand. He appeared when she was unaware like a half-remembered song, until she became aware, constantly aware. He slipped into her spaces as quietly as rainwater into the gravel
cracks of the main road where nameless mossy flowers bloomed each April.

If her parents knew, they didn’t let on. All her mother said was that she had grown careless with her chores, that she left clumps of weeds behind in fields she had once picked clean. I found dried rice in the cooker you scrubbed, she said one evening as Baobao passed through the living room after dinner. Baobao paused at the door. Her parents were sitting on the couch, their faces awash in the television’s blue-bright flicker. Pay better attention, her mother said. Though she didn’t shift her gaze from the screen, Baobao nodded, expressionless, inside a knot of shame. Her parents’ love was sterile and whatever she felt for this boy, his fingers smudging her windowpanes, adjusting his shirt collars, smearing string with boiled fish paste and smashed glass for kite fights with the younger children, was not. Gossip must be spreading about them. Someone pinning up the washing, Have you seen Baobao and that meiguoren?

Let them have their fun. Baobao hasn’t had a boy her whole life, and now that Xiaoyue is gone—Poor girl. But with a huayi? It will go nowhere. He will return to America.

A bit of fun. They are young.

It’s time she began to look for a husband. She should think of her father, son-less.

Baobao heard them in her head as she fell asleep, conversations she invented when she was left alone in her mind. The gossip that must have spread when she was born, a girl, and then three or four years later when no second pregnancy was announced. When Zhang and Ming married and she followed her mother to the market to buy a kilo of raw peanuts that they boiled with salt and set out to dry, to be arranged at the ceremony with the longan and the lotus seeds and the shriveled red sweet dates, zao sheng guizi, birth a son soon. When Xiaoyue left and Mrs. Luo told her that when Xiaoyue returned, if she returned, it would be with a husband. She and Xiaoyue had laughed about it on the phone later even as Baobao’s ribs ached with truth. She imagined being a shengnu, alone and unwanted at 27. She had heard of other families selling their daughters to be married in far-away villages to men they had never seen before. She imagined her father, swollen-lipped and graying, his hair downy soft and stuck in patches to his skull, giving her away to a faceless man in exchange for a fistful of bills. She slept and let the images eat her eyes.
The train stifling hot, oppressive. Baobao sliding in and out of knowledge, wakefulness slippery as the insides of thighs in August. Every time she opened her eyes the scenery had changed. It was difficult to breathe. The air sat jealously on her chest, her shoulders, the limp strands of hair that stuck to her mouth. The loneliness of the empty car beat against her ears.

The secrecy was meaningless. Everyone by now must know. She hunched over, kneading her collarbones with the knuckles of a fist, a new nervous tic, kneading as though to make sure they were still there, protruding beneath her skin like old roots. They had emerged when she began to stop eating: in part because of the nausea, in part because it disturbed her how she felt her body growing and shifting like the plates of the earth long before anything began to show. This before anyone knew. Before her mother took her hand and they both knew. Before her mother walked her to the bus station a kilometer away where a boy scarred with acne nodded them into the white cloth box hitched to his tricycle. Before they were pedaled and swaddled into the cold room with its pocked white ceiling and the growling belly of the ultrasound, before the cool gel spread over her skin, the wet alien touch of a latex-gloved hand, the words—nuzi—that fell on her as though from a long distance away, a promised punishment. If Xiaoyue saw her now. Baobao wondered if she would still recognize her, carrying the ultimate ownership, the mark of having belonged to someone. For Xiaoyue she would stand up straight.

One night he had pressed his face into the toothpaste stains on her nightgown, the space between her breasts, had slipped his hands beneath the cotton and slid them down her stomach and then further down. No, she had said. Please, he said. His voice vibrated inside her. No, she said again, then softened. Another day. He repeated it: another day. In his mouth the words relaxed, flattened, ran together. He stroked her hair. The old cat, Mimi, nudged open the door and yawned her plaintive meow, her eyes bright bulbs in the blackness. They shushed her together and giggled.

In daylight he seemed afraid of the cat, shying from her when she crossed them together, creaking across the road or through the long grasses beside the wooden building where the farmers stored their new equipment, her fur dust-filled, her eyes rheumy and unfocused. Mimi was old, twelve or thirteen now, and plodded around the house on arthritic toes. Baobao’s father had brought her home as a shivering kitten when
Baobao was seven, retreating from his customary silence to remark that her patches reminded him of the cat he’d had as a boy. Then he’d coddled her with chunks of fish and a physical warmth that he had never shown Baobao when she was younger. When the cat kittened when Baobao was almost nine, it was her father who argued against killing the babies, even though there was nowhere to keep them and no way to feed them. In the end Baobao had helped her mother drown them one by one in a bowl of milk. Their tiny limbs had splattered the liquid all over her arms and dress front, their warmth in her hands as tight as clenched teeth.

Even so, Baobao liked Mimi. As a child she’d meowed at her and rolled smooth pebbles across the floor for her to pounce on and stacked the plastic stools they kept around the house in towering obstacle courses. As an adolescent she’d protected the cat from the village children, who liked to kick their crumpled tin cans and grimy soccer balls at her, their cruelty born of boredom and humidity. In middle school, when Baobao had been convinced that she was in love with Long, he took a shine to the cat and sometimes stopped by during the lunch hour to offer her crumbs or bits of string. Baobao and Xiaoyue had lengthy, serious discussions about whether these offerings meant Long liked Baobao too, and Baobao preened with the hairclips given to her by Auntie Gao and began to hang around outside with Mimi instead of taking her post-lunch nap so that Long would have a chance to talk to her. But each time he saw her he gave her only a blank nod and said nothing.

A thump, a jolt, and the growl of the train’s engine grew suddenly louder. Baobao opened her eyes and looked outside at the landscape: a few spindly, sparse-leaved trees, long yellow fields of wheat. They had stopped. Her head throbbed. She stood up, gripping the wooden back of the seat to steady herself, and nudged out into the aisle. Something or somebody was panting like a dying man. Voices, feet, something slamming. A gaggle of workmen with clean-scrubbed boots carrying cloth lunch bags shoved their way into Baobao’s car, gesturing and speaking loudly in Cantonese, their voices lacing into an unintelligible tumult. An elbow jabbed into Baobao’s side. She smelled sweat and the tang of slick metal and wanted to gag.

The door of the car opened and Baobao, borne along with the crowd, flowed out into the white breathable air. How long had they been traveling? Nothing looked familiar. She remembered the conductor’s searching gaze when she
had presented her ticket to him earlier, the confusion of a man seeing a girl alone. Then, nauseated by the train’s rocking motion, she had pitched into a restless sleep. But for how long? Baobao looked at her cloth shoes sinking into loose gravel, unfamiliar gravel, and realized that her neck hurt. She felt dizzy, feverish. She longed for a smile. She longed for someone to touch her, gently, a moment only, a touch of kindness. Once, some weeks after Mrs. Liu’s funeral, Baobao had found Xiaoyue crying in the shadow of the schoolyard’s brick wall. Long doesn’t like me anymore, she had blubbered, and when Baobao tried to tell her it didn’t matter Xiaoyue had slapped her hand away. You don’t get it, she said. I just want to be enough for someone. But you are enough! Baobao had wanted to spit. Everybody sees you. She thought of her mother avoiding her eyes that morning, the scrap of paper with the clinic address slipped under the bowl of porridge she ate for breakfast, a double ring stain of water cutting between the characters.

Baobao looked up. The workmen had evaporated. A suggestion of evening was falling over the land like a set of heavy drapes, the air cooling, the scratchy music of locusts rising into a cacophony. She could not have missed her stop; they must be in the stretch of countryside preceding the city proper. They had travelled so long that it must not be much farther. She would find the train station here and inquire about a bus or taxi—yes, that is what she must do. Baobao began to walk, slushing through the gravel past car after car streaked with rainwater and bird shit. Ahead was a mess of buildings: a village, perhaps. But no, as she got closer she realized it was more than that—a town, really, with rickety houses that leaned into the road as though they were whispering confessions to the opposing façades. Though it was not quite dusk, some windows, already orange with electricity, smoldered behind grids of chicken wire. Old women with buns and baskets of scallions sat on wooden stools in the street, stripping the broken leaves from the bulbs. A patch of squinting children bent over a dirt hole and flicked at marbles with their nails.

The station couldn’t be far; all she needed was to find the downtown area where the shops were, to get out of this residential division. She walked block after block. Gazes slid past her like water off a tarp, as though she were invisible, as though something in her body prevented them from catching onto her skin. She could feel a vein pounding in her right temple. People slid in and out of her peripheral vision. A man methodically slicing a newspaper into long shreds with a
pocketknife. Two children dipping their feet into a plastic bin of water. A woman knitting a narrow scarf, her needles flashing in the dying light, a ball of creamy wool nestled in her lap. Baobao longed to touch the scarf, to feel something beneath her hands. She saw her father in her mind, his thin white lips after her mother told him that his daughter had been ruined. She saw the boy, his eyes growing blanker each day his departure closed in on him, the final wave he had given her as though to a stranger on the street. Everyone had become a stranger in the end.

A woman in a tattered dress carrying a carton of unpeeled lychees leapt into Baobao’s vision, appearing from nowhere, from darkness. Hungry, girl? she asked. Fresh lychee, the last of the season. She shook the box and the fruits tumbled dryly against the sides.

No, auntie, thank you, Baobao said. The words bored into her mind as though the voice belonged to someone else. How long had it been since she had last spoken? Her throat felt swollen with disuse.

The woman lurched nearer. Baobao resisted the urge to back away. Please, buy my lychee. A yuan and I’ll give you the whole box.

No, auntie, thank you. Close up, her face was pocked and startling, her eyes entirely black beneath the thick folds of her eyelids. Baobao could smell her: something acrid and sulfuric emanating from the surface of her skin. Her stomach turned. Please just tell me where the train—

Please. The woman reached out a clammy hand to grab Baobao’s wrist, her hot sour breath washing over Baobao’s face, and Baobao staggered backward, wrenching out of her grip, and ran, her shoes slipping on the dusty road. She felt something pinch her back, whipped around, frightened, saw the ravaged face of the woman rearing back with another pebble, her features contorted and hideous.

Baobao ran faster. The sky was blackening and the windows were filling with silhouettes. Faces bobbed before her, tightened with anger or sadness. Each step made her head throb harder, the hammering vein shading into her vision—or perhaps it was the night descending in pitching waves of darkness. Ahead a door opened and light and raucous laughter splashed into the street. Baobao moved toward the door, the warmth promised inside. The interior of the room warped as though seen through a glass bottle: a long low brown leather couch, scarred with cracks; a rug colored a kaleidoscopic magenta and green; a wooden hostess stand; manicured nails tapping the surface. She followed the nails up and saw
the beautiful painted face of a girl her age, who smiled at her, then frowned. Baobao pulled towards the smile. The girl, looking uncertain, said something, but Baobao couldn’t hear her, music pulsing through the floor and all through her body, her chest tight, her head cotton-stuffed and heavy. Please, she said, let me stay here. I just want to rest. The room spun.

More words Baobao couldn’t hear. She felt herself nodding—anything for the smile again, for silence, something to quench the dry roof of her mouth. An image of her parents arose in her mind: her mother’s face looming over the bed when Baobao was sick, the cool dry back of her hand brushing her temples. Her father cradling a cup of cold water, letting a stream of it trickle over her cracked lips and down the back of her throat, piling winter coats onto her shivering and feverish body. Waking in the darkness to their whispers at her bedside. How she longed for them now—how she longed to tell them how young she still was—

A cool touch, gentle fingers against her arms. This way, please. Baobao felt herself guided to an open door, up a set of stairs drowned in darkness, stumbling, feeling them squeak wetly and suck at her feet, another door, buttery light under the cracks. She pushed at the darkness and felt it give way. Then the fingers were gone and she saw loafers smudged and crossed on a low coffee table. A television blaring and a thick yowling voice and laughter. Men’s voices, men’s laughter. She felt herself clutch at the cheap wood of the doorframe. Are you the new girl. Come over here—twitchy little thing. Over here, over here. Their voices were not unkind, merely liquid, difficult to grasp. Their faces seemed to melt before her, features scrambling and unscrambling: widow’s peaks, mustaches, square glasses sitting on close-cropped hair. The darkness behind her eyes shaded in and out. She felt a palm on the small of her back, her fingers releasing from the doorframe, someone steering her into the center of the room. A cool glass pressed into her hand. Thirsty, girl? A bottle tipped, the tinkle of liquid falling. She smelled the sharp bright smell of baijiu. The music still going, finally piecing itself into recognition in her mind: American pop songs, their insistent rhythm, the thin warble of a woman’s voice trailing in the background.

A karaoke bar. She had never been in one before, had not even imagined there would be one in such a small town. The men looking at her kindly, crushed on the couch. Look at those bones. Do you eat, girl? So much noise rising around her she couldn’t hear. Someone touched
her shoulder. I can feel them. Someone her knee. Sit here, girl, someone pulling her into a lap, the rustle of polyester, warmth lining her whole back. So much warmth. She felt it radiating. Baobao wanted to be enveloped by that warmth. Their eyes crinkled at her, soft and dry as onion skins. Well, she’s not bad, really. Drink up! Someone pushing the glass in her hand. Are you afraid? She felt breath in her ear, wet and hot, someone’s fingers undoing her braid, want in those fingers, want around her, someone stroking her hair, hands coming in under her breasts. Wow, they’re like melons! Feel this. She felt the boy’s fingers slender and strong, caressing the same flesh, the power she knew when she walked before him, wanted. She tipped the glass into her mouth and the warmth flared within. Another. The bottle tipping again, then her mouth, sticky and heavy, her limbs sunk in deep water, the bright paths the fingers traced all over her skin. Another.
We expected the king, but the princess we received with equal hush. She wore a fascinator of green feathers that shone like our lakes. Her convoy approached our archway. We applauded her. Instead of tucking her chin to her chest (so to prevent the archway from deposing the fascinator), she bent her head up, parallel with sky, and we saw emerge from above her suit her porcelain neck, and, for only a moment, her perfect Adam’s apple. All our fathers died within the week. Later, the town augurs would swear this was prophecy.

⁂

In private, the princess wore khakis and carried a tripod. Her specialty was camellias. She and my mother were married behind the manor in the quiet garden where she took her favorite photographs. I didn’t attend, but foresaw an elaborate series of events: she would latch the camera to the tripod, set its self-timer, look at my mother,
trip over the tripod’s legs, drop with the camera into the grass, and the image would be of a space between them.

**

What surprised the townspeople was not the vigor of our new government but how frequently we sneezed. It afflicted us all with a reassuring regularity. Snot got everywhere. Allergies, most agreed, and blamed the flocks of swallows who had flown in from far-off to roost under our archway. This was, the town augurs reported, not inauspicious. Moisture-wicking fabric became fashionable. Daily my stepmother the princess blessed us as we blessed each other.

**

I badly wanted to avenge him. I stopped masturbating and drowned my childhood dolls in the lakes. I applied mascara and joined the resistance. When my mother and the princess went on their honeymoon I dug up their garden and scattered what I found—little bones, flower petals, dirt—like tea leaves in the foyer. When they returned I photographed, then swept up, the treasures, the swallows flew away, and we all stopped sneezing.

**

This was a bad omen, the town augurs said; the lakes might dry up next. They joined the resistance. My mother and the princess made plans to flee. They buried her camellia pictures where the bushes had been and said a queer prayer. But by this time I had invented the x-ray. I inspected everything from the garden. Under the lens it was obvious: the bones were hollow. Swallows’.

**

When they escaped, our resistance came to power. We were nervous. We need a scapegoat, the augurs suggested, trying to calm nerves. Make it a spectacle, do it on the archway. The word went out and I made preparations. I wore heels and my best fascinator; I told the executioner, *bless you.*
Taxidermy
Jordan Cutler-Tietjen

1. In my dream, I am Peter the Great
2. I am visiting an anatomist named Frederik Ruysch

and I am admiring the work. How are these bodies so lifelike, so almost breathing?
You are telling me there is waxy liquid inside their veins that I could be climbing

And I am turning to see faces embalmed daughterlike ask my family if it’s alright

if I touch what I have been brought here to touch.

I am forgetting monsters are man’s doing, my sister was never born Mr. Ruysch

Because here you’ve made her beautiful she looks almost a teenager glassy

as the future spreads high above her and, now, me.

We are waiting for the prayer to end a path up the wall to open up

As I am blessing Nature, she has been the family this sister imitated in has completed,

her infant cheeks flushing and I may be seeing with my mother’s eyes.

I am reaching for a small babe that could the ledge, missing, falling, be my own safe and my sister has caught me and

I am touching her and I am kissing her cheek I am kissing her cheek

now I am awake and, hopefully, self-replicating.
I Turned My House into a Painting
Matt Reiner
I am imagining you
as you were that night
we went walking, down
the street, out near the field
of horses. A mist had thickened
in the air above the grass

and we couldn’t see them,
only hear the shudder
of their hooves. Your breath
was soft, your face
just visible by the diffuse
light of the moon and the far lamp
of the neighbor’s garage—
you had a look

of such calm focus, staring out
over the obscured field
as if you could see, right
through the mist, something
in the field’s very center.
I reached to hug you,
and watched your gaze
turn towards me again,
the vision passed.
That was sometime

in the summer. When I last
called you on the phone,

I spoke a long time
before you said anything, and then
came someone else’s voice

on your end, laughing, and
some change—I heard you
take a good, deep breath,
then say you had to go.
Towards what,
I wonder, what is it
that you’re facing
in the fields where you are now,
mostly corn, I imagine, vast
hills of it, all neat in rows except
a thin gold dust, stirred,
sometimes, by the wind
passing over.
Holding the Mirror at a Distance
Matt Reiner
“Language is powerful, almost magic, and the smallest alliteration can elevate a sentence or be its undoing.” If this line sounds too much like a writer’s earnest musings, it might help to know that the character who voices the thought is responding to a massage therapist’s frank assessment of her buttocks: “hard,” because, as the therapist puts it, “you’re a tight-ass with your feelings. An emotional tight-ass, a tight-fisted tightwad. Can’t you hear how everything’s right there in the words?”

The buttocks in question belong to Sonja, a translator of gruesome crime novels, an aspiring licensed driver, and the woman at the heart of Dorthe Nors’s sharp, funny, brooding new novel Mirror, Shoulder, Signal, out in June from Graywolf Press. A Danish writer, Nors has published two other books in the U.S.: Karate Chop, a collection of fifteen stories that average a few pages in length; and So Much for that Winter, a set of two experimental novellas about women “on the brink of disappearing.” The arrival of Mirror, Shoulder, Signal, longlisted last year for the Man Booker International Prize, establishes Nors as a writer of rare formal range. Consistent in all of her work is
but writing novels is always a different experience from writing shorter pieces. It takes a lot of time, you have to have a different approach for characters to meet, and so on.

It’s interesting because in the short stories I always choose what gender I please. I mean the protagonist can be a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, black, white, whatever. In *Minna Needs Rehearsal Space* and in *Mirror, Shoulder, Signal*, I chose quite deliberately to have a woman, and that, of course, connects them. But basically, they’re still working on shedding a light on the same things, which are structures of time and existential structures, and people on the edge of losing themselves, or people at a crossroads. Those are the things that keep pulling me in.

Yale Literary Magazine  Your last book published in the U.S., *So Much for That Winter*, includes the novellas *Minna Needs Rehearsal Space* and *Days*. I felt that there was a certain kinship between Minna and Sonja, the protagonist of *Mirror, Shoulder, Signal*. Did you see the works as taking on similar questions?

Dorthe Nors  They didn’t feel like writing the same story, but all writers will have books that are connected in the things that they investigate. In these two, I guess there is a way of looking at life when you’re not that young anymore. That’s part of it. But I see them as very, very independent pieces. First of all, *Minna Needs Rehearsal Space* was driven by a conceptual need to play. It’s the most playful thing I ever wrote, and I had so much fun writing it because I made these rules for myself, and I tried to play by them. It’s not that *Mirror, Shoulder, Signal* wasn’t fun to write, but writing novels is always a different experience from writing shorter pieces. It takes a lot of time, you have to have a different approach for characters to meet, and so on.

YLM  Was it hard to go from writing stories, and then these formally inventive and playful novellas, back into longer works? Or had you been working on *Mirror, Shoulder, Signal* in the background?

DN  I always write one book at a time. I wouldn’t say that it was hard, but since the novel is the more classical form, there are more restrictions around it. Also, you have to stay with your character for maybe two, three years when you write a novel, sometimes even longer. With short stories, you
can take a character that is pretty cruel and awful, and you don’t have to spend that much time with them. That’s the primary difference: when you write a novel you really have to choose a protagonist that you can endure hanging out with for a long time.

I think it’s incredibly important that writers change form now and then, exercise other sides of their language. This is how precision is born. So in order to keep my language and my perception sharp, I do change genres now and then. I just finished a short story collection here that will be out in Denmark in September.

YLM I’m wondering what your earlier novels were like, because we haven’t been able to read them in English.

DN My true voice was born with the book just before *Karate Chop*. The first two novels were thicker, they were longer, and they were very inspired by Swedish writers that I had studied at university. I do feel that I grew into my voice around the third book, and that it crystallized in *Karate Chop*. The problem with having these earlier works translated is that I don’t remember why I wrote them. [LAUGHS] And I think age has not been kind to them, I don’t know. I haven’t read them in quite a while because I’ve been so focused on contemporary things. But who knows, maybe the third book will be translated one day.

YLM I wanted to ask about *Minna Needs Rehearsal Space* and *Days*, and just your formal experimentation in general. Is that something that’s common in Denmark, or is there not really a big experimental scene?

DN There is a big scene—well, “big.” Nothing is “big” in Denmark. We’re five million people who speak this language, so it’s hard to call it “big.” But there are some communities in the Danish literary scene that do work with short, short prose and experiments like that. Writing within a small culture sometimes results in a withdrawn style. When you primarily communicate with the others in the group it becomes a very coded kind of literature. I think the difference is that *Days* and *Minna Needs Rehearsal Space* have a strong awareness of the reader, that there is somebody listening. That might be a slight distance to what is going on some places in the Danish scene. But basically I think the Danes write novels, and experimental stuff—the same things you do.
YLM Are there authors from Denmark that are being translated into English that you would recommend people check out?

DN Kim Leine. He’s won big awards. He writes about Greenland and the Greenlandic history—pretty good, but it’s very different from what I write. It’s a very, very thick book, thick narrative. He’s out in the U.S.

I think there might be a book out next year by a writer called Naja Marie Aidt. She has a book that was translated in the U.S. called Baboon. She also wrote a book about losing her son, which is the best she’s written, I think. It will be out in the U.K., therefore it probably will be out in the U.S. also. It’s called When Death Takes Something From You Give It Back: Carl’s Book.

YLM Thinking about your own experience with translation, have there been any surprises with this most recent book?

DN Mirror, Shoulder, Signal has been sold to twenty countries, and the really funny thing is that when the translator returns it to me it’s always with the same questions, no matter what the language. It’s the same complications. It could be a small word that troubles people. And in some countries, for instance some Slavic countries, you can’t be gender neutral in your verbs, which bothered me because I really like, in some texts, to leave the gender out of it. In some languages that is impossible.

YLM You’ve spoken a lot before about your dual national influences, with Swedish literature informing some of your subject matter, and then the Danish language being very playful. In Mirror, Shoulder, Signal, the chief distinction seems to be between city and country. I’m curious if those opposing forces have played a role in your life or in your writing at all.

DN The answer to that is dual. I did come from the Danish countryside. I was born far away from urban life and personally knew that I had to leave because I had potential, as my teacher said, and I had to go to university, I had to go somewhere else. That leaves a damaging thing on your soul. Your identity is split between two places: the place you came from and love, but can’t return to; and the place you have to go, but don’t really belong to.

The other answer to that question is that right now in Denmark, this is a huge conflict, and I guess it is in Trump U.S.A., too. There are the urban people versus people outside, in the rural
areas and the industrial areas, who are not benefiting from the same goods that people in the big cities are. And there is a very, very strong political conflict between the outsiders and the insiders. Very few Danish writers know both positions. Most Danish writers come from Copenhagen or live in the Copenhagen area. They just don’t know what’s out there—but I do. So I wanted to take it to that level. That is not the same as Sonja being a replica of myself—I don’t see her as an autobiographical character. But I donate knowledge to my characters. Otherwise they would be completely two-dimensional, and they would also be boring to read about if they did not have some general existential and political qualities that people would be able to mirror.

YLM One thing I find so impressive about your prose in general—and I think it is part of that Danish tradition that you’ve talked about—but the playfulness and the understated language and the wry way of putting things. You have that on the one hand, but there’s always an earnest emotional core to everything you write. Is it hard to strike that balance, or does it come naturally to you?

DN Well, I hope it comes naturally to me, because the day it doesn’t feel natural anymore, I’ve got to do something about it. When I said that I think that I found my voice around Karate Chop, that is what I found. I want people to feel that there is an abyss beneath the sentences, that there is something else, a void, a darkness, something that you’re not too certain about. I would say emotional presence is probably the way to put it—it sucks the reader in and allows the reader to be present with their emotions.

When I studied at university, I studied literature, and Swedish literature in particular. The approach to literature was that it only took place in our heads and that it was something that could be analyzed, that it was something that could be pulled apart and understood, and I hated it. I rose up against it, I hated it. Because I do think literature has to of course be smart and engage our minds and intellects, but it should also acknowledge that human beings are full of emotions and memories and things that they bring into the text. If there’s nothing to mirror that, the text dies. It becomes math. Math is boring. Literature shouldn’t be math.

YLM I was noticing in Mirror, Shoulder, Signal you poke fun at that idea of textual analysis. Sonja says that her massage therapist Ellen’s way of “parsing other people’s bodies [...]” reminds her
of her university classes in textual analysis. Everything’s supposed to mean something else.” I kept thinking of that line as the book went on, with Sonja’s positional vertigo—it seems like in some ways you’re encouraging us to think of it as a spiritual condition, but in other ways you’re making fun of the reader who looks too deeply at things. Was that deliberate?

DN  I’m not very deliberate. I’m very intuitive when I write. But at one point I must have found that very funny. Sometimes when I do readings people will raise their hand and ask about that spiritual condition with her dizziness, and then I go, “It’s a very common disorder. Will everybody here who has suffered from this kind of disorder raise their hands?” About twenty percent of the audience will raise their hands because they suffer from this. And I go, “Well, there goes your symbol.”

But of course I find it funny to describe a person who doesn’t know how to find direction in life as somebody who, every time she’s under pressure, flips over. So of course it is a metaphor for her existential situation. But it’s also something concrete. You have to give your characters some fun stuff to play with. Otherwise, they don’t live.

YLM  There’s such a physical comedy to your work, and often at these emotionally climactic points—like in Minna Needs Rehearsal Space when Minna slips on a rock, or Sonja falling over in Mirror, Shoulder, Signal. Are these moments meant to provide relief? How do you see them functioning in your work?

DN  When you work with this kind of precision that I like to work with, I find that I can have people laugh at the beginning, and then someone will cry because it’s so heartbreaking what’s going on. And also, engaging the smile in the reader will quite often mean that they accept the heartache that is also there. But I never plan it out. In my daily life I see stuff that is pretty heartbreaking now and then, and two minutes later it cracks me up completely, there was something about it that was just so stupid. I’m that kind of person.

YLM  I think a lot of people are.

DN  Yeah, and thank God you are. How are you going to survive life if you can’t laugh at it when it’s hard?

YLM  Another running commentary in this book is on crime fiction, specifically its dominance in
the Danish literary scene and its often brutal depictions of violence against women. At the same time, in the book, it’s women like Sonja’s sister or Folke’s wife who are these authors’ biggest fans. Is that a real trend in Denmark, or is it exaggerated or imagined in this book?

DN There has been a tradition of the short story in Denmark. I usually say, for instance, that Hans Christian Andersen wrote short-short. His stories—we call them fairy tales, but they were written in the 18th century, after modernity hit in, so they are pretty modern and therefore short stories. He’s the giant in that genre. Another very big short story writer we had was Karen Blixen, Seven Gothic Tales. And then there are some really, really good short story writers from the ’40s and ’50s who are not translated at all.

What happened in my youth, when I was studying and when I started writing, was that the Danish Writers Academy, which is a powerful small institution, tapped into a trend that said the short story was not anything they would study because it was a non-genre. If you wanted to write a short story, that was just because you weren’t able to write a novel. So it was constantly degraded. My approach to it is that it is the hardest of all the genres, because if you’re not good at it you write really terrible stories.

But it has changed. After Karate Chop had that success, there have been a lot of short story
collections in Denmark. It’s really interesting. Some of the writers who fifteen years ago, or ten years ago, would say to me that they would never touch the short story genre are now publishing short story collections. It has really changed, and that’s lovely.
“But my roommate: she has, I think, night terrors. She can’t sleep one night without making these noises, like she’s screaming or whatever. Like a zombie noise, like: *euaaagh*, like that. And sometimes she wakes up at like eight in the morning and sits up in bed and just says, ‘Oh, fuck...’ and then goes back to bed... I swear it’s impossible sometimes. I’m up in bed reading at night and she just keeps making those noises, like every couple minutes. Woken me up once or twice... But, at least it’s never happened to me.”

The third floor is really an attic or loft—I can’t be sure of the specifics—and it is warm and dark and womblike given the night and the humidity in the air. It smells like our sweat and someone is burning incense downstairs or has, at least, recently.

“Oh, my god,” Pietra murmurs. “Yeah, I’ve definitely had like waking nightmares. Like, hypnagogic—”

“Wait,” says Jeanne. “What’s that word mean?”

“Like liminal,” she says. “Like between asleep and awake.”
“I was like fifteen,” she says after a moment, resuming her cadence. She looks around at the exposed timbers. Our shadows flicker against them; our hosts have scattered electric tealights on the hardwood between the mattresses on the third floor because—as far as I can tell—there are no light bulbs up here. It is night. The window gives us nothing.

“I was in high school, and I woke up one night convinced I was just covered in scorpions,” she says, and she lets it sink in. She runs her open hand over her belly in the air like she’s communicating a pregnancy. “And I threw off the cover and like I saw the scorpions crawling all over me in bed. So obviously I screamed and I fucking fell out of bed.” Pietra shakes her head. She cannot believe what she’s had to endure, and it is a sympathetic time of the night: neither can we.

It makes me think of a certain story to tell, because god, if there were ever a time to tell it...

Instead this girl who we talked to earlier in the night comes up the stairs behind Jeanne and Pietra, who has her legs in my lap and is leaned against Jeanne’s arm. The girl stands over us for a minute, and she has brought us, we see, red plastic cups with what I assume is wine.

“What’s up?”

“Hey,” she says.

“Go on down,” I say, and it’s kind of nonsense, so I amend: “Take a seat.”

She sits on the mattress, next to where I am resting my head, but she only perches, tensed, to set down the four cups of wine. She has their quivering plastic casings pinched between the fingers of either hand. I lift my head and she seems to get the message, and moves so that when I set it back down I do so on her crossed legs.

“We are talking,” Jeanne announces; someone in a shadowed corner of the third floor shushes her dreamily, asking her to preserve the quiet. We have sunken into a pool of our legs and Merlot.

But I take a sip from the cup, and it’s nothing so sophisticated. I know that the thoroughly fine bottle of Sutter Home I brought out got drunk up quickly, and I espied, earlier, the jug wines lined up on our host’s kitchen counter to be uncorked. It is sweet and nothing about it challenges my tongue—so I think it is the perfect wine for this time of night.

“What is this?” I murmur to no one in particular.

“It’s—good,” is what Pietra replies after a little bit too long. She has an incredibly small frame and in drinking, the toxins bleed right through the walls of her flesh into her bones. When she shifts her legs in my lap—the heel of one foot is perched on my breastbone—I hear the lees slosh from femur to knee.
“We are talking about dreams and things,” Jeanne says a little urgently. She leans forward to address this new girl.

I debate whether or not I ought to say anything, but I come to realize that I am obliged. I look up at the girl’s face. She looks down when she feels my head move in her lap.

“Nightmares.”

The girl seems to understand and she nods her head, and she asks, “Can I touch you?” It’s broad but we’re contextual animals. I close my eyes in satisfaction and nod my head “yes,” and I feel her place her fine-boned and very slim fingers sort of on either side of my head.

I have long, thick, dark, heavy, beautiful hair. Handfuls of the stuff. She collects some into one hand and strokes my cheek.

The thing to understand before progressing is how, individually, in a police line-up, or in file photos—you get the sort of thing that I mean, just something independent of our placement on the third floor of this house—we are all cool, young, and beautiful to look at. Even this girl whose lap I am laying my head in, having gotten to talk to her a little bit earlier with our second drink of the evening, seems to fit in. She’d had glitter dusted lightly all over her chest and collarbone and in the flicker of the little tealights her skin is iridescent still, but it could be sweat, and it could be shadow.

“I don’t really ever remember my dreams,” the girl says. “So I don’t really have nightmares like the kind you wake up in the middle of the night from.”

“I don’t know if I’m jealous or not,” Jeanne murmurs. “I feel like you’re missing out on something.”

I shrug lazily. “Don’t ascribe meaning to something for no reason.” But no one seems to react, so I’m not entirely certain I really said it.

“Wait sorry,” Jeanne says suddenly. “But what’s your name?”

“Clio,” the girl says softly. I look at up at her, and I was right, she is beautiful to look at. I’m sorry I didn’t catch up with her earlier, because the third floor has become quiet and meditative and I’m sort of obligated into this conversation with Pietra and Jeanne. But, you know, maybe I could get her number.

We are sitting around by the edge of the third-story staircase, and it’s warm from all the body heat and the insulation, and the fact that heat rises, or so I’ve been told.

“You were talking about nightmares?” Clio asks us. She is running one fingertip around the ridge of my ear; it feels good.
“I used to have nightmares about drive-by shootings,” says Jeanne.

Clio sort of blinks.

“Wait,” Pietra says, sort of sitting up a little straighter, and looking at Jeanne with a slight look of peering concern, “why?”

“What?”

“Like why were you afraid of them?”

“Because there was a drive-by at my elementary school and two at my high school back home,” Jeanne says.

“Oh,” says Pietra, and settles herself back on Jeanne’s arm.

“Did anyone die?” I hear Clio ask. It’s the sort of question that could very easily be gleeful and lascivious, but it sounds genuine, like she’s asking after the ill health of a friend’s relative.

“Well, one, the first time,” Jeanne replies. She resettles herself on the mattress, crossing one leg over the other. Her skin collects the light and spreads it around like a liniment. It is dark and in the dark appears soft. She and Pietra have been together for hours now, and I can’t say it hasn’t been a spectacular thing to watch.

“But you said,” Pietra adds suddenly, turning to me, “you said you had nightmares.” The stud in her nose catches the light and glitters. Her hair is short, thick, cut at home and choppy and uncaring. There are freckles on her skin, something oxblood in the glare from the tealights.

I am confused. I don’t remember having said that. “What?”

“You said that you had nightmares, earlier,” she says. “Right? Isn’t that how we got started on this?” She turns her head to my left, to look at Jeanne for confirmation, who shrugs and takes a drink from her wine.

“You said that you had a nightmare and you were going to tell us about it,” says Pietra.

I cover my eyes with my hand and after a moment squeeze the bridge of my nose in a very grand and operatic way to show everyone that I’m kidding, I’m alright. If you believe it, or not. I’d actually just managed to forget for a moment the reality of the situation. This girl showing up made me start thinking about girls, about wine, about, you know, other things.

Outside, at the window, it is snowing again, and the snow against the sky is white; it is evocative. In another corner of the attic, someone in the dark moans very softly, closer to a sigh. They are pleased and satisfied.

“Yeah,” I say after a moment. “It’s fucked, though.”

“Well, whatever,” Pietra says.

“What is it?” Clio asks me, it seems like, out of the blue.
I look up at this girl. Her face is fine-boned and pale, and she has dark circles under her eyes, but makeup too, and they work together to lend her gaze this vast intensity. Because she is small, and she is thin, you wouldn’t expect this of her, necessarily, no. But she looks down at me and it’s shocking; it’s striking to see this intensity so close to me, like holding in the palm of your hand barely contained a frenzied dynamo.

I take a little breath. “You know like lucid dreaming?” There is a murmur of agreement. “Well sometimes I sort of lucid dream, or like—well, anyways, you’ll see what I mean.

“I had this dream that I was at my house, I was at my house alone, in bed, no one else was around in the middle of the night. And the—the men in the clean white coats—you know what I’m talking about? I got this premonition that they were coming. And sure enough they did, they came, got ahold of me, butterfly net, straitjacket, everything. They put me in a straitjacket and threw me in a padded cell.

“And before long they come and get me and have got me strapped down to a gurney, they’re carting me along to—an operating theater. And I’m strapped down and this is—I’m taking biology I guess, at the time—so I realize what’s gonna’ happen. I realize that they’re going to dissect me. They’re going to cut me open and root around and take things out; kill me.

“And I’m freaking out, and demanding, begging to be let go, but the doctors or surgeons, they keep insisting: ‘Shh, it won’t hurt a bit. It’s not going to hurt…’ They had this—mask, or helmet sort of thing. With a bunch of straps and a big rubber part that went over my mouth and nose. And they, you know, they put that on me… And I knew I was dreaming, I guess? But at the same time I couldn’t convince myself to wake up, and I knew whether it hurt or not, if I couldn’t convince myself to wake up, it was going to be an experience I’d have to start carrying on with for as long as I’d remember it.”

I am then quiet for several moments. I notice, suddenly, the absence of movement. Clio is not touching my head any longer, though she has not become so upset as to upend my head from her lap.

I have disturbed our gloss, I realize. We are four women sitting together, but just a few moments ago we were, I think, a single thing. Tangled legs and hair, four pairs of hips and thighs. Several colors come together in the waning glow from the electric tealights.

But though our bare skin is cool and dewy in the dark, I realize: I became naked, and my
nakedness was worse than the penny dreadful horrors I described.

I resettle myself slightly, as a form of punctuation. I stir beneath Pietra’s long tan legs, and in Clio’s narrow lap. My hair is heavy and beautiful.

“But I guess I must have woken up then,” I add, by way of conclusion. “I don’t remember what happened next.” Then I laugh, to show them everything is alright, me and them, we’re all alright.

They laugh a little bit too. And they seem to settle things down themselves. Clio’s hands resume care of my head. I did not misjudge her—not even the fact that in my nakedness I bred nothing but shame—but because of—the—the thing of it—when a dream—or a nightmare—if a dream is not a dream—regardless—They have taken out all my organs. My insides are grain and pulp. Copper wire nested through the stuffing. The stars they put in me, red dwarfs, are insulated so that they don’t burn the sawdust where my stomach once sat. I would burst in flaming effigy, and I—it might be the truthful I, if I am

So I laugh, to put her at ease, and everyone else, seeing that it’s okay, laughs along with me. We’re all okay. It’s the right context to say a thing like that, and we’re the right people—her feet are on my tits, for god’s sake. There are words of relieved assent; you can’t trace their truthfulness but to do so would be a fruitless and purposeless exercise.

We are quiet for a moment but after another Pietra lifts her voice again and she brings something up. It is a question, and it hangs in the air like the scent of incense, the musk of lathered thighs, and the snow in the air at the window, standing up, standing tall, and never falling under our sleepy eyes. And like the snow falling someone answers, and we laugh, and someone says something, it could be me.

But I can’t be a part of this with them, not really, because of—not even the fact that in my nakedness I bred nothing but shame—but because of—the—the thing of it—when a dream—or a nightmare—if a dream is not a dream—regardless—

They have taken out all my organs. My insides are grain and pulp. Copper wire nested through the stuffing. The stars they put in me, red dwarfs, are insulated so that they don’t burn the sawdust where my stomach once sat. I would burst in flaming effigy, and I—it might be the truthful I, if I am
not the chimera I once imagined—would go on
living still in their canopic jars, living in my heart
and lungs. I am in my incised guts.

And my head is in Clio’s lap and she is feeling
my hair. The thought arrives—though I cannot
be sure it was not a dream and was not imag-
ined—that when I awoke as an outpatient, and
the surgeons gave me a brief overview of adjust-
ing to it all, that they promised me: for every story
you tell, you will get one organ back.

And I wonder if it will be my heart or lungs,
but probably something as small as the gallblad-
der—they took everything out, and I am human
taxidermy, though their work was flawless, and
no one will ever be able to tell. And beyond this,
I didn’t even finish the story—and I felt no baro-
metric change; I received no postcard notifying
me of my upcoming surgical appointment. It must
not have even registered. If I didn’t imagine the
plea bargain in the first place.

I run my thumb across my flesh where there is
no seam and feel the real weight of their precise
replacement; the pressure of my flesh where no
one’s caring hands could divine an empty wrong-
ness. But I’m all fugazi.

“What are you doing?” Clio asks curiously.
She is holding my chin gently with one hand,
and when I smile at her, she smiles back.

I am paralyzed, but there’s bootstrap in this
husk, and I can talk, I can smile, I can make love
indistinguishably. I would say that it is like riding
passenger in your own body, but no, the sense
of the shell is still all there.

Later we all go off into the night and the snow.
We are tired—yes even my skin sags outwardly—
and there are places we must go. A cherry bomb
airbursts above the snow and the spalling travels
in water. We are the exploded fragments of this
night’s detonation—because nothing will ever
be the same again, and not in an apocalyptic
sense, but only to say that in our coming togeth-
er and going apart, we have collided, glanced,
and altered each other irreparably.

When we are alone and we suppose that this
is it, Clio and I stand facing each other ankle-
deep in a snowdrift. We shiver but it is not too
cold. The sky only looked dark from the inside,
because above us it is all cloud, and the city ham-
mers copper against its snowing surface.

She has a scarf wound around her neck; her
face is red from the cold and the wine. I see her
reach into her jacket pocket and pull something
out in one gloved hand. She hands it to me: it
is a scrap of paper. “Here,” she says. Her voice
is hoarse and tired. She might be drunk. This
might not be the decision she wants to make,
or, going forward, it may be nothing but a belly-ache of regret. “If you want to get coffee or something sometime.”

I smile at her. “Sure,” I say. I don’t mean to give the impression I have things figured out myself. “I’ll say good-bye to you here, then.”

Going down the road the world has become quiet and still. I know that eventually the hands on the clock will resume their turning, and sooner, rather than later (checking my phone, it is almost 4 AM)—but not right here, and not right now. I imagine that the road is a hundred-thousand miles long, snow and sleeping trees, and because I imagine it, it becomes the truth. I am alone and I am walking in the dry falling cold. There is no one and nothing else around, only me, because this is how it is on the inside, underneath the skin.

(I’ll take off everything I’m wearing, if you want to see. I’ll peel off my skin and pull out my hair. I don’t know what’s holding it all together underneath, but I’ll show you, if they’re there, the strange bones beneath.)
boy comes out, holds soccer ball gingerly.
takes off shoes
puts carefully aside.
grass glows green, edged hard with sun.
airplane buzz in blue sky.

boy begins to move
dribbles, kicks, jogs
strong legs in strong sun.
boy like dog
content with ball.
amazed he is so easily satisfied.
girl stares at sky.

gradually, the others:
rainbow of t-shirts and easy shorts
emerging tops of knees.
dog with ball becomes boys with game.
boys run. girl wonders about ‘boys’
and ‘girls,’ about ‘dog’
and ‘game.’ hot sun.
words wane.

on the way in
slight lean towards grassy field.
walks on.
averts her eyes.

girl has no interest in boys, but
is glad to see bodies in motion
sun lighting up the shapes of them
leaves and
tree trunks and
the muscle under shining skin.
boys kick. girl listens.
sharp hit, loose echo.
bench is for sitting. girl reclines.
just sound, just sky.

girl wonders
why she does not join.
her own muscles are not
insignificant
things.
muscles
hunger. shinbones
flinch.

(when did bones learn
flinching? when did hunger
turn shy?)
Sharing a birthday with her mother
the girl calls to say thank you
at the same time the mother calls
to remind her to wear silk pajamas.

It is humid for October,
the pajamas will cool her.
She will know silk because
it does not crease when folded.

The girl nods across the line.
With her mother, she does not need to use
all the words she knows:
lachrymose, conifer, marmalade.

There is something wonderful
about having a word for everything.
The world feels so full when you can hold
whole species of trees in your mouth.

The girl walks through the fall foliage
speaking the names of birds: egret,
cardinal, sparrow, guinea fowl.
Dusk falls and the whippoorwills emerge.

When her mother landed in this country,
not knowing what to call peonies
or black-eyed susans, how, among all the flowers,
did she manage to survive?
Miss Marlene MacGlúinebeag was seated at her desk at noontime in Silver Thimble School for Home Economics in Pells, South Shitesdale preparing to eat the second half of her homemade pasta primavera when she noticed a colorful figure resolving in her periphery. Curious and alone in her classroom, the pale woman, raisin-like and aged, rotated her flossy head rightward to look out the window, where she saw:

A peacock!

What a surprise! She blinked at least five times in rapid succession, too stunned to register the uncomfortable abrasive weight of her mascara-laden lashes on the superior fringes of her cheeks. But before our woman could adjust her contact lenses (a delicate process, involving her right pinky-finger, the only appropriate tool for the job as Marlene was hopelessly and exclusively right-handed and equipped with the standard four-fingers-and-thumb on her right hand, each of which were varied in size, their set of surface areas predictably finding a minimum value in the pinky), she was interrupted:
“Miss MacGlúinebeag?”
The voice came from a young man from her third period class, Geometry, it was. He was a young man, tan skin, dark hair, a bit shifty if anyone asked Marlene in confidence. He was too tall to be trusted and seemed incapable of knitting an even pair of socks for her Textiles and Clothing course.

“Miss MacGlúinebeag?”
Oh! What was his name?
“Yes? What is it, young man?” Marlene leveled her gaze with the boy. He was a bit blurry indeed, one half of his face clear and articulable, the other half a murky swatch of colors. She condemned her lenses and blinked at least five times in rapid succession, finding the real quandary to be that her eyes were as dry as outer space itself. A breeze came through the window, cool and casual, and boosted a balloon of odors from her pasta to her nostrils. Suddenly, Marlene remembered the peacock.

“Well, I…” the boy began. His speech, in reality quite probably a perfectly coherent string of words and phrases, to Marlene was denatured into a fluctuating garbling, along with his face, which soon began to closely resemble a pregnant, shivering raincloud. Marlene was fighting an involuntary and spasmodic urge to turn her head to the right. This peculiar battle caused her to, from an outside observer’s point of view (say, the chattering student before her), appear insane, or, at the very least, in need of an MRI, or perhaps a nice bath.

The boy frowned. There appeared to be something deeply wrong with his teacher, or, at the very least, more than slightly concerning. He glanced at her pasta primavera: was it rapid-onset food poisoning? Perhaps she was choking. Was he prepared to do the Hemingway? The Hummer? The Heimlich whatsit? He ought to reach out to her:

“Miss MacGlúinebeag? Miss MacGlúinebeag, is everything alright?”

“Is everything alright?” Marlene echoed. A patch of sweat, like a shoal in receding tide, emerged on her brow. A pain in her neck rang out like a bell as she tried not to look out the window to her right. If she looked then he would look and make a big fuss. She couldn’t have everyone crowding around taking pictures. Wouldn’t he just go away!

The fingers on her right hand twitched involuntarily and struck the white plastic fork that had been perched artfully between the rim of her tupperware and the table. It toppled and caused a scratchy din. The boy frowned.
“Miss MacGlúinebeag? Miss MacGlúinebeag, is everything alright?”

Marlene lifted her lips into what felt like a smile of geriatrical glassiness. She blinked twice and only managed to dislodge her left contact lens such that it descended from her eye and landed with a small clamor on the table below. Naturally, she closed the lid of her (now defunct) left eye and once again leveled her gaze with the student before her, who had miraculously resolved into a coherent and digestible visual form. She expertly read the wrinkled concern on the boy’s face and set about to immediately dispel any bothersome worries he might attempt to express.

“Oh yes, everything is just fine, thank-you. You see, I’ve been having some trouble with my contact lenses, but luckily, I have a spare set right here in my desk.” Marlene gestured to her desk and hoped the student would not observe that the desk did not in fact have any drawer or equivalent receptacle in which a spare set of contact lenses might be stored.

“Miss MacGlúinebeag, I don’t mean to be rude, but it seems like your desk does not have any drawer or equivalent receptacle in which you might hope to store a spare set of contact lenses.”

Marlene reeled back in shock. To an outside observer (say, the stunned student before her), our woman seemed to jerk minutely backwards in her chair, a motion that could be reasonably explained away as a uniquely hefty exhalation, or some such insignificant bodily event. It was the peculiar action of her eyelids that disturbed the student before her: in her reeling, Marlene attempted to disengage eye contact with the young man (a labor which had thus far been solely carried out by her right eye, the left being defunct without its lens) and in so doing became irrationally confused; for, as you know, our dear Marlene had had her left lid closed (covering her defunct eye), and now was lowering her right lid (so as to disengage eye contact); the descension of her right lid produced an uncomfortable muscular tension in her (closed) left lid, and so just as her right lid fully eclipsed her line of sight, her left lid popped open, resulting in an exact mirror of her previous eyelid configuration!

Upon witnessing this, the student before Miss Marlene released a yelp, which he tactfully disguised as a small and polite cough.

“Oh! Excuse me, I must be catching an infection of the upper throat. Miss MacGlúinebeag, I don’t mean to be impolite, but you seem rather unwell. Shall I call Nurse Nelly?”

Nurse Nelly! This was getting out of hand!
“No! That will not be necessary, thank-you!” Marlene replied calmly, her voice bearing an unfortunate sonic resemblance to a caterwaul. She placed both hands gracefully on the table for emphasis, her right hand missing the mark and landing in her pasta primavera. Marlene looked down at her hand with a look of dismay and exhaled, and then inhaled approximately three seconds later, as that is the proper procedure for quotidian breathing. In so doing, a parade of odors jogged through her nostrils, and she was struck again: the peacock!

“Would you like me to find you a napkin, Miss MacGlúinebeag?” the student offered, looking grimly at her right hand, which was coated in a mélange of olive oil, rotini, and snap peas.

“No, thank-you, I have a spare set of at least three napkins right here in my desk.” Marlene neatly patted the table with her left hand (her right hand, of course, being mired in pasta primavera). (One must note, with an affect of warmth and pity, that our woman had cleanly forgotten that the young man before her was wise to the fact that her desk was in fact a simple table, without drawers or any equivalent receptacles in which napkins or contact lenses might be stored.)

The student gave her a look.

“I’ll go get you a napkin, shall I?” The boy promptly turned and left the classroom, presumably in search of napkins.

Marlene exhaled, and then inhaled approximately three seconds later, as is expected of a living person. In so doing, a mob of odors assaulted her olfactory organ: the peacock!

Alone as she was, Marlene sat paralyzed for at least four seconds in her seat. Approximately twenty-five minutes had passed since she had last seen the peacock. Slowly, our woman rotated her flossy head rightward to look out the window, whence a delicate wind was flowing. Naturally, Marlene found it at the very least difficult to see what lay beyond the window, as her left eye (defunct) and her right eye (rapidly drying in the path of the delicate wind flowing from the window) were both open. She promptly shut her left eye, and blinked her right eye at least three times so as to sufficiently moisturize it. With a grand throat-clearing and shoulder-rolling, Marlene, oiled hand and all, rose from her seat and strode, phlegmatic and outwardly undisturbed, to the window, where she saw:

Pipes! And a small chimney!

Indeed, our woman observed a bundle of green and blue pipes, freshly painted and gleaming, splayed in the immediate foreground of a
singular, thin, royal blue chimney stack! Upward and downward, leftward and rightward; nowhere to be found was a peacock, simply the aforementioned arrangement of rooftop hardware (which, to an outside observer with an artistic eye, from a certain angle looked remarkably like a full-grown male peacock).

“Miss MacGlúinebeag?” Our boy had silently returned, only to see his teacher positioned at the window, both hands placed gently on the sill. She turned.

“Do you have a napkin?” she asked.
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