“So it is not because I feel a duty to teach or convert the public that I publish my things but because, if one is to recognize one’s own identity, one needs imaginary readers.”

MAX FRISCH, MONTAUK

“I know my literary trademark is the problem of identity, even though I do not identify with this trademark myself. But both my trademark and I are fine with this.”

MAX FRISCH IN AN INTERVIEW WITH DIETER E. ZIMMER FROM DIE ZEIT
**Scofield Thayer**  
Sculpture by Gaston Lachaise  

**Interview Disaster**  
Painting by Ian Francis  

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Always a Question

Philosopher Simon Critchley, who I interviewed for this issue, wrote the following statement in two of his books, *On Humour* and *ABC of Impossibility*: “Does not our identity precisely consist in a lack of self-identity, in the fact that identity is always a question for us—a quest, indeed—that we might vigorously pursue, but it is not something I actually possess?”

There is some sort of irony in the fact that this exact statement appears twice in Critchley’s ouevre and, therefore, has some identity with itself, resonating from one text to the other, an echo. For our purposes, though, the more compelling thing to notice about Critchley’s statement on identity is that it is not actually a statement at all—it is a question, and so doubles back on itself, interrogating its own ponderance. But the question mark which sits at the sentence’s conclusion also perfectly fuels the claim itself: we do seem to have within us a question, a lack, a “chronic divisiveness,” as Critchley calls it. My introduction for our previous issue—the Dambudzo Marechera & The Doppelgänger Issue—attempted to get at a similar proposition about identity through our Whitmanian multitudes, contradictions, largeness. The beauty of segueing from the doppelgänger as the theme for that issue to identity as the theme for this issue is that the doppelgänger is merely a literary trope through which one can examine the larger problem, the ultimate question of identity—a question we are quite excited to end our first year exploring.

Before we chose the theme of identity, though, we chose this issue’s spotlighted author, Max Frisch. Scott Cheshire, one of our managing editors, wrote an essay for *Electric Literature* in August of 2014 (republished in these pages), which focused on plotless novels and featured some extensive praise for one particular plotless novel that had been out of print for years: *Montauk* by Max Frisch. When Tony Perez of Tin House read Cheshire’s piece in *Electric Literature*, he set out to acquire the rights to republish the novel (a complicated process, as you’ll see when you dive into the issue and read his conversation with Conor Higgins). At the same time that Perez was trying to hammer out a rights agreement for Tin House to republish *Montauk*, we were creating the first issue of *The Scofield*, so it made sense that when Tin House finally did republish *Montauk*, we would release an issue focused on its author.

The author of *Montauk*, Max Frisch, is better known as the author of the novels *I’m Not Stiller* and *Homo Faber* and of the plays *Firebugs* and *Andorra*. He is a Swiss writer whose work wrestles with ideas of identity, morality, and political engagement. Frisch maintained a complicated relationship with his homeland. In a speech given in acceptance of the 1973 Schiller Prize, he declared: “I am Swiss, not simply because I hold a Swiss passport, was born on Swiss soil, etc.—but I am Swiss by quasi-religious confession.” Cheshire, in addition to getting Tony Perez to become Frisch-obsessed by quasi-religious confession, managed to do the same to a number of us on *The Scofield* masthead, turning us into Frisch acolytes, adding our names to a long list of Frisch fans in the almost eighty years since he began his publishing career with *An Answer from the Silence* in 1937. Yet even with all the critical praise and cult-like fandom amongst a certain set, Frisch has never achieved the status stateside that he maintains in Europe, and for that reason, we felt him deserving of our spotlight. We are honored that fellow Frisch-champions,
As with all of our issues, a lot of behind-the-scenes work went into making this celebration of Max Frisch and identity possible. In this issue in particular, that work came in the form of a series of staff conversations. They began in early November of last year, when we announced the issue, but intensified in late December, when one of our editors-at-large at the time, Porochista Khakpour, brought up that the pairing of the theme of identity with a white male author could be potentially problematic. What does it mean to discuss identity through the lens of a straight white man in 2016? What does it mean to do so in a moment when Donald Trump, openly spouting bigoted views to rile up an angry base, has seemingly clinched the nomination of one of America’s two major parties for the highest office in the land? Admittedly, our staff-wide discussions became challenging at many points: Should we change the theme from identity to something else? Would doing that lead to a better issue? What would a better issue look like?

This is where things got very interesting because what we realized, as the pauses between discussions gave way to better and more compelling editorial ideas, is that the best issue that we could possibly make would be one that embodied the very nature of our talks: the passion in them, the messiness of them, the candor that happens when people with very different life experiences and world views try to connect over something they love—in this case, literature (or, well, this very tiny corner of it). It dawned on us then that this was exactly what we started The Scofield for: to have complicated conversations, to ask difficult questions rather than offer easy answers—even, and perhaps most frustratingly, to fail, and then, in the words of Samuel Beckett, to “fail better.” We decided to “dig into the unease,” as one of our editors-at-large, Mira Jacob, described it, and in doing so, we found a way forward.

such as legendary critic Sven Birkerts and Mark Jay Mirsky, Frisch’s friend and colleague, who founded the literary journal Fiction with Frisch and Donald Barthelme in 1972, wrote penetrating, insightful pieces for this issue (on Man in the Holocene and I’m Not Stiller, respectively). Academy Award-winning director Volker Schlöndorff, who adapted Frisch’s Homo Faber into the film Voyager, agreed to be a part of the issue as well, in the form of an interview. In addition to these three titans of Frischdom, we have numerous other writers exploring various aspects of the author’s work.

After choosing Frisch, of course, the question, then, was: “What should the corresponding theme be?” The moment that question was uttered, though, it was immediately followed by another: “Is there any greater question in Frisch’s work than the question of identity?” Scholar Gerhard F. Probst, from whom we get one of our issue’s epigraphs, called identity “one of [Frisch’s] dominant themes, by some critics the central theme of his oeuvre.” Probst points out what we already knew: that the theme of identity has long been considered Frisch’s main philosophical concern—so much so that Frisch cleverly responded to this assumption by saying in an interview from decades ago (one that we had translated into English for the first time and include here): “I know my literary trademark is the problem of identity, even though I do not identify with this trademark myself. But both my trademark and I are fine with this.” The irony of being unable to identify with this identification of the problem of identity within his writing is the perfect ouroboric distillation of the grand question that not only guides Frisch’s work but also determines so much of all of our lives. Does not our identity precisely consist in a lack of self-identity?
I want to thank each member of our staff and all of our contributors for being a part of this conversation and for helping us to create the complex tapestry of this issue. I don’t want to pretend any of this was seamless or flawlessly executed. I certainly have a learning curve, as do we all. But I think that’s the point of conversation—and, even more so, that’s the aspect of conversation that *The Scofield* has always tried to mirror in its pages. *The Scofield* has always attempted to be a haven for dialogue, for questions, for openness, for inclusivity, for diversity—as I wrote in the letter from the editor for our first issue, we want the magazine to be a place “where various voices can come together in harmony and in cacophony.” The question we face as editors making the mosaic of each issue is: “How can these various voices interact to enliven the mind, to help the mind see beyond itself, to help it identify with other people, other things, and other ideas which may at first seem foreign?” The modus operandi here is the same as in our previous issues, but the stakes are admittedly higher when we decide to focus on such a contentious and fraught word like identity, which has been used as both weapon and badge, as both insult and accolade.

That is what we hope will come across on these pages—the surprising, revealing, and complex insights which come from engaging with identity in all of its facets. As with all of our issues, the theme is meant to spin out in ways that the author never intended. So for our first three issues, the themes of solitude, love, and the doppelgänger were explored both in relation to their respective issue’s spotlighted author and pushed in a plethora of different directions beyond that author’s use, interest, or intention. Identity, as a theme, likewise was always going to cast a wide net in terms of the potentialities for things to discuss under that umbrella term: there’s identity in the existential sense, in terms of being who or what one is; there’s identity in the political sense, in terms of the groups we identify or are identified with, through race, gender, sexual preference, etc.; there’s identity in the mathematical sense, in terms of the equality of two expressions; and there’s identity in the more basic sense, in terms of general similarities and affinities between things. We wanted to take all these prospective pathways of engaging with the word—looking at each as valid, valuable, and insightful.

As Dustin Illingworth, our other managing editor, said in our conversations with the editorial staff behind the scenes:

Identity, in this issue, remains a word necessarily loaded with all of the charged cultural connotations it has assumed in contemporaneity—the vital stuff that absolutely deserves to be interrogated, discussed, clarified—as well as something larger, the nightmare / gift of personhood, an idea which, I think, subsumes any splintering into particular categories. I believe the strength of the issue is that it treats both of these understandings (and experiences) of identity as valid and worthy of discussion.

This complex dual nature of the identity theme—both the “universal” sense of the existential wonder and horror we all face moving through space and time in physical bodies and the more cultural and political sense of our social group affiliations that either we take upon ourselves or society pushes onto us—was at play in my life in a major way during the construction of this issue. Wrestling with these two conflicting yet complimentary ideas of identity—dealing with how they entangle one another—
pushed me to face certain aspects of my life which had been heretofore hidden, confused, unaddressed. In April, around the time Tin House republished Montauk, and as this issue was nearing completion, I came out in an essay I wrote about Prince for Literary Hub (which is also included here). But my story, of course, is just one of many, and so in this issue we share a surfeit of stories which grapple with both strands of the identity question—new fiction by Jeffery Renard Allen and Alison B. Hart, poems by Juan Gelman and Phillip B. Williams, essays by A. M. Davenport and Tennessee Jones, just to name a few of our phenomenal contributors. In Jones’ essay exploring his transgender identity, he interweaves those two threads of the identity question beautifully in his opening paragraph:

Is it possible to just be human? This question has been with me, in various forms, since I was a child. The initial desire, I think, came from wanting to know what might be universal in human experience, for I had felt, for as long as I could remember, as if I were outside this experience. I abandoned the idea of the “universal” in my late teens, somewhat heartbroken, when I realized it was meaningless. Every attempt led only to erasure, to the flattening, of someone’s experience. Every lens was fractured, incomplete. But I never abandoned the idea that there is some way to acknowledge the fact that we are all alive, that all objects and creatures exist, swimming in this shared air and beyond it, and that this facticity is very important.

That initial question of Jones’—“Is it possible to just be human?”—is only one in a long series of questions that line these pages. We have Bertrand Russell asking, “Why is it ever worthwhile to affirm identity?” And John Cotter asking, “What obligations do we have to our former selves?” Edyson Julio questions, “How could I fear what I understood to be a different version of myself?” Joseph S. Cotter inquires, “Is it because I’m black?” D. Foy ponders, “What remains of a man who can’t forget?” When people say, “Just be yourself,” Yahia Lababidi wonders, “Which one?” Andrew Mason asks, “How does outward appearance affect inner identity?” V. V. Ganeshananthan challenges, “You write a story about a woman, and you’re a woman, so you’re the woman, because how could you imagine another woman?” Also included here are some of David Bowie’s questions from his lyrics, like “Who can I be now?” And we have Lewis Carroll, through his Caterpillar, asking of Alice, and by proxy us readers, “Who are you?” Emily Dickinson reiterates the question, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” There’s a whole collection of questions about “the vale of soul-making” at the end of our excerpt from a John Keats letter. And Soheil Rezayazdi catalogs a funny list of potential nihilistic password security questions. Our spotlighted author, Max Frisch, partakes in this inquisitive dance as well, especially through his questionnaire, twenty-five questions he wrote in one of his sketchbooks, which we’ve foisted on a number of unsuspecting writers.

We hope this issue’s various questions (and its various ideas, arguments, conversations...) swim in a shared air and beyond it. We hope you join us—swimming in this shared air as well, or at least dipping in a toe or two to check the temperature. Mostly, we hope our issue does both our spotlighted author, Max Frisch, and his major thematic obsession, the question of identity, justice. The question is left open, as questions always are, ending in
those ambiguous marks with their concave curvature like an uncertain gray cloud above a seemingly more final dot. While this issue is full of questions, especially those surrounding the nature of identity in all of its muddled terror and glory, I suppose the issue’s most central question is that foundational one we all ask both outward to the world and inward to ourselves, the question that opens up the first scene of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “Who’s there?”

*Who Is That?*
Max Frisch Selected Bibliography

Novels
An Answer from the Silence (1937)
I'm Not Stiller (1954)
Homo Faber (1957)
Gantenbein (aka A Wilderness of Mirrors) (1964)
Montauk (1975)
Man in the Holocene (1979)
Bluebeard (1982)

Plays
Now They Are Singing Again (1945)
Santa Cruz (1947)
The Great Wall of China (1947)
When the War Was Over (1949)
The Firebugs (aka The Fire Raisers and The Arsonists) (1953)
Don Juan, or the Love of Geometry (1953)
Rip Van Winkle (1953)
The Great Rage of Philip Hotz (1956)
Andorra (1961)
Biography: A Game (1967)
Triptych: Three Scenic Panels (1978)

Sketchbooks
Sketchbook 1946–1949 (1950)
Sketchbook 1966–1971 (1972)
Drafts for a Third Sketchbook (2010)
Max Frisch Ports of Entry

If you’re interested in Max Frisch, but have no clue where to begin, here are some recommendations for you from some writers and scholars intimately connected with Frisch and his oeuvre.

Matthew Specktor on Montauk by Max Frisch

I came late to Frisch, and so, appropriately perhaps, to late Frisch. Montauk was the first book of his I read, and it remains unquestionably my favorite. Recounting an affair, a weekend the author spent on Long Island with “Lynn,” his much younger publicist, in 1974, the book paces and circles, drops, at times vertiginously, through wormholes of regret and (occasionally) ecstasy. Whether the book is direct autobiography (“Completely autobiographical — without inventing a single character; without inventing happenings of more significance than his own simple reality”) or otherwise—really, in 2016, who cares?—it is shot through with a selfconsciousness that reflects not the matter-logged ego-magnification of a Knausgaard or a Wallace but rather the advancing presence of death. The affair, as Frisch recounts it, is desultory, futureless; indeed, Frisch struggles to apprehend it (“When the skin feels how the sand dries on it, how the sun, how the wind, how all this is for the skin and the brain...”), and is whelmed, over and over again, by association: by thoughts of an old school friend from whom he slowly grew estranged,

of his first wife, former mistresses, and other affairs, by miscellaneous considerations of money and other cities, rooms, beaches, voyages. In short, the book represents, better than any other I can think of, the way life feels as it grows so barnacled with experience that it becomes almost impossible to separate one moment from the next, or one’s history from the pressing consciousness of extinction.

Mark Jay Mirsky on Gantenbein by Max Frisch

Gantenbein—or A Wilderness of Mirrors, the title under which I first read—is Max Frisch’s most complex book. I read it first some forty odd years ago shortly after meeting Max, and then once again when I taught it in a graduate class, possibly twenty years ago. The shock of the first reading still echoes in my head because it was as if Max had written a book of personal prophecy. He explored through a fictional construction riddles of his life with women that when he wrote it still lay partly in the future. Why should people read it? It is a profound but witty exploration of the extent to which we must be willfully blind in a marriage or long term union to the behavior of a partner if we expect a union based on love to survive. In I’m Not Stiller Frisch had questioned the identity that others fix on one, and of course, the identity that we are willing to assume ourselves—what is fiction, what reality? These questions reappear in subsequent books, Homo Faber, and Gantenbein together with a sharp sense of humor that teases the middle-class Swiss temperament and its smugness, but Gantenbein is a far more direct attempt by the author to see himself naked in the distorted mirrors of fiction than either Stiller or Homo Faber.
Janice Lee on *Man in the Holocene* by Max Frisch

*Man in the Holocene* is so much about the passion of observation, the importance of noticing and looking closely at the world. As Geiser watches the deterioration of the surrounding landscape, and too, the world itself, his loss of language, clarity, and memory become the onset of a new and more focused consciousness. Partly, he is waiting for the feeling of death, and partly, he delays his own demise by studying the inevitability of the world’s. We know already that language is not just an instrument of communication or reasoning but that it also shapes our understanding of the world. There is a wonderful appreciation for knowledge, perhaps, as death looms more closely and outside, there is always the rain. Frisch writes, “Nature needs no names.... The rocks do not need his memory.” I read this voraciously, suddenly and gradually feeling my own world both close in necessarily and apocalyptically, and open up to a new way of being seen, being articulated, being unraveled.

Dustin Illingworth on *I’m Not Stiller* by Max Frisch

This lovely book of treachery traces the imprisonment of one Jim White, a man jailed for the crimes of the Swiss sculptor Anatol Stiller, an identification he unequivocally denies. The more the people around him insist he is, in fact, Stiller, the more stubbornly he clings to a series of densely exotic tales comprising his “actual” life: a tableau of alibis in which duplicity gains an aesthetic dimension. The *New York Times* called this work “a spiritual blackout,” and while there is indeed much darkness here—situated somewhere between Kafka and Camus—the book is also often riotously funny. It examines the extremities of self-deception and self-acceptance, and locates identity as the locus of an individual’s greatest and most necessary freedom. What could be more Frischesque?

J. M. Schreiber on *Homo Faber* by Max Frisch

“I don’t believe in providence and fate,” the narrator of Max Frisch’s *Homo Faber* insists in the earliest stage of what begins, as the subtitle of this 1957 novel suggests, as a report—a measured accounting of a recent series of critical events that have threatened to upend his emotional equilibrium. A Swiss engineer working for UNESCO, Walter Faber is a technologist by training and temperament alike, a man of numbers and pragmatic logic. He retraces in clinical detail, a business trip to South America that is unexpectedly set off course by a forced landing in the Mexican desert that in turn leads to an unplanned detour and a number of unsettling discoveries concerning the woman he once loved, and an old friend with whom he’d lost touch. When he eventually returns for a stopover at home in New York, he finds that the mistress he thought he had ditched has refused to accept his rejection and, not being a man of grace or patience, Faber makes the sudden, crucial decision to travel to his next business stop, Paris, by ship rather than plane. And on that ship, on the cusp of his 50th birthday, he meets 20-year-old Sabeth, who captivates him. As their relationship develops over the following weeks, his report becomes ever more defensive as he insists repeatedly that he was innocent—he could not possibly have known, he tells us, that this alluring girl with the reddish blonde ponytail was his daughter, a daughter he didn’t even know existed. By the time they reach Greece, the full impact of the Oedipal inversion collides with unforeseen tragedy, leaving our cool and calculated...
the case: “Alcohol does help sometimes...I pace the room, glass in my right hand, and take the opportunity that only alcohol provides: I make a different final statement. —I am not innocent....” Is he? The answer doesn’t really matter. What matters is Frisch’s cool and meticulous execution of voice and character. It is nothing less than seductive.

Scott Cheshire on Bluebeard by Max Frisch

Bluebeard, Max Frisch’s eighth novel, reads like a post-modern home erected on sand. It’s intricately constructed, full of bone-dry humor, and is intellectually charged; but as you read, the foundation shifts beneath and crumbles. In fact, you lose solid footing from the very start. The novel begins with unattributed courtroom dialog, and the dialog remains that way throughout the book. And as such that dialog constitutes more than half the novel. The other half being the musings of one Herr Doctor Schaad on billiards, his failing medical practice, time spent in the park feeding swans, and his recent acquittal on charges of murdering his ex-wife. The tension one would expect in a courtroom drama is deliberately deflated almost immediately, and the rest of the story depends not on whether Schaad is guilty, but rather do we like him enough to keep on reading. And I do. Which reminds me of that tired undying argument about character. Do we like him? Do we like her? I’ve never cared much about either, really, except when it comes to someone otherwise unlikeable, despicable, sociopathic, or even evil. That’s when things get interesting. In fact, the magic of Bluebeard is that one is led to assume his guilt. Schaad seems to be a murderer. But he is no monster. “Swans are not witnesses,” he says, and it is ball-in-the-throat poignant, as he spends a large portion of his time (empty now since most of his patients have taken their business elsewhere) obsessing over the case: “Alcohol does help sometimes...I pace the room, glass in my right hand, and take the opportunity that only alcohol provides: I make a different final statement. —I am not innocent....” Is he? The answer doesn’t really matter. What matters is Frisch’s cool and meticulous execution of voice and character. It is nothing less than seductive.

Bishan Samaddar on An Answer from the Silence by Max Frisch

There was Hemingway’s Old Man and the Sea; here is Frisch’s “Young Man and the Mountain.” What did either of them see? What did they hear? Anyone who has trekked in the mountains and has faced the immensity of what rises in front of them has heard the voices that the towering “silence” throws at them. Surely they are voices from within oneself? One can’t be sure. Like “black light” or “cold fire,” the silence of the mountains is itself an answer that is impossible to describe. The only proof of that answer is in how it affects the one who has heard it. And that’s what Frisch describes to his readers. What begins as a thirty-year-old man’s petty attempt to prove his extraordinariness by climbing the untried and greatly dangerous North Ridge somewhere in the Alps ends in a metaphysical exploration of what it means to be alive. For it is only death that can perhaps make us say yes to life. But let’s be wary of jumping to conclusions. Frisch’s early novel (which he prefers to call a “story”) does not end with any easy affirmation—it is as ambiguous as the voice of silence. Only those who have heard it will know. Those who haven’t will seek it out.

Scott Cheshire on Bluebeard by Max Frisch

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Kristen Palmer on *Firebugs* by Max Frisch

For four months in 2009 I lived in a shiny new high rise apartment building in downtown Atlanta, GA. My husband was writing for *Tyler Perry's House of Pain* and part of the gig was housing. We were un-housed and I was un-employed, so the cat was packed up and we decamped for Georgia. After watching as much *Law & Order* as I could stand, I gave myself a job to read a play a day and write about it on my blog, “Plays With Others.” Except I didn’t have any plays with me, so my plan was to visit every used book store and purchase whatever plays had washed up on their shelves. These dog-eared, battered scripts emerged as over-looked time capsules with glimpses into what writers and audiences were trying to understand at particular moments in time. One of the plays that happened into my bag was *Firebugs*, and this is a very good play to encounter Max Frisch on his own terms. This play was written in 1958 and translated into English in 1960. The complete title is *The Firebugs (A Learning-Play Without a Lesson)*, and the play sets out a situation so literal as to be absurd. Arsonists come to the door of a comfortable, well-fed, liberal man’s home. The man invites them in, allows them access to the attic, and helps them set a fuse—and then they burn down his house. Frisch’s straight-forward narrative, his joy in writing the obliviousness and naive complicity of his everyman character, create an energized romp that stabs to the heart of liberal complacency. The play is specific to a time, but the problem at the heart remains hot and this play has received recent successful productions in London and Chicago. When you find it, in some distressed paperback version, translated as *The Firebugs*, or *The Arsonists*, it’s deceptively clear narrative will no doubt have shifted again as the world continues to wrestle with how to respond to those who might choose to burn down the comfortable classes for the sheer joy of watching the flames.

John Sebestyen on *Andorra* by Max Frisch

*Andorra* tells the story of Andri, a young man who has spent his entire life in the community of Andorra. Frisch writes that “the Andorra of this play has nothing to do with the real small state of this name, nor does it stand for another real small state; Andorra is the name of a model.” Despite this statement, it is telling that there is more than a subliminal connection of the geography of the play to the geography of post-WW2 Europe. The Andorrans in the play pride themselves on being better than their neighboring country “the Blacks across the frontier” (short for “blackshirts,” or the color of their military apparel); they believe their neighbors to be brutal, uncultured, and anti-Semitic. They regularly tell the story of how one of their own citizens, a Teacher named Can, adopted a Jewish boy (Andri) from the Blacks in order to save him from this oppression. However, *Andorra* displays the anti-Semitism that exists in the lives of the Andorrans themselves, despite their supposed disdain for their neighbors. Andri believes instead that Can is inventing stories in an effort to protect him from what he views as his inevitable fate: death at the hands of his fellow Andorrans. *Andorra* informed the post-war culture of Europe and
resonated with people in Switzerland and Germany in the wake of WW2, helping them to see how their countries, and they themselves, enacted or enabled patterns of oppression in their societies. Between 1963 and 1964, there were 900 performances of *Andorra* in Germany and Switzerland. In 1965, Max Frisch received the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society, an award given by the International Book Fair in Jerusalem. As a result, Frisch became the first person to give a German speech in Israel after the Holocaust. *Andorra* remains a compelling example of writing that has great potential to move readers and audience members both to examine patterns of oppression that exist in contemporary societies and to take active steps to combat those patterns.

Aashish Kaul on *Correspondence* by Max Frisch & Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, standard-bearers for Swiss avant-garde literature in the post-war years, unveiled new possibilities for both theatre and the novel, and forced the world to take note of a culture hitherto considered dormant and backward. Their correspondence, conducted over four decades amid the frenzy of their productive years and the accompanying public glare, by turn warm, honest, teasing, and critical reveals them in their full humanity. Although a mere fraction in length compared to the famed Goethe-Schiller exchange, and shorter than the near contemporaneous correspondence of those two prolific German exiles, Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse, it is the more tragic, for a friendship that began with such promise and mutual respect ends in misunderstandings, scars, and failure. Even so, over the course of only thirty-three letters, each writer comes across as a deep reader of the other’s work, recovering moments and meanings of penetrating insight by way of this epistolary dialectic. The collection comes with a long opening essay by Peter Rüedi that sketches with admirable skill and erudition the life and its conditions, both philosophical and material, that slowly generated this exchange. Eminently readable in Birgit Schreyer Duarte’s translation, and supplemented by notes, pictures, and parallel potted biographies, this beautifully produced volume by Seagull Books is indispensable for admirers and scholars of these two major writers.
A Selection from
Montauk

A sign promising a view across the island: OVERLOOK. It was he who suggested stopping here. A parking lot for at least a hundred cars, at the moment empty; their car is the only one standing in the grids painted on the asphalt. It is morning. Sunny. Shrubs and bushes around the empty parking lot; so no view here, but there is a path leading off through the shrubs which, they decide, will take them to the viewing point. Then she goes back to the car, and he waits. They have plenty of time: a whole weekend. He stands there not really knowing what he is thinking at the moment.... In Berlin it is now three in the afternoon.... He does not usually like waiting, but she has suddenly realized she does not really need her purse just to look at the Atlantic. Everything seems to him a bit improbable, but after a while he begins to accept the simple reality: a rustling in the bushes, her jeans (a pale washed-out blue), her feet on the path, her reddish hair through the twigs and branches. Her return to the car was worthwhile: YOUR PIPE. Then she walks on ahead, ducking here and there beneath the tangle of branches, and he ducks down under the same branches when she is already walking upright again: the figure of a strange young woman. It is still undergrowth in which they are walking. The overgrown path is only a path of sorts, not always clearly recognizable. At the outset he had gone first—in his role as a man, since neither of them knows the way around here. At one point, a swampy ditch over which he had to help her. Since then she has been walking in front, and he prefers it that way. It makes her happy, as he can see from the lightness and springiness of her step. The Atlantic cannot be far away. High above, one solitary seagull. As he walks, he fills his pipe and marvels, not asking himself what he is marveling at. Now and again he catches the scent of flowers, but he has no idea what they are, the plants here are unfamiliar. He has assured her that he can find the car again quite easily, and she seems to trust him. To light his pipe he has to stop briefly; it is windy, and it takes five matches. In the meantime she walks on, so for a few moments he loses sight of her; moments in which this walk with a young woman seems to him like a fantasy or a distant memory. In fact, there are now a lot of paths, or what look like paths, and so she has stopped: Which way? The map he bought yesterday is still in the car; it would not help much anyway in this territory. They just follow the sun. It is no path for conversations. In places where the undergrowth thins, the surrounding countryside can be seen: it does not look strange to him, though he has never been here before. It is not Greece—different vegetation entirely. All the same, he thinks of Greece, then again of the island of Sylt. He wishes there did not always have to be memories. They have been walking for half an hour. They want to see the Atlantic. They have nothing else to do, they have plenty of time. It is also not Brittany, where he was last at the seaside, a year ago. The same sea air. Maybe he is even wearing the same shirt, the same shoes, all of them a year older. He knows where they are:

MONTAUK

an Indian name, applied to the northern point of Long Island, one hundred and twenty miles from Manhattan. He could also name the date:
5/11/74

There are not only branches hanging over the path, causing them to duck; there are also withered ones lying here and there on the ground, and she has to hop over them. She is very slim, but not bony. Her blue jeans are rolled up over her calves; her bottom looks small beneath the tight pants, which she is wearing without a belt, and there is a comb stuck in the side pocket. She is neither taller nor shorter than he, but lightly built. Her hair, when she wears it loose, reaches down to her hips, but now she has it tied up, a red ponytail which swings as she walks. Since he has to watch the path (if you can call it that) and also keep an eye open for the best way of getting out of this tangled undergrowth, he sees her figure only from time to time; her blouse bright in the sunshine, which makes her hair look fair too. Frequently it is a tossup which way to go—no path. Sometimes she takes a huge step to get up on a rock or a tree stump; her legs are long, but the step is too large, and to raise herself she has to make an effort. That she would do too if she were alone: toss her head sharply to throw the ponytail back over her shoulder. The prospect of reaching the coast seems ever more unlikely, but still they keep going. Then for a while it looks as if she is walking along a rope, putting one foot before the other like a tightrope walker, her shoulders bending pliantly to adjust the balance. Still no sign of sand dunes; not a gull now in the sky. She stops to roll up the sleeves of her blouse; down here in the hollow it is hot—no sea breeze. Now they are standing side by side: a peculiar sense of present togetherness. He notices that he has both hands in his pockets, a cold pipe in his mouth. Her face: he has not forgotten it, but with those huge sunglasses she is wearing he cannot see her eyes. Her lips during the daytime are narrow, often mocking.
not assist her—that hair was not for my hand to touch.
One last question: DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A DOOMED MAN? Afterward I saw that she had left her cigarettes behind, and her lighter. It remained there under the lamp for two weeks, a cheap green lighter.

What am I really doing over here?

One can go out without an overcoat; a snowstorm on arrival, but shortly afterward it was spring again. The women’s prison on the corner, a tall block of brown brick, has been demolished; it is now a sandy square, surrounded by wire netting. Pigeons are cooing in the hedges, but they can fly out any time. Otherwise little has changed in two years. The little trees on Ninth Street are still thin and sparse; but their leaves are sprouting. (The courage of chlorophyll!) In the drugstore, where I again take my breakfast, the people serving behind the counter are still the same. The yellow taxis, the gleaming black garbage sacks on the street, the sirens of the red fire engines. In the hotel they recognize me as an old customer: DID YOU HAVE A GOOD TIME? A different room from the last time, two years ago, but furnished exactly the same: low table with marble top on which one can rest one’s feet, yellow standing lamps, yellow bed coverings, green wall-to-wall carpet, a sofa the color of manure but not uncomfortable, two armchairs in the same color, the familiar whirring of the air conditioner, which one can, however, turn off. One can also open the two sash windows a bit by pushing up their rotting frames; the panes are always dirty. The parapets in front of these windows are low, and you have to be careful if you want to look down on the crossing below. It is only in dreams you can fly by your own power.

MAY I INTRODUCE YOU?

Then I either miss the name or forget it at once. I stand there and make answers and do not always know whom I have answered. Why does one do it? It must be done (say the publishers) for the sake of the book—

LYNN

I could ring her up on some professional pretext. Dinner perhaps. Now, whenever a woman attracts me, I feel presumptuous.

HUDSON:

Renewing acquaintance with the oily reflections on the water. A few fat gulls on the jetty. An old steamer is still lying at anchor; beards of seaweed on the chains. A solitary helicopter flies past. It is windy, the black water slaps against the jetty, whose beams were already rotten two years ago. A big white freighter, which will presumably sail tomorrow, lies quiet and unmoving: STATENDAM, Dutch flag waving in the wind. Behind me the old highway, at the moment under repair. The dingy little bar where they play billiards is also still there; BLUE RIBBON, the neon sign red as lemonade in the dusk. To the west there is a slimy sunset going on, in front of it a long black freighter. A few people on the jetty, idle strollers like myself. A young black is describing slaloms with a bicycle. A couple entwined on the furthermost plank look like a silhouette. An old man with a dog. Another dog without a master. The long thick hempen hawser. A beer can begins to roll about in the wind.
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS:

I rise and express my thanks.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART:

I skip the art and spend the whole morning sitting in the sculpture garden. Maybe art has nothing to say to me when I am alone. I enjoy sitting here under the few trees. I have been coming to sit in this garden (Moore, Picasso, Calder, etc.) for twenty years and more:

1951
1956
1963
1970
1971
1972

Back on my feet, I again have the feeling that my body has grown lighter. It is now quite light, as if the weight of gravity had lessened during my long walk. Everything I admit to myself also seems practicable; I must not just speak, but do.

CENTRAL PARK:

A reliable source has taught me that the famous squirrels are not in fact squirrels, but tree rats. Once there were squirrels here. The tree rats are not reddish like squirrels, but are no less decorative. One can watch them from quite close for minutes at a time, so tame are these tree rats. The main thing that distinguishes them from squirrels is that they destroy squirrels.

WHITE HORSE:

The writer is afraid of feelings that are not suited to publication; he takes refuge then in irony; all he perceives is considered from the point of view of whether it is worth describing, and he dislikes experiences that can never be expressed in words. A professional disease that drives many writers to drink.

SANITATION:

I still awake much too early. Before the daily round begins, people take their dogs, large and small, out into the street, holding tight to the lead as the animals piss or shit. One dog hour in the morning, another in the evening. One must just take care where one walks. They are clearly very dependent on their dogs and puppies, the people here; they have a craving for love and patiently allow themselves to be dragged from one sniffing post to another, even when it is raining. Only when they come to a red traffic light do they resist being pulled along and put up a fight till the light turns green. A befouled area. Some have more than just one dog. An area full of love cravings. The white truck with the revolving brushes (SANITATION) can never reach it all; bits always remain behind.

LONG DISTANCE:

A woman weeping on the telephone makes me helpless, completely helpless; being unable to grasp her wrist—though that would make no difference anyway.
FIFTH AVENUE HOTEL:

In the day (without the glow of the yellow lamps) the carpet looks blue rather than green. At the moment the sun is on it, a slanting rectangle, but the air on my legs strikes cool. I had been reading and thinking of what I was reading; suddenly this memory of the skin: FRÜHLING, JA, DÜ BIST’S—namely, through the spring sunshine on this carpet, which I know: I once kissed it. I UNDERSTAND YOU NOW! All of a sudden, reading (FICTION) fails to help against this memory of the skin, which is due above all to the coolness around my legs above the socks. No bird song through the open window, but the traffic noises of a big city, quite specific noises as the buses start up again on the green light at the corner of FIFTH AVENUE and NINTH STREET. Again I place my feet, still in shoes, on the low table and eat nuts from a hollowed hand.

MY GREATEST FEAR: REPETITION

An American girl student studying literature at Yale does not put the usual academic questions. She asks:

Does Stiller really want Julika to be redeemed, or is he really only interested in being her redeemer?

WASHINGTON SQUARE:

Chess players around the stone tables with their weather-resistant chessboard tops, above them green leaves and twittering birds. I often stop there for a long time, but remain standing; I never sit down. Today someone, a black man, asked me if I would like a game. Not much of a player, as I had already noted, yet all the same I did not risk it. Can I afford defeats? Or even a victory? Because it achieves nothing; on the contrary, afterward the knowledge of my domestic failure still yawns—

15 COMMERCE STREET:

I should never want to live in a place I had once lived in before, not even in this delightful house. One room on each floor. In the basement a perfect kitchen and an eating niche which felt like a cabin, lamplight even by day; what one saw through the little windows was not sea spray, but snow on the sidewalk, the legs of passers-by in snow and slush, the swifter legs of dogs. On the top floor, where I tried to work, the building shook most of all; the rumbling of the heavy trucks with their heavy trailers began long before dawn, and when that left off, because they had to stop for a minute at the traffic lights, there was the other rumbling of the subway. All the same, I had the feeling that the house was quiet; a quietness as if I had been deaf. The soft hum of the refrigerator, one’s own footsteps, the crackle as I turned the pages of the newspaper. I could hear mail being pushed through the slit in the door, a key being inserted and turned in the front door. Had I been deaf? I heard what was said to me, and I believed it. A record of genuine sea sounds (to help me stop hearing the traffic) I could also hear; a friendly gift—

We heard Neruda reading.

VIA MARGUTTA:

The warm air has done that, the light: I am suddenly in Rome. Only the architectural background is wrong, of
course. No idea what I should be doing in Rome; I am only there for a little while—

GOETHE HOUSE:

A successful man can look like a walrus and women will not only flock to him but even flaunt their charms unbidden, almost without reserve. Only out on the street, anonymous in the crowd, do I feel utterly like a walrus again.

EIGHTH STREET BOOKSHOP:

To be able to stand in a bookstore at midnight ... I bought the little yellow Langenscheidt: only to see, when looking things up, how my memory lets me down, in almost every case. After all, one did once know:

SENSIBLE / SENSITIVE / SENSUAL

I read in the elevator that Konrad Farner has died in Zurich. I do not miss my floor on that account. Konrad Farner has been spared much. But the circle of dead friends is widening.

OLIVETTI LETTERA

I cannot help it, I have bought a small typewriter, though with no literary intentions. (A story set in Ticino has gone wrong for the fourth time; the role of the narrator is not yet clear.) This obsession with typing sentences—

PRO MEMORIA

A French nobleman on the way to the guillotine once asked for pen and paper to write something down. His request was granted: one could always destroy what he had written if it were addressed to anybody. But it was not. It was a note entirely for himself: pro memoria.

What I have to do in New York would still have to be done even in Zurich or Berlin. In Berzona (Ticino) it has already been done, I think. In Rome? Then again I do not really know what has to be done; pollution of the surroundings through feelings no longer fit for use, gone rotten because I have never expressed them, or not honestly enough, have not consciously put them behind me. It is high time I did. I dreamed the night before last that I was to be executed on Wednesday, and I could not understand why it should be next Wednesday: I am in good health. This arbitrary decision by an authority that does not know what it is about—an authority, incidentally, without an address; there is no chance of an appeal.

Another dream:

People are whispering. Who? My father’s coffin has burst open, they say. I did not know that, but I understand. Confinement can drive one insane. They give me something sweet to eat, as one does to comfort a child. Passers-by. I suddenly cannot see why I should lie down in the coffin. They have already got into a sort of barge, all of them dressed in black, and there they stand now in this barge with long oars. Lake Zurich. Nobody tries to stop me as I run away, find on the jetty a long rescue pole which can be used in a pinch as an oar; only it is laborious, for the pole has no blade. Still, I will show them. I cannot remember what I was standing on; a sort of raft, a board? I stand on it and row along after them. Someone has told me where they are going.
When I at last catch up with them, row along beside them, they do not speak to me. I can hear what they are saying. You don't need to whisper! And they are not whispering either. He will burst his lungs, they say. No doubt in their minds that I am done for. And now he has to go rowing! They had assumed that I would take it more easily, that I would make no fuss, would not put up a resistance. It makes no difference: we are rowing to my funeral. But I don’t see why: I am, as they can see, still able to row. Now they are no longer talking to me; they are in a hurry.

TRATTORIA DA ALFREDO

I admit that I did not discover this trattoria just by chance; I went out to look for it, as if there were some feeling there to be called for: A CAUSE D’UNE FEMME. Not wishing to be recognized, I stopped only long enough to light a pipe; a passer-by with nothing particular in mind. A feeling of shame to be standing here two years later, waiting for a green light. Incidentally, I saw the little trattoria only from the outside, chairs upturned on the little tables. For it was early morning. To see inside one would have had to put one’s face close to the reflecting window-pane, using both hands as blinkers to see through the reflection. That I did not do. It was a shock when I saw my figure in the glass. But once it was green again, I knew: a natural occurrence. I hadn’t, after all, fired any shots. All the same, I had now forgotten where I had been meaning to go, but I kept on walking. Without a coat. It was cool, springtime, as it had been then, a clear blue morning with a wind from the sea. As I walked along I read every advertisement closely, though there were other things I might have done.

DIE WAHRHEIT IST DEM MENSCHEN ZUMUTBAR

She cannot stand this sentence. A quotation. She calls it kitsch. What is this truth anyway that Man is supposed to be able to face? We quarreled about what kitsch was.

MY LIFE AS A MAN:

The title of a new book which Philip Roth brought yesterday to my hotel. Why should I shrink so from the same title in German: MEIN LEBEN ALS MANN? I should like to know what I, writing under artistic discipline, would find out about my life as a man.

GIACOMETTI:

His exhibition in this impossible museum with its spiral staircase; opening night with a thousand tuxedos and ladies in long gowns; above it all his blown-up photographic portrait. And what a face! ... What is it (or who is it) that gives a person class? Achievement is partly responsible. Is it something one gives oneself? Even in failure one can have class. For what reason? Class has nothing to do with fame. I know people who have lost their fame while still living; they still have class. Class is not the hallmark of victory. How, then, does it manifest itself? I have met people of class, men and women, famous and otherwise, though I have never met Giacometti. Contact with people of class (they do not have to be working in the same field) provides encouragement in a singular way. The encouragement does not come from their praise; they bestow class, whether they agree or disagree; in their expectation of class they are always ready to make yet another effort. This expectation can of course be disappointed. In people of class the
expectation of class is not a random one, but it has nothing
to do with success or lack of success; they set the standards
themselves. By this they can be recognized more unerringly
than by their actual achievements, which the other
person is in many cases not competent to judge. Their
class gives their achievements distinction. They are not
always friendly; but they do not lose faith when someone
occasionally falls short of his class. They will listen
sympathetically to the self-doubts which are put before
them, but they do not allow themselves to be deceived
by self-accusations, like others who, if not immediately
dazzled by a grand manner, involuntarily reduce their
expectations and become indulgent in a manner that sets
everything down a peg, absolutely everything.

ERINYES

They do not tear you apart, they just stand there, on some
corner or other: here, up on the third floor, you once
lived, WAVERLY PLACE / CHRISTOPHER STREET,
twenty-three years ago. As if I didn’t know! I do not even
glance up at the house front, I just note that the shop
on the ground floor is now different; it used to be a food
store, a lousy one; I had two hundred dollars a month,
the apartment cost one hundred dollars a month. Once a
flowerpot fell off my window sill, but it hit nobody.

Where will the Erinyes get me?

Recently we found a term for it: attacks. Always unpleasant
for her, I know, and completely incomprehensible. She is in
no physical danger; if she fears that, she is wrong; not the
slightest tendency in that direction. If there were violence, it
would be against myself: a form of self-expression. I imagine

I am showing understanding, thought, awareness, though
admittedly making no allowances—at the start quite calm,
though making no allowances for either myself or anyone
else. I do not shout, at any rate not at the beginning. I
cannot, it is true, be reached by words, even if I continue
for a while to listen. The truth I am trying to express, the
truth that in this moment I recognize, is seldom a self-
exoneration. An attack may be set off by trivialities, things
too ridiculous even to mention, but I see them as signs, and
therefore by no means trivial. These signs are so clear to me
that I can scarcely bear any other explanation, least of all an
innocuous one. No accusations—no, I am seeking only to
get things clear in my mind. So it seems to me, and in these
moments I have no fear at all of the consequences, of which
I am quite aware. My speech (monologue) has a lethal
quality; but it does not arise out of hate. What is the other
person to do? Simply understand what it is I am unable
to put into words; accept it. I cannot bear myself. But I
cannot wake up, as one can when one's dreams become too
unbearable. As I see things in this moment, thus they are,
just this and nothing else, and I am prepared. For what? It
is then, I know, that I begin to repeat myself. There is no
returning to reason; reasonableness offends me, it humiliates
me and it also provokes my anger. Yet I began so calmly;
what I had meant was not a reproach, but something more
important: THE TRUTH, I mean. If I tear my shirt,
it stands for my skin. I plead; it comes out, apparently,
sounding quite different. I implore. But everything I say
now sounds merely vindictive. And other things simply do
not come to mind. At such moments I would give my life to
be able to make myself for once understandable— nothing
more than that. Afterward I feel sorry about my anger; it
could never have untied the Gordian knot. And on top of
that I am obliged to apologize.
SWEETS

It is said to be the oldest fish restaurant in the city. A shed in the old marketplace which should have been demolished years ago. Unless you had heard of it, you would never enter it. At midday there is hardly a table to be had: it is full of busy people from WALL STREET. Since getting to know this restaurant I have taken many friends there. With seafood dishes of every kind they serve an excellent American sauterne, and beneath the highway one can see the glittering EAST RIVER. Lynn had also not known it before. She likes it; it is not at all chic. She has arranged another interview for me; that is her job. With her flowing hair and her spectacles she is a mixture of Undine and nurse. In the summer she is to visit Greece with her parents. No point in my offering her advice: it is a GUIDED TOUR. Since Lynn has read none of my writings, I enjoy for once saying the exact opposite: I am not interested in politics at all. The writer’s responsibility to society and all that rubbish: the truth is, I write to express myself. I write for myself. Society, of whatever kind, is not my master, and I am not its priest or even its schoolteacher. The public as a working partner? I can find more reliable partners. So it is not because I feel a duty to teach or convert the public that I publish my things but because, if one is to recognize one’s own identity, one needs imaginary readers. Basically, however, I am writing only for myself.... Lynn does not protest; it sounds more convincing (to me as well) than I had expected.

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Courtesy of Tin House. Translated by Geoffrey Skelton.
Markers of Silence and Contemplation: A Conversation in Three Parts with Tony Perez, Jacob Vala, and Jonathan Dee

Max Frisch’s *Montauk* slithers between the inner realms of experience and observation. Narrated by Frisch himself, or some close approximation, the text centers on an actual, weekend-long affair with Lynn, an employee of his publisher and woman thirty-three years his junior. Though Lynn has not read Frisch’s work, her presence stirs up a messy self-examination of his alienation from and failed relationships with women. A lover, a ping-pong opponent, a reader, Lynn seems to open a space in which Frisch explores his doomed connections with those closest to him. In the two-day span, he adopts a digressive form to capture the lived experience, both internally and externally: “I want to invent nothing; I want to know what I notice and think when I am not thinking of possible readers. Do I write just to satisfy readers, just to give critics something to work on?” *Montauk* examines its author as much as it examines its own form.

I recently spoke with three men involved with the 2016 reissue of Frisch’s text. Tony Perez is an editor for Tin House Books. Jakob Vala created the beautiful cover art—the watery, minimalistic, heaving blue seascape interrupted by a red lighthouse. Jonathan Dee’s introduction to the release proves to be a helpful guide for readers unfamiliar with Frisch. Here we discuss the intersection between Max Frisch’s world and art and how the most recent release of his late modernist opus came to be.

I. Conversation with Tony Perez, Tin House Books Editor

CH: How did you first discover *Montauk*? And what drew you to the decision to put it back in print?

TP: When we reissue an out-of-print book, it’s typically because somebody—usually another writer—has been a great evangelist for it. In this case, that was Scott Cheshire. The first time I met him he raved about the book, convincingly enough that I started trolling for copies online. But I couldn’t find the slim, beat-up paperback for under about $40. Soon thereafter, he published a great essay about his own discovery of the book, and “plotless novels” in general, which finally made me suck it up and pull the trigger. I think I read it that first time in a single sitting. It felt like the spiritual older cousin of some of my favorite recent novels: those by Jenny Offill (as Scott mentions in his essay), Ben Lerner, Sheila Heti, and others. But it felt singular too, not quite like anything I’d ever read. I was surprised that no one had reissued it. When we started jumping through hoops to track down the rights, that part made a lot more sense. I eventually learned that I was certainly not the first person to try. Just when we started feeling self-satisfied about this great discovery, we realized that it had been sitting under our noses all along.
Jonathan Dee had written glowingly about the book in the second issue of Tin House.

**CH:** What was the process like as far as obtaining the rights and getting the book back into print? How long ago did this process start?

**TP:** That part was tricky; the various rights were held by a number of different publishing entities and estates, and it seemed like no one had the whole lay of the land. Luckily the people who did have a piece of the puzzle were kind, helpful, and enthusiastic about getting the book back into print. So, for those interested in bureaucratic procedurals: the rights to Montauk itself were controlled by Suhrkamp Publishing House in Berlin, but the English language edition was controlled by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. At some point over the years they lost track of the translator’s agreement, so were unable to issue the rights, as we’d need Geoffrey Skelton’s estate’s blessing. We found his son through the Society of Authors, and he gladly signed off on it. However, the translation was co-registered with Skelton and Frisch, so we needed permission to publish the translation from Frisch’s estate as well. Thomas Strässle at the Max Frisch Foundation helped us secure those final rights. Those emails put a hurt on my gmail storage, I’m sure.

**CH:** How would you describe Frisch’s influence upon contemporary literature? Have you found there is a Frisch community out there embracing this reprint of *Montauk* or was it harder-going to remind people in America who Frisch is than you thought it might be?

**TP:** It’s tough to say exactly what Frisch’s influence is among American writers, but I think *Montauk* anticipated a lot of the autofiction that’s been popular the last few years. Frisch wasn’t someone that I heard name-checked terribly frequently before we took this project on, but when I talk about him now, I’m pleasantly surprised how many writers I know admire his books. Of course, I routinely discover that other people’s blind spots aren’t as gaping as my own.

I’ve been really happy with the reception so far; these things are always an uphill battle, but there seems to be something like palpable excitement for this book. Ben Lerner sent a nice note the other day, and I got the impression he’s been talking it up to whomever will listen. I can’t imagine a better person to have out on the stump for *Montauk*.

**CH:** Do you think this is a key work to understanding Frisch’s life? Or is it unwise to treat *Montauk* as any sort of historical account?

**TP:** I’m inclined to take Frisch at his word that this is a novel—not straight memoir—but whether or not the scant plot went down exactly as he wrote it, it’s clearly a very personal book. So on some deeper level, I think anyone that wanted to understand Frisch’s life and perspective would be wise to start here. Still, you may want to cross-reference those impressions with his Sketchbooks prior to making any grand pronouncements at cocktail parties.

**CH:** In a passage on page 25, Frisch writes that he is “not interested in politics at all.” Of course, if you’ve read other works of his you can see this may not exactly be 100% true, but I’m curious as a publisher what you look for in literature. Are you looking for more ambiguity and nuance in the texts you’re interested in or do you think work should be more clearly political and didactic in its approach? Would Tin House publish an author whose politics are not in accord with its own political perspective?

**TP:** I think there’s an important place for didactic political writing—God knows there’s plenty out there to be didactic about—but in literature I gravitate toward
stories where whatever conclusion we're coming to isn't foregone. A couple years ago at our Writers Workshop, Jim Shepard made a useful distinction between drama and conflict. To paraphrase him poorly, a situation can be intensely dramatic but still one-sided, whereas a compelling central conflict is one that the reader is at least initially fruitfully uncertain how to negotiate.

I think I’d have a hard time acquiring a new book if I found its politics totally despicable. Though I can’t say I’ve been put in a position where I had to make that tough decision. But when it comes to reissues, I’m open to books that I might take issue with, even if only because I think they’re important for the historical/cultural record. Next year we’re publishing a translation of the Dutch writer Jan Wolker’s *Turkish Delight*; there’s plenty in it that makes me squeamish, but it was a tremendously important and influential book (and its main character, however awful he might act, certainly embodies a compelling conflict).

II. Conversation with Jakob Vala, *Montauk* Cover Designer

**CH:** How would you describe your creative process for this assignment?

**JV:** I begin every cover design by reading the manuscript and taking note of any imagery or themes that stand out. For me, *Montauk* is an exploration of the aging male identity. As the author-narrator relates his insecurities and regrets over past relationships, he reveals an underlying loneliness. I wanted to express this vulnerability as well as the sort of drifting tone of Frisch’s writing. It was also important, to me, to reference the iconic Montauk lighthouse—not only as an indicator of place, but as a symbol of masculinity and isolation.

In creating my illustrations, I started with a few sketches, but quickly transitioned to the computer, making the lighthouse first. From there, I played with pattern and color until I felt I had a few solid concepts.

**CH:** How was this assignment different than other cover design assignments you have had in the past?

**JV:** I was given quite a bit of freedom to explore with this cover. The editor, Tony Perez, wanted to pay tribute to the original edition and suggested a retro-minimalist aesthetic, which I’m always game for. I believe I was told to have fun and “win a design award or something.”

**CH:** Compared to the other cover designs you did for *Montauk*—all of which are gorgeous, by the way—what do you feel stands out about the final choice for this edition of *Montauk*?

**JV:** Thank you. We had fantasies of printing all four covers, but, in the end, there was a clear consensus. The final cover feels most authentic to the story and its era, without looking dated.

**CH:** How was the decision made for the final cover?

**JV:** I presented five covers to the rest of the book staff. My single photo-based concept was immediately eliminated. Everyone had a favorite of the four remaining covers, but we all agreed that the final option was the best. It was a quick decision.

**CH:** How did your reading of *Montauk* influence the cover design? Have you read any other of Frisch’s texts? If so, were they on your mind while thinking how to work with *Montauk*?

**JV:** I’d only heard of Frisch in passing before we acquired *Montauk*. The cover was inspired, solely, by my reading of the book and the small bit of research I did, in order to establish a fuller context. An advantage of redesigning something like *Montauk* is the amount
of existing discourse. These outside perspectives can be helpful, to a point, but I tried to avoid overcomplicating the design process with too many opinions.

CH: Though each of the cover designs exhibits their own vitality, there are aesthetic similarities among the other illustrations. You play with repetition of color and shape. What brought that aspect out for you? Did you approach the cover with a theme in mind?

JV: Tony and I wanted to honor the mid-70s time period of the original printing, while appealing to a contemporary audience. I love the paperback aesthetic of that time: the grid structure of Penguin’s covers and Alvin Lustig’s earlier work for New Directions. Those covers have an elegant minimalism, created through pattern and a very intentional use of color. I also chose to limit the color palette as a nod to older printing techniques. Except for the off-white, paper color, the final cover uses various opacities of only two colors.

III. Conversation with Jonathan Dee, Writer of the Montauk Introduction

CH: While Montauk is based upon actual events in Frisch’s life, some passages read like fragmented vignettes in a narrative whose plot is secondary to the themes, language, and form. How does this stylistic approach complicate (or mirror) the relationship between memory and narrative?

JD: The “plot” of the book is indeed secondary—simple and uneventful; the drama proceeds from the compulsive, associative workings of Frisch’s memory, as he puts the events and sensations of the present into the broader, sadder context of the history of his relationships with women. That restlessness and discontinuity—that fragmentation, as you put it—seems to me a good formal mirror for the ways in which one recalls, voluntarily or otherwise, one’s own life and the mistakes therein.

CH: Frisch writes, “The writer is afraid of feelings that are not suited to publication; he takes refuge then in irony; all he perceives is considered from the point of view of whether it is worth describing, and he dislikes experiences that can never be expressed in words.” In your experience as a novelist, does language automatically obfuscate lived experience? How would this relate to Frisch’s actual relationships?

JD: I think what he’s talking about is the double consciousness with which every writer is familiar: the awareness of life as material, even as life is being lived. This awareness predates the writing itself, so I don’t see it as being about language per se.

CH: In the introduction, you mention Frisch’s catastrophic long-term relationships with the women in his life. Though this book seems to mostly be about a single affair he had, do you see Montauk as an oblique (but perhaps more genuine) glimpse into Frisch’s other failed relationships?

JD: Entirely. The affair with the young publicist is less subject than lens. Its ersatz intimacy, its lack of consequence, are the terms upon which its “success” depends; Frisch comes to realize that those terms have been set by himself, within himself, over the course of a lifetime.

CH: Montauk is written in a similar form and style to Frisch’s later work—short sentences with lots of open white space. How do you think the gaps and blank margins work with the book’s thematic objectives?
JD: They are markers of silence and contemplation. Though I suppose technically they make this book (like *Man in the Holocene* and others) read more quickly, paradoxically they also slow the prose down, isolate the ideas within it, pull them up from the stream of time.

CH: Toward the end of your introduction, you claim that *Montauk* fits into a tradition we now call autofiction. Do all autobiographies, at least on some level, defy passive remembrance? Is the writer inventing, perhaps unconsciously, his or her own life story as he or she writes it? What does fictionalizing a biography offer to the reader?

JD: *Montauk* avails itself of fictional forms and techniques, but that’s not the same as saying that the material it contains is fictionalized. It’s true, of course, that all autobiography involves levels of invention, both conscious and subconscious. I’m kind of old-fashioned, though, in feeling that there is still a moral line, important if not always bright, between acknowledging the limits of memory and deliberate falsification for aesthetic gain.

CH: As a novelist yourself, how has your reading of Frisch influenced your own writing?

JD: When I was much younger, *I’m Not Stiller* very compellingly taught me what an unreliable narrator was. As for the influence of his later novels, I’ll paraphrase Joy Williams: some great books can teach us little about technique, their way of touching us is simply by exploding on the lintel of our minds.

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**And Dreaming**
I was reading an old Paris Review interview with Max Frisch in which the writer at one point observed that *Man in the Holocene* was his favorite of his own works. This from the author of *I’m Not Stiller* and *Homo Faber*—I was more than a little surprised. I remembered when that short novel appeared in a single issue of the New Yorker in 1980, with its various lists and quoted encyclopedia excerpts set in different fonts against a darker background—what a cobbled-up collage it seemed then. I was not impressed. Back then I considered literary collage a kind of laziness, an end run around the difficulty of finding the best transitions. Frisch’s reproduction of secondary-source materials seemed to me a failure of the transforming imagination.

Reading the book again 35 years later, I’m realizing, not for the first time, that every book—that is, every reading—marks a particular intersection of the immobile text and the ever-changing sensibility of the person turning the pages. Whoever it was who read *Man in the Holocene* in 1980 is hereby proven to have been another person.

It was not that I didn’t recognize what Frisch was doing when I read the book that first time; it’s that I didn’t grasp the meaning deeply enough, didn’t apprehend it in such a way that the structure and execution would reflect not artistic expediency so much as a smartly risk-taking response to a felt artistic necessity.

The novel is readily summarized. An old man, Geiser, is living alone in his house in an isolated area in the Ticino canton in the Swiss Alps. A series of storms and outages cuts him off for many days from his few village connections, stranding him with minimal food stores. He becomes aware, too, that his memory is faltering; he finds himself subject to unnerving failures of connection. To occupy himself, and at the same time to push against these episodes of forgetfulness, he begins cutting up his encyclopedia, pinning up lists and charts relating to the history of the earth from the earliest named geological periods to the present, the Holocene. Frisch intersperses these clipped-out texts throughout the novel.

Most of the novel takes place in a kind of diffuse ongoing present. The only sustained narrative event is a day-long hike Geiser undertakes to cross various mountain trails to a nearby town. But what in former times was a manageable hours’ long hike has proved an arduous ordeal. Exhausted, he abandons the effort at nightfall and makes his erratic way back home.

There are very few novels about age and aging, and this is for obvious reasons. The novel is a laboratory of transformation; it studies *becoming*. The older person is seen to be finished with that, at least the more marketably adventurous part of it, and unless he or she is made by the author to look back and assess the past, the field of narrative possibility is radically diminished. Frisch is almost perversely refusing that option. He invokes Geiser’s past in only the most limited and selective ways. We hear nothing of the man’s career or marriage; beyond that he is a widower with a grown daughter who from time to time looks in on him. We find almost no subjective hints as to the kind of...
life he might have lived for his long decades; no mention, either, of world events. Like his great Irish contemporary, Frisch scours away nearly all contingency, though Frisch is a good deal more matter-of-fact than Beckett in his fronting of reality—we find little or no trace of gallows absurdism. Man in the Holocene is finally a novel about scale and reduction. Frisch works on two fronts. To begin with, Geiser’s accumulation and posting of geological and paleontological facts diminishes his existence categorically, reminding him—and us—in the barest numerical terms that a human life is the merest flicker in an inconceivable vastness of time. That abstract diminution works alongside the intensifying erosions of subjective memory. Geiser is whittled down like a sculpture by his fellow Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti.

The overall premise is painful to contemplate. A man living alone, attending with no show of affect to such business as he has to attend to. Feeding himself, his cat. Arranging his clippings. His solitude is such that we feel he can barely fill it. It seems the most desolating loneliness imaginable, though Geiser himself betrays nothing. Frisch has him doing one thing, then another, making his basic observations:

Probably the whole village is without electricity.

The icebox has not yet started to smell bad, but the butter is soft and runny; obviously the power has been off for some time. The cheese is sweating. Though not really hungry, he eats the last egg, raw—though with some revulsion, since it is not chilled.

The fuses are all in order.

It was inevitable that at some point I should remember the darkest of all dark poems, Robert Frost’s “An Old Man’s Winter Night”—and it is too immediately apt to Geiser’s situation and existential mood not to cite in full:

All out of doors looked darkly in at him
Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
What kept him from remembering what it was
That brought him to that creaking room was age.
He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.
And having scared the cellar under him
In clomping there, he scared it once again
In clomping off;—and scared the outer night,
Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
But nothing so like beating on a box.
A light he was to no one but himself
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.
He consigned to the moon, such as she was,
So late-arising, to the broken moon
As better than the sun in any case
For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
His icicles along the wall to keep;
And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
One aged man—one man—can’t fill a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It’s thus he does it of a winter night.
The poem is harrowing in the measured steadiness of its evocations and I see now that it was Frost who gave me the idea of Geiser’s being a solitude that he could barely fill. Both writers are inviting questions about ultimates, about the consolation and possible redemptions of experience.

Part of our understanding of art—the act of writing—is that even in its darkest and gravest exposures it brings meaning, or clarifies the impulse toward it. There is no serious work that does not at some level ask the question of meaning—and thus even to propose that there might be no meaning is to frame meaning as an idea that we have to deal with. As Shakespeare wrote, “...the worst is not so long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’”

It’s not that I didn’t grasp these basic perspectives when I read the book in my late 20s. I believe I did. What I did not grasp—could not have—was the sensation experience of age. Nor can I yet, not fully, but I feel a good deal closer. I feel I have more right to speak than I did earlier. Youth cannot know age, it’s as simple as that. That is what makes youth the privileged—the innocent but doomed—condition it is. Emerson wrote, in a whole other context, “Our moods do not believe in each other.” We could easily say the same about the stages of life, though when youth contemplates age it is in ignorance, and when age beholds youth it is with significant forgetfulness. I was still young when I first read Frisch. His narration of circumstance was clear enough. What did not signify—not in the same way—were the gaps, silences, and elisions. I did not yet understand how memory remakes experience, and how the erosions of memory then begin to alter everything again.

Frisch began exploring what might be called his phenomenology of aging in the early 1970s in his Sketchbook 1966–1971. There, through recurrent lists and questionnaires, he introduced the idea of “the Doomed Man”—the individual who has realized that he has reached the beginning of his decline, arriving at the point where the idea of mortality is never far from his thoughts.

This notion of “doom” is of course known to all, but Frisch, here and elsewhere, gives his psychologizing a decidedly male inflection, focusing on vanity around sexual potency and various strategies of dissimulation that are more particularly male. The ironist’s touch is everywhere evident:

The doomed man recognizes what he is from the fact that nobody envies him, not even when he enjoys fame or possesses a fortune, that is to say, has advantages that younger men do not have; despite that, nobody wants to change places with him.

The doomed man is always concealing some fear. When his napkin falls under the table he feels he has give himself away.

Frisch’s short collage-novel Montauk, published in 1975, was a fully realized portrait-from-within of such a “doomed” man. The author drew extensively on the materials of his own younger years, interspersing among the other narrative elements a series of what feel like private exorcisms. “He wishes there did not always have to be memories...” he says at one point. He recounts the betrayal of one of the friends of his youth, the painful end of his long affair with the writer Ingeborg Bachmann....

But Frisch’s Frischean narrator, Max, full as he is with remorse and encroaching angsts, is also still caught up...
in a life of plans and obligations. He travels, engages in his bittersweet weekend tryst with his publicist, a much younger woman; he still avails himself of the future tense.

Not so Geiser. Geiser is a man who has reached an inner terminus. His reference to the future extends no further than mapping the course of his next few actions. Interestingly—ominously—we almost never see him performing the actions. Spotting some cobwebs on the ceiling at one point, he thinks he might have to unscrew the handrail of the banister to reach them. A few sentences along we read: “The cobwebs are gone.” The tactic contributes to a ghostly depersonalization of his tenancy in the house. Of Geiser’s own past, there is, with a single key exception, almost nothing. This seems less a matter of Frisch not filling us in on Geiser’s memories, more a suggestion that he is no longer in their reach. The wish expressed in Montauk—that there would not always have to be memories—has maybe been granted. This is another way of saying that Geiser has moved past caring—past the anchoring connection to his various younger selves.

In part this appears to be Frisch’s novelistic conceit, to create a protagonist literally and symbolically all but stripped of everything—taken off subjective life-support: Geiser as experiment, as guinea pig. We are brought into the world of a man alone, a man clearly worn down by life-loss and grief, who is now experiencing the very real and much feared destruction of memory. Not just the memory of the past, but also the day-to-day memory that would orient him in his life. “While Geiser is failing to remember where he put the candle in case the power should go off again, the hot plate continues to glow....” As Frost had it: “What kept him from remembering what it was / That brought him to that creaking room was age.” Geiser’s impulse, as I noted, is not to fortify himself with the subjective past, but rather to lay out the grid of geological time, to frame up the major eras of human history:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Era</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAMBRIAN</td>
<td>100,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILURIAN</td>
<td>70,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEVONIAN</td>
<td>80,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARBONIFEROUS</td>
<td>75,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERMIAN</td>
<td>75,000,000</td>
</tr>
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And so on...

*Man in the Holocene* is finally about one individual enduring inexorable loss, the erasure of everything that could be said to define a meaningful life. It is a progressive diminution, a compressed account of a man making do with less and less. It is necessarily about resistance and refusal—and thus also stark anatomizing of what makes us human. Once we have grasped the irresistible momentum at work, we are compelled forward by a kind of grim fascination. We need to see how the mind and spirit will finally cope and what salvage is possible. Part of Frisch’s great success—which I did not quite grasp in my earlier reading—is that he derives from this a harsh, but also piercing, beauty.

Frisch’s narrative tactic is to bring us to realization gradually. When we begin the novel, the extent of Geiser’s memory loss is unclear. At the outset we tend to regard him as a forgetful older man who is living alone and who, unattended, can be expected to experience the kinds of gaps we all do. He seems at first capable enough within the limited circumference he has described for himself. But as the narration proceeds, the blanks come more often; they begin to make a pattern that changes our view. Again and again Geiser finds himself immobilized, unable to recall what he was doing or intending. We see him stand in
the middle of the room at a loss. Once we realize what is happening, we understand his clipping and posting of facts and statistics as a kind of rear-guard action against the erosions. Recognizing the danger, Geiser is taking steps. What is striking is the basic tonal flatness, the complete absence of distressed emotion. He moves forward, pushing back as best he can, but he never invokes or addresses the life, the memory world, that is falling away.

We are therefore more inclined to readerly equanimity ourselves. If Geiser is as stalwart and undistressed as Frisch portrays him, then we accept those as the emotional terms of the book. Until—

The writer is a master at placement, and the moment—the “reveal”—that he has set up is distressing, in part because it comes to us in the same uninflected manner as does everything else. It is, I can say, the one moment that had lodged itself in my reading memory, lodged so vividly, indeed, that when I went back to re-read the novel all these years later, I featured it as a key climactic event that I was reading toward. I was shocked to find that the whole business transpired in the matter of a few sentences—and was never remarked again.

Several things happen to set us up—and I’ll take the blame for giving it away. When Geiser returns from his day-long mountain trek, it is past midnight. He discovers that a pot of minestrone has been left for him in his absence—and he knows it is from a professor acquaintance of his. Still, disturbed by what feels like an invasion of his order, he resolves to henceforth lock his door.

Next we follow Geiser’s reflection on various practical considerations relating to his clipping project—along with a group of reproduced images of dinosaurs and their skeletons. And then, suddenly, there is a break—not in text, but in the sequence we have been attending.

We read, “It is clear that Geiser must have been wearing his hat. Otherwise it would not be lying beside him on the floor.” We are momentarily dislodged. He has fallen, we think, lost consciousness, suffered some kind of stroke. It’s clear that he remembers nothing of the event, and we now see him trying to figure it out—judging the time elapsed by the fact that the chestnut log in the fireplace is still burning, wondering whether his daughter has tried to get through to him, noting, too, that his left eyelid is “still” numb. Geiser next tests his mental faculties by remembering his year of birth, mother’s maiden name... The prose on these pages is set out in brief sections, many only a sentence long. The catalogue of stray-seeming observations—“At some time a stray dog on the grounds—” is suddenly followed by “Since yesterday, when he roasted the cat over the fire and then was unable to eat it, Geiser can no longer face even the soup, because there is bacon in it.”

The eye could almost slip right past it. But there it is, and, yes, it’s certain now. We are no longer dealing with memory lapses alone, but with a more disturbing dementia—not just a break in awareness, but also a deeper tear in the fabric. Disturbing as we find the contemplation of the fact, it is equally disturbing, if on a slightly more abstract level, that the narration, in “close third-person,” should then move along so matter-of-factly to other things. This is another of Frisch’s favored tactics—planting a cause that must find its effect in the reader.

With this revelation, Frisch is almost done. But not quite. His next move, an unexpected one, is to give Geiser, who we now view as a casualty, a man unmoored, his one sustained memory from the past. It is not a memory of marriage, fatherhood, or vocation—about these main features of his adult life we know nothing—but rather
about a mountain climb and descent that he took some fifty years ago with his brother, who, we learn, is long since dead.

In contrast to the most rudimentary scraps from the past, Frisch now provides several pages of close narration, presenting the whole arc of what was clearly a harrowing episode—very likely the closest that Geiser has come to death.

The memory, likely triggered by Geiser’s recent outing, covers first the stages of ascent and arrival at the peak, and then slows to dramatize the perilous—climactic—descent, during which Geiser suddenly finds himself alone on a narrow ledge, rock-face in front of him, unsurvivable drop at his back, and with temperature dropping, every reason to think that he will die before his brother can rescue him:

But to stand there alone against the face, both shoes wedged in a crack, unable to move, looking down on the glacier—nobody could have held out till midnight. Even half an hour would have been too long. In the meantime it had turned cold; no wind, but the sort of cold that leads to indifference.

Placed in the novel as a kind of culmination, exceptional in the relative completeness of the telling, the account is made to carry a major thematic weight. Nearness of death, the absolute implacability of elements, the unprecedented distillation of self-awareness in the face of nothingness...what Frisch is doing, after so many pages of setting out the fractured, intermittent-seeming consciousness of Geiser, is pulling everything together into a single vivid image of a man face to face with death. That Geiser was that time reprieved changes nothing, in effect.

And it could be that the fast obliteration he faced those many years ago is to be seen as much preferable to what he knows awaits him now.

Right near the end, after the memory account, Frisch resumes his more fragmentary mode:

Why does she talk to him as if he were a child? There is nothing to say.
What to do with all these bits of paper?

... All the papers, whether on the wall or the carpet, can go. Who cares about the Holocene? Nature needs no names. Geiser knows that. The rocks do not need his memory.

There follow a few last reproduced textbook entries, a description from the geological perspective of Erosion, and then, Apoplexy, a detached medical description of stroke, and then, finally—masterfully—we get a sustained kind of God’s-eye passage about place, one including only the most distant sightings of humans:

The village stands unharmed. Above the mountains, high up in the blue sky, the white trails of passenger planes that cannot be heard. The scent of lavender, bees, during the day it becomes almost hot, summer as usual. The walls in the sun are swarming with lizards, they lie basking on the stone window sills or flit silently up and down the walls of the house.... Now and again one hears the sound of a power saw, the shrill whine as the saw eats into a tree trunk, and a little later, after one has heard a sudden rustling somewhere in the undergrowth and the dull thud of a felled tree, the crackle of its idling.
Frisch’s finale recalls nothing so much as the “Time Passes” section from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, which worked to such devastating effect to present, by way of absence, the death of Mrs. Ramsay. Clearly this is meant to be taken as the world going on after Geist’s death, even though the death is nowhere mentioned. Frisch’s is a complex and effective balancing act. For as we have been led stage by stage to grasp the wearing away and extinction of a human life, so now we are brought face to face with the neutral lastingness of Nature. Here is the world as it is stands forth, essential and beautiful—at least for the reader who arranges the pictures in her mind, tuning into the vivid sensory details, but inescapably aware as she does so of her own softly ticking mortal pulse.
Nihilistic Password Security Questions

What is the name of your least favorite child?
In what year did you abandon your dreams?
What is the maiden name of your father’s mistress?
At what age did your childhood pet run away?
What was the name of your favorite unpaid internship?
In what city did you first experience ennui?
What is your ex-wife’s newest last name?
What sports team do you fetishize to avoid meaningful discussion with others?
What is the name of your favorite canceled TV show?
What was the middle name of your first rebound?
On what street did you lose your childlike sense of wonder?
When did you stop trying?

I’m Nobody! Who Are You

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one’s name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

This piece was originally published in McSweeney’s
We get up instead and have breakfast, do the dishes. We think about what we will do during the day instead.”

When he said this, I had a good laugh at myself. It made me feel uncomfortable, but the discomfort was good and necessary. Somehow, this had not occurred to me in such a long time that I’d forgotten I’d ever known it. I went outside about halfway through the panel and had a cigarette on Hester. The sun was setting very pinkly on a brick building. Some guy walking by dropped something and I picked it up for him. I hadn’t felt as good as I did then, in that moment, in months.

I still remember the moment someone told me race doesn’t exist. I was standing in the library of our collective house in Richmond. I was 19. He said it casually, as if this were common knowledge, and I had no idea what he was talking about. There were so many questions, but I was ashamed to ask them. My first thought, I think, was bizarrely childish. Like we were all super-heroes; like we could change our DNA. It just profoundly made no sense to me, and yet I knew it for truth. I’d spent the first 18 years of my life in an Appalachian town famous for a lynching and expulsion. The first and only time I ever saw a black person on the street in my town, the kids on the bus shouted out the windows and threw things at him. I said something, I don’t know what, and one of the older kids called me a nigger-lover and sprayed me with a can of aerosol deodorant he pulled out of his gym bag.

After my roommate told me this, I went to the library in downtown Richmond and checked out a lot of books to figure out what the hell he was talking about. I took at face value that all forms of oppression are connected—my first girlfriend had introduced me to bell hooks when I was 17—but I really had no idea what this meant. It was just a slogan I believed in.
I remember, too, the first time I met a trans person who knew they were trans. We met in hand-to-waist shackles, being led towards a holding cell. He was so new to transition that he didn’t mind sharing his given name. We ended up sharing a cell together. We ended up fucking. We made each other bleed. When we got out, we hitched around the country together for months. It was the first time, I think, I’d come close to much of feeling anything with sex, in those times that we made each other bloody, that we blacked one another’s eyes. It was always easy to take a punch. In it, you could actually feel something. He was a mirror. I started to think that maybe it made sense, why I’d always hated wearing dresses so much that I’d let my mother beat me striped before I’d put one on to go to church.

What I do not remember is realizing my family was poor. I don’t remember the first time I felt less than human, or the first time I felt trapped, or had the compulsion to hide myself. I don’t remember the first time I felt lonely, or when I stopped having faith that anything good would ever happen to me. I do remember the first day of school, and not being able to read anything except for my name. I kicked the chain link fence and dug in the mud when they let us out for recess. I watched the other kids. I didn’t understand what they were doing.

I remember when I finally understood just how fucked up the term “white trash” is, and just started calling myself trash. I was older than you would expect.

I had always said, up until the time that I had a nervous breakdown, that nothing bad had ever happened to me. I had been born white and in the US; I’d always had a roof over my head and never been hungry. My father was an abusive drunk but he didn’t beat or fuck us. That bad things had happened was something I could admit to myself, when I was alone, and then immediately feel guilty for that admission. My brain, already fine-tuned to self-denigration and self-hatred as if this were a natural part of being a good and ethical person, I’d further colonized with the oppression hierarchy unconsciously enforced by the radical thought police.

I never felt guilty for being white (by white, I mean not only color, but the confluence of power) until I moved to New York. And even this took many years. I had to become white before I could feel guilty for it. Despite being, in phenotype and culture, so white that my parents had no idea where we came from, it did not take me long to understand that I was not white in the same way as my middle- and upper-middle class friends who had gone to prestigious colleges, who had had an entirely different life experience. Phenotype and the amount of education and cultural capital I’d acquired for myself erased, ostensibly, this difference between us. I was constantly filled with rage; sometimes I wanted to strangle my friends. They seemed, in very key ways, like clueless children. In the years before I came to fear and distrust them, I saw more of myself in the black and brown faces of the people in my neighborhood who were poor than in my friends. I saw in them my mother, my father. I began to think of myself as a gray ghost. I told almost no one this—sure the thought police would come knocking on my door—and the few I did disclose this to were transplanted Appalachians. They said “You be careful who you say that to.”

I came to New York with a backpack, a shitty public high school education, and $150 after I paid first month’s rent. I came without any kind of safety net, other than a sort of ready-made community of radicals I’d met through activism. I knew that I wanted to die with as few regrets as possible, that I could not stand the misery of being
poor my entire life, that I wanted to be a writer, and that whatever I might attain, I wanted to find a way to give back to people who needed it more. My mantra had always been “Success or Suicide,” which I suppose sounds dramatic, but my stability, insofar as I’ve ever been stable, had always hinged on extremes. To be so nakedly against the force of one’s own will is desperately uncomfortable, but you get a lot of shit done.

I very much wanted to live; I was in so much constant psychic pain that I did not care so much if I died. What I wanted was to not waste time. I conducted my life within a dissociative fear/ful/lessness I was entirely unaware of. The escape strategy of suicide was taken from me when my best friend jumped in the Susquehanna River. This gave me no choice but to live. I talked my way into a publishing job, put myself through school, got my first book published, fell in love again and again, each time with astonishing transformation and severity, traveled as constantly as my life would allow, grew a savings account, and entered grad school for writing. Around this time, I also passed the Fire Department test, and a few weeks after getting my appointment to the Fire Academy, was awarded a fellowship that would allow me to do nothing but write for the first time in my life and paid a modicum of middle class income. I chose the old dream over the new dream, not knowing that this would be the first of many awards for my creative work. I was mind-numbingly depressed through all of this; I’d been mind-numbingly depressed my entire life. My partner moved in—it was the first monogamous relationship I’d ever had—and we started looking to buy a house in Brooklyn after the market crashed. Everything I’d worked for I was on the cusp of achieving. I was 28. For the first time in my life, I could breathe. I’d been in New York for six years. It felt like much longer.

I suppose anyone who wanted to put pen to paper to write the particulars of their dissolution—if they have survived it—could go on and on forever. In retrospect, I guess it’s not a surprise that I fell apart when my life finally started to feel comfortable. I’d come from a place where if you broke, you would stay broken. There’d never been the margin for that error before. I’d always felt I was walking on a tightrope across the chasm of what my parents had told me I could expect out of being alive. So much of me believed—and still believes—that it is foolish to expect anything other than bad things happening.

The days were long and good after I got the fellowship in grad school. Used to fifteen-hour days of dumb jobs and undergrad, I was thankful just to have time to myself. My partner and I built a garden; we were very much in love with each other. We both had the sense, I think, that we were growing up together, and that growing up was good. Alone with my work, alone in front of a screen, is the place where I’ve always been most honest. And with all this time to write fiction, to spin out a world, I finally came to excavate my own experience, to dig through the sediment of years, and see its true shape, to understand how my soul had been warped around it.

I’ve spoken with many friends about denial, as if we are self-aware enough to partially know when it is happening. But that is not what denial is; to halfway know is something different. One cannot be aware of denial; its nature is the not-knowing. Before I was living with the aforementioned partner, I loved a woman who is a survivor. She started having flashbacks while we were together that landed her in the hospital. I thought there was no way I could understand her experience, and at the time I truly didn’t. I knew that I’d had a years long
I’d been afflicted with by growing up in an all-white town that celebrated genocide. I went home again to do research on the incident; there was surprisingly little to find. I read books about lynchings and was horrified by my lack of reaction. The fiction I wrote was as unfeeling as the short paragraphs in textbooks that are written as if history is irrevocably done and gone, and not something that is still happening. With the time to write, I spent months imagining what it would have been like to witness a lynching, to be subject and object to and of them, and the effects this kind of dehumanizing violence must have on all of us, but on the white psyche in particular, whether these effects are consciously cognized or not. I got as close as I could, and as I wrote these pages, I found I no longer wanted to exist in this country, on this earth.

During this time, the flashbacks began taking over my waking reality. I drank a lot; I did drugs; I got hooked on porn. I stopped having sex with my girlfriend and she suffered without knowing why she was suffering. I had no idea what was happening to me, and was deeply ashamed of every action I made. She started sleeping with a cis man and a few months later told me she didn’t know if she could stay with me because I am trans. We have since agreed to disagree about this occurrence. For me, it happened. It was the wedge that went into these other spreading fault lines that completely cracked me open. If there had ever been a chance I might not fall apart, that chance was gone after she said this. For her, it was something she was forced, by me, to say. And I suppose this is true. How else does someone come to say the unsayable unless by force?

She moved out of the house, but I stayed with her, in large part because I’d never been single and was terrified to be alone. I’ve always been addicted to love, always operated

relationship with a sadistic and probably sociopathic older cousin that had started when I was very young. This was something I believed I’d never allowed myself to feel shame about. I told my lovers about it, I joked with people I trusted, and I used the story to say fuck you to people who felt no qualms talking ignorant shit about Appalachia. That I’d had an incestuous relationship and did not appear to be a hillbilly seemed to disarm them. It stopped the “white trash” jokes cold.

As I worked on the novel, this relationship began to come to the fore. I started to remember things I hadn’t forgotten, but that had never felt visceral. They were so bizarre that I didn’t quite believe they’d happened. My father died unexpectedly the summer before I started grad school, in July of 2007. My aunt left a message on the answering machine to tell me, using my old name. I didn’t feel much of anything about it when I found out he was gone. I went back to the mountains for the funeral, and at my grandmother’s house my cousin laid his hands on my shoulders as if he owned me, and asked me how I was doing. What was terrible was how much I still wanted to be owned. I did not know it then, would not know it for years, that this touch cracked me open. The flashbacks started soon after, the uncontrollable fantasies that made me feel more alive than really anything else. It was perhaps the most intense sexual feeling I’d ever had.

A couple months later, one night coming home from workshop shit-faced on the train, I wrote in my notebook, in hand-writing I could hardly read later, about the town I grew up in. I woke up the next morning realizing the book was larger than I thought, and that the way to illustrate that all forms of oppression are connected, in this fiction, would be to connect the power dynamic of my experience with incest to the psychic hollowing out
Perhaps, by the time this happened, I had already long been dead.

It is difficult to come to terms with what has happened to us. It is even more difficult to come to terms with what we do to ourselves in reaction to all that has happened. There’s always the belief that we have a choice. Sometimes we do, and sometimes we do not. I understand, now, what happened to me. I faced my terror; I survived it. At the time of this writing, July 2014, I am still trying to recover from what I did to myself. My consciousness has not yet caught up to its present. The young girl who kicked at the chain link fence finally understands she did nothing wrong. The 30-year-old man who went crazy and wrecked his life keeps forgetting that I have chosen to live, that I am someone different now. This 30-year-old man doesn’t want to admit that some scars are permanent. He’s still trying to turn back time. He wants his imagined innocence.

I have been prone to what I used to consider transcendental experiences my entire life. I remember, maybe around age ten, while my parents were going at each other like dogs in the front half of the trailer, staring at the shine of light on the footboard of my bed and thinking I saw god there. I’d walk around in the woods and lose hours, and not be able to tell anyone what had happened. It wasn’t that I didn’t know; it was that I didn’t want people to think I was crazy. I’d put my hands out in front of me, and walk through the trees, looking for another world like dousing for water. Sometimes I found it, usually not. I did not understand until I was in my thirties that the world I’d been looking for was this one. I did not know, until I began to recover from falling apart, that I’d been living outside of my body for pretty much my entire life, and that those transcendental experiences,
in large part, were the times that I actually came back within myself. It took a long time to realize that this is just how some people experience life. For the first time, I felt I understood people who were comfortable with themselves. It was hard to come to terms with this. And then, I did the only thing I really could do, to avoid growing bitter, and that was laugh. What a cosmic joke it was, after all, playing out in this universe I call “me.” I’d been broken down to my most basic elements, and even these were dissolved into something more elemental: a void, a formless firmament. I began to imagine more. I had to.

This greatly affected my personal metaphysics, which I’d sensed the glass ceiling of for some time, a ceiling that was made of experience, of course, but also of political ideology. I’d been thinking for so long about social constructions, the paradox of the realness of these as they manifest in our lived realities, and the fact that they are a fiction written onto us by Power. I’d become so utterly beholden to their reality that I’d forgotten their unreality without quite realizing it. I’d forgotten to ask: What comes next?

I remember, I don’t know what age I was, or the circumstance, but it must have been later on in high school, because I’d already politicized myself, and I felt always on fire with the horror of all that had happened, and was continually happening, to countless people and groups of people, destroying countless universes, all across the globe. I was looking at my hands, maybe; I was certainly sitting in front of my typewriter, wondering what the fuck had happened here and what could be done to fix it. And I thought about what it would look like if human beings evolved, what form our spirits and bodies would take, and it occurred to me that we would turn into pure light.

There is a part of me that still believes this.

Which, in a roundabout way, brings us back to my original question: is it possible for any of us to just be human?

A friend who read an earlier, very different version of this essay told me that she felt it was infected by nostalgia for a return to The Garden. To a place where we are unaffected by trauma and culture, where we have not sinned nor been sinned against. To where we are whole and all that should not have happened did not happen because it should not have happened. She said I seemed loathe to give up a concept that, at this point in history, if it could ever, no longer exists. I chewed the inside of my cheek. I knew she was right. We are all Cyborgs now. Our Garden cannot be looked back upon. Our moments must be looked towards, and they must be Now.

When I think about what might be possible, of how to imagine a different lived experience while in the stream of this utterly fucked up and completely beautiful world, I come back to the late spring and summer of 2012. I’d been single and celibate for eight months, off of the booze but still haunted by my cousin, and I’d woken up to the fact that I was living in the Underworld. I was conscious of my deadness, and conscious for the first time, of the possibility of rebirth. I think of this time—when I understood that rock bottom was not a pit, but a world and a creature of vast that included peaks and rivers and valleys, and a night sky the stars shined against—as Afterlife. From there, in that bottom, I could see just how narrow that tightrope I’d walked upon had always been. And around me, in that vastness, was the wreckage of all I’d had to ignore to keep my footing upon it for all those years. I understand that if I were to come out of this luminous dis-reality, it would not be to rebuild with the wreckage of what I’d known. It would
There was a period of two weeks in which I lived the entire time in the eternal now. I had no thought of what would happen, no fear of the fear. There was only the motion of happening. Each interaction I had with strangers, with friends, I at once did not think of the ways we are socially constructed—how we are cut into parts—nor did I forget the existence of this. It was seamless. During this time, I saw the possibility of what it might mean to be alive if we allow ourselves to die in order to come back as something other, to surrender ourselves of all we’ve ever been afraid of. It was beyond anything I’d been able to imagine, to be nothing other than simply myself, and to love people, unfettered, in their singularity, for no reason other than for the fact that they exist, and that we exist together, in this world Giorgio Agamben refers to as the Irreparable.

I understood that it is not beyond the realm of possibility to grow a new soul in a single morning. I saw that when we love ourselves down to the marrow and beyond, to before and after the edges of the known, to before and after our ancestors and us as ancestors turning back to the earth, that it is not possible to deny someone else their humanness in even the slightest of ways. In this state, it is impossible to be anything other than that which you are, and impossible not to see the sameness of difference of this particularity in others. I understood that self-hate is the blood oil dominator culture runs on, and that absolute love is what is required to stop the machine that is destroying us. I could not stand knowing this. It was too simple. My heart broke.

During that two-week period, I thought I was “cured” of whatever it was that had been bothering me my whole life. And then the feeling began to fade, in slow degrees over the weeks, the clarity muddied, the eddies of anxiety formed of substance I had not been able to previously imagine.

This was perhaps the strangest, and most wonderful and terrible time in my life so far. I was 33, and was present in my body, on a consistent basis, for the first time I could recall, and for the first time, I knew what to call this. I was practicing somatic therapy and meditation and I’d begun to have energetic visions. I stopped relying, so much, on my intellect, for intellect had proven itself to be only one tool, and it was deformed, hopelessly colonized; I’d spent my entire life simultaneously pulling myself out of holes and digging them deeper with it. I put my fear of being alone into a forest of pine trees I grew out of my left hand. I let the anxiety pour out of my upturned arms, and the energy was the shape of snakes disappearing into the late afternoon grass. I rewrote narratives I’d had my entire life in a single evening, not upon paper but within my body. Some spirits told me something about my best friend on a mountain in North Carolina, and when she came, later that evening, to my cabin I asked: “Why haven’t you ever believed anything I’ve told you about my childhood?” She said: “I’m sorry. I couldn’t believe what you told me because I wouldn’t have survived it. I believe you now.” I went to my mother and told her none of it was right. My father, her father, back and further back, all the way to the beginning. I asked her if she’d ever felt safe. Her face twisted. She burst into tears. “Safe,” she said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I told her there’d never been a reason for any of it. She told me she was sorry for everything she’d done to me, that she hadn’t known any better. I forgave her, had already forgiven her. That other world, the unimagined one, is always already here, the same as the old one, but different. It is only visible in the light of forever.
came back and knocked me out of time, I grew afraid of people. I believed again all the lies I’d told and been told about myself. It was hard to buy a pack of cigarettes. People edged away from me. We can sense one another’s fear, conscious or not. The world did not stop singing the song it is always singing, but I grew deaf again to it. That clarity, in such longevity, has never come back. I am left, now, not with the remains of what happened to me, but what I did to destroy myself during the years in which I disintegrated into the fault lines of my experience, and with what I know is possible. And I am tired, so very tired, from it.

Seven years have passed since my father’s death. I’d always had this idea that if he and I ever had a drink together, made a late night of it, that we’d work everything out. He died before this could happen. In June of 2014, I went home to take care of my mom after surgery, and one evening went to visit his mountaintop grave. The moss was growing up over it. I sat down on it, maybe where his chest would have been, opened a beer, and talked out loud to him. I told him I understood, finally, why he drank. I told him I knew it didn’t have anything to do with me. I told him he was forgiven, and then I asked him to stop haunting me. I’ve known for some time my father lives in my face—he didn’t have any front teeth the entire time I was growing up, and this affected the way my father did everything—and when I feel uncomfortable, which is most of the time, I feel my mouth twisting around in the ways that his always did, I feel in those constrictions the urge to hide. I clinked the beer against the stone with my father’s name on it, and then poured the rest onto his grave.

That night, I camped alone on a mountain ridge that has been in our family for generations. I sat in a lawn chair and looked out into the dark. It comes up from the ground there, not down from the sky. I was waiting for my father to come, of course, and for him to leave. Time passed, the dark fell, and eventually my mouth and lips, and then tongue, and then the muscles of my esophagus began to move of their own accord. This lasted for a long time. When it was done, the white T-shirt I wore was slicked with drool I had not been quite conscious of emitting. There is nothing transcendental or supernatural about this, of course. I am just finally aware of my body and its myriad senses. I’m aware there is no separation between its corporeal and energetic aspects. There is reality in the present, and reality cut up into parts, and this latter cannot be separated from the first. But this latter is an illusion that passes itself off as our one and only reality most of the time.

If there is a Garden, if there is healing, it is blooming with the transmutation that occurs from scarring. It is a place where the sun shines both fierce and calm, the shadows forever changing with experience. It is not a frozen moment to be attained; there are no gates around it. It is a place where our color, our gender, our economic status—all of it—is woven into the fabric of the organic, not forgotten, but simultaneously accepted as the real and unreal. This perhaps, is the place where we might forgive each other for what is unforgivable. Where we might see that what has been done to one of us has been done to all of us. I perhaps no longer believe that I will heal from my passing on this earth, that I will ever evince the light of what is most true in me, or that I might know, beyond the passing of an eternal moment, what it really feels like to be alive. I perhaps no longer believe in this for myself, but I will never say that what happened to me is more or less terrible, or more or less real, than anything that has happened to anyone else. And I will never say that my own damage, or the impossibility of my own healing, precludes
this possibility for anyone else. I will never say healing is a privilege of the privileged, though privilege—the time, the space, the ability to pass in whatever ways—plays an undeniable part in its facilitation. None of this would have been possible, for me, if I’d had to worry about money. It’s been a long time since I have; it is still strange to me that writing has, for a moment that keeps seeming like it will end and then doesn’t, given me an almost middle-class income. A wise woman once said “Money changes everything.” It does, whether you want it to or not. I’ve worked my entire life, unknowingly, despite, and in capitulation to Power, to whiten myself. This whiteness, the absence and gone of the Appalachian gray, I wake up into each morning and it still feels like a mask, but it is one that never comes off. It is indelibly changing my features, not just in the lines around my mouth but in the contours of my ineffable. No, I did not want to be poor my entire life, and so I am not. The price of this is part of my soul becoming snow blind.

Privilege is a two-edged sword, for its true function in the larger machinery of dominator culture is to enable the denial of experience, to cut us off from what makes us human, to take from us knowledge of the places where we must mourn, and the places, too, where we must celebrate, alone and together. The landscape of privilege is a monstrous place where monstrous things grow, unable to discover or feel the ways in which they have become monstrous.

Try to listen, very deeply, to yourself. Try to believe the stories people tell you that seem too terrible to be true. Try to listen, especially, when people seem to you to be motherfucking crazy. We cannot imagine the unimaginable alone. We are what we have to get out of this mess, in hope and in hopelessness.
Here’s the Truth

Here’s the truth: you write a story about a woman, and you’re a woman, so you’re the woman, because how could you imagine another woman? How inconceivable that will be to everyone—a woman imagining a woman who is not herself. But what would the point be otherwise? A woman the same color as you, but a different height, a different width, and her insides blot and turn against yours like two colors of paint turning into a third on a palette. You have imagined a woman the same color as you who is not you and you are the only one not astonished by this imagining. The story you write is about a woman who is not you, but whom you write about with the understanding that even so, everyone will assume that she is you. The woman you have imagined walks down a street and sees a man she loves, and no one has guessed or will ever guess that this is you imagining the woman you love in the shape of a man, what would she be like, what would you be like, if you loved her as a man, what is a man anyway, what is a woman, and would you love her that way, can you test yourself out, and later when someone asks you, which part is true, with their most listening face, you will start to talk about that part of what you wrote, about the woman you love in the shape of a man, and the someone will say, I mean, to your life. And then you’ll have to stop yourself from telling them about the scene you wrote with the body, which is a body you remember not from any funeral you attended in your childhood—childhood being what you consider the era in which it wasn’t so hard to imagine people imagining other people—but because you had a science teacher who thought you were a scientist (do you see him imagining you as a scientist, how wrong and big he was) and he took you to see a cadaver, and that cadaver has become every cadaver you’ve ever written, because you imagine the dead and the dead and the dead, who can’t imagine anything. To your life, they will say, raising glasses at a book launch, and you’ll agree, it’s pretty good, the part where you killed off your sibling because she would have taken over the story, the parents who began as the parents you have, but became other people so distant you forgot where they began, and that they began you, they began by imagining you, and even they, so remarkably capable of imagining you, were wrong.
SCOTT CHESHIRE

The Fundamentalist Reader: On Plotless Novels and the Meaning of Life

I discovered Aristotle’s Poetics during a biblical literature class, years ago, at Queens College, shortly after my professor declined to tell me if he believed in God. That same morning, the young man behind me asked why it is we no longer live for centuries like Adam, Noah, or Methuselah. The professor didn’t answer him, either. I bought a copy of Poetics that day, the same version as his: a Penguin Classics paperback, translator Matthew Heath, a painted illustration of the Globe Theater on the front cover, secondhand, from the QC Bookstore. The books that shape us often come with a story of discovery, perhaps suggesting, or so we like to think, a casual providence at work: it came along just when I needed it, and I had no idea. I suppose it’s no accident the Bible starts with a “genesis,” and ends in “revelation” because the beginning of our relationship to any good book ends in what that book reveals about ourselves. The best ones, the books that last, lay for us a path toward some personal epiphany. This isn’t news, of course. Aristotle drew up the blueprint, in Poetics, more than 2,300 years ago, wherein story (or “poetry,” for him, epic, comic, and tragic) requires, among other things, a beginning, a middle, an end; and that story is purposeful, formally functional, and always on a path toward telos, “the end,” toward meaning.

Sort of how space travel well beyond the stratosphere is still determined by our limits within it, Poetics set the rules novelists play against. For modern readers, the beginning, the middle, the end of a story no longer need be in that order, or even look familiar—but they are there. Telos, “the end,” meaning, remains central. It’s the way toward meaning, and the place of meaning, for writer, reader, and character. Lately, I’ve been giving lots of thought to why, in recent years, a particular kind of novel, what I think of as the “not knowing” novel, so resonates with me. Why am I attracted? Why are others palpably not? And why, it seems, are these novels attracted to me? People keep pressing them into my hands. Just a few months ago I was given by a friend, insistently, Jenny Offill’s Dept. of Speculation, because I simply had to read it, and I would absolutely love it, etc. My friend was right. Lots of white space, no clear “plot,” it read like a narrator thinking out loud, unaware I could hear every word. The reading experience was intimate, felt almost invasive on my part, like eavesdropping. It also felt familiar. I mean this as compliment. It sort of looked like Elizabeth Hardwick’s Sleepless Nights (also recommended by a friend), and reminded me, in parts, of Sheila Heti’s How Should a Person Be? Most of all, it brought to mind one of my favorite books: Montauk by Max Frisch. All of these books are intimate, and share a near shapeless close-to-the-bone rawness you don’t find very often in novels. But they also read like writers in search of self-knowledge, in search of meaning. They are books that do not yet “know.”

I then thought of my younger self and realized that version of me did not read books like these. In fact,
nobody I knew, then, did, and aside from years alive on earth, what was the difference between “me” then and now?

Perhaps my attraction toward books that read like a writer “not knowing” comes from my religious fundamentalist rearing, a rebellious response, because it seems the longer I am away from the church—this also being a significant difference, I was raised in a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses—for over twenty years now, the more radical becomes my taste in books. I do know the first time I encountered a writer poking up his head, out of the text, not because he “knew” (the essence of meta-fiction, really) but because he did not: it was thrilling. It was Kurt Vonnegut, in Slaughterhouse-Five, calling out, but not in name—“That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book”—once again disrupting the wonderfully melancholy contraption of that book’s plot, and sounding like a bewildered ghost trying to find his way home. Apparently, I liked this sort of thing. But why?

And so I revisited three books especially meaningful to me, not only in my reading and writing history, but during my extrication from the church —The Names by Don DeLillo, Gilead by Marilynn Robinson, and, of course, Montauk by Max Frisch. I re-read them, in that order, in order of discovery, to try and determine what it is and was about these books that remains so important to me. It was an experience increasingly intense and personal. If you can imagine a book as the lens through which a writer eyed the world, in search of meaning, The Names read like peering through a telescope, and Gilead a handheld magnifying glass. Reading Montauk, on the other hand, often felt like spying from the dark side of a two-way mirror. Telos was omnipresent. The search for meaning suffused every page. And that search belonged to Max the narrator, surely, but also Max the author, and somehow it was also mine.

It was 1991, and I was eighteen years old, still a Jehovah’s Witness, but religiously and spiritually confused. I bought a paperback copy of The Names at The Book and Record Nook, in Norcross, Georgia, the place where I discovered a strange and beautiful trinity: The Stooges, John Coltrane, and Don DeLillo. Having been raised in a fundamentalist Christian home, but also unaccountably attracted to art—the two are rarely paired without detriment to the fundamentalist sensibility—The Names pretty much rearranged my brain. Here was a thriller about language itself, its ability to control, and distort, not to mention a secret cult that paired the alphabet with a killing hammer. I was changed. But more than anything else, I was introduced to a very particular point of view, DeLillo’s take on the world. While the characters might not be, every novel is utterly “him,” reflecting a man in a room making meaning from all the chaos and violence surrounding us. Years later, I bought my first copy of Gilead, in Seal Beach, California, just blocks from my apartment, at a bookshop run by a sweet old man named Nathan. He had long gray hair, hanging down his back, in thin watery lines like strands of rope. We used to talk about faith, and what to do with all its bait and tackle after you no longer had use for it. Gilead was confounding, at first. Here was a book expressly written about the Christian faith, about God, Heaven, and all in the voice of a Protestant minister. I should have buried my copy in the sand—but no. I couldn’t put it down. I never really have. I came to understand that a novel about religion need not be a religious novel, and that the Big Questions are essentially the same for both camps. Plus there was the wise and weary voice of John Ames, who at times reminded me of
my father: gentle, loving, probing, deeply curious about the physical world, occasionally irascible, but always questioning the “why” and “how” we are here. Ames is telos-driven; but so is Robinson. There is a distinct space between those voices, yes (Ames is a man, Robinson is not, etc.), but there is a quiet and quivering energy throughout the book, as if two attracted magnets were prevented from touching. It almost feels holy, maybe because it feels so human, so “her.” The separating space between Robinson’s two voices always threatens to collapse. As for Montauk, I discovered it just a few years ago, and I was immediately entranced. The book seemed to be a search, it wanted to know about itself, and had no separating space at all.

Max Frisch is best known for his 1954 “debut” novel *I’m Not Stiller*, generally considered a masterpiece of 20th-century German literature. It’s certainly the book of his most read in America, and it’s a brilliant comic novel obsessed with identity. Famously, the first line shouts: “I’m not Stiller!” Thou doth protest too much, we think, and the remaining 375 pages consist of one Mr. Jim White, imprisoned, claiming a case of mistaken identity; that he is not Mr. Stiller. The rest of the world, an ex-wife, co-workers, etc., insist that he is. In fact, all of Frisch’s work is identity-obsessed—from his actual debut published some sixteen years earlier, dismissed (a bit unfairly, I think) by Frisch as juvenilia, *An Answer From the Silence*, on through his three fascinating Tagebücher (daybooks, or diaries), and the novels, *Homo Faber, Gantenbein, Man in the Holocene, Bluebeard*, and the sort of unclassifiable and magnificent *Montauk*. The plot of *Montauk* (translated by Geoffrey Skelton) is simple: a brief love affair between a man in his seventies and a much younger woman, it lasts but a single weekend. But if I may use Hemingway’s metaphor, that’s just the tip of a large and life-sized iceberg. *Montauk* is really about memory. In fact the opening lines that place us specifically in space and time — “A sign promising a view across the island: OVERLOOK. It was he who suggested stopping here”; and from page two: “MONTAUK / an Indian name applied to the Northern point of Long Island, one hundred and twenty miles from Manhattan. He could also name the date: 5/11/74” — belie the real plot and setting. To be more precise, *Montauk* is about an older man sitting at his desk, with pen and paper, trying to write the story of a love affair, but failing, ever falling away in memory. Or as Sven Birkerts puts it, *Montauk* is a “book of retrospect, yes, but not of passive retrospect.” The older man is Frisch himself. Although it’s not until after six pages of relatively straightforward third person storytelling that his “I” makes a jarring entrance.

Obviously she is as astonished as he that he is here now, standing beside her...

His flight is booked for Tuesday.

At first I thought she was just the camera girl usual on such occasions, suddenly crouching down and clicking, telling one how to sit, and then, just as one has at last forgotten her, clicking again, once, twice, three times, four times. But she had no camera.

In *Montauk*, telling and recovery are bedmates. The involuntary act of Frisch remembering how he met the woman disturbs what he’s writing about her. He eventually returns to third person—but not for twenty-seven more pages. And this only after the memory of that woman...
reminds him of his ex-wife, a recent “domestic failure,” other ex-wives, other broken loves, of his mother, and the fraught relationship he has with his daughter, plus a long digression on a close but troubled friendship with a man referred to as W:

I feel that my friendship with W. was basically a disaster for me, but that W. himself was in no way to blame. If I had been less submissive, the outcome would have been better—for him as well.

OVERLOOK:

... He realizes nobody knows where he is today, and that pleases him.

The book is filled with such switches in perspective. It wants to be both objective and subjective. It wants to be “now,” and “then” in time. “Literature cancels the moment, that is what it is for,” he writes. “Literature has another time....” Montauk wants to “know,” even as it imagines and remembers the “unknown.” The book embraces contradiction, attempting to exist in the in-between of memory and experience, of art and life, of meaning-making and just plain being. The book is alive. If this sounds like some meta-fictional game, it’s not. Naming the narrator “Max” is not a device. It’s the opposite—there is no mask. He is naked. “It was a very personal book, which I wrote for myself,” Frisch once said of Montauk. “I did not know if I would ever publish it, and for awhile I thought I wouldn’t.” Plus the writing is always lucid and beautiful:

He leans against the wall, his back to the sea. She will approach over the deserted terrace, and he is prepared to be surprised, whatever she looks like, she comes up to him and is simply there. It is now midday. Everything is outside: a fluttering flag, a squat lighthouse, gulls, music from a transistor radio somewhere,

The gleaming metal on the distant parking lot, sun, wind—

Lynn is nearly 31.

And yet, all the while, Frisch is constantly probing, questioning himself. “Why this weekend in particular?” “Why am I telling all this? Who am I telling it to?” And who’s asking? It’s the “Max” of Montauk, yes, of course, but it’s also Max the writer, Max the ex-husband, Max the father, and he wants to know who he is, who he really is, who he has become, how he got here, and where on earth is he going? How many have I hurt? How will I die? And have I been a good man? The space between the two men has collapsed. And while these are fundamentally moral questions, they also happen to be the bread and butter of a religious search. A benevolent possession, we join Max on his, and so what meaning there is for Max becomes mine.

A writer sharing his name with a narrator also is not new. Consider Sheila Heti’s How Should a Person Be?, a “novel from life,” about a young woman named “Sheila Heti.” It’s a book I admire, and one that stylistically shares quite a bit with Montauk. Or consider Montaigne’s Essays of the sixteenth century, which might not be a “novel,” but neither is Montauk, strictly speaking. Frisch carefully subtitled most of his books—Homo Faber: A Report; Bluebeard: A Tale; An Answer From the Silence, Man in...
the Holocene, and Montauk: all of them subtitled A Story. The distinction is noteworthy. In German, the subtitle reads: Erzählung. According to a German friend of mine (a scholar and novelist), erzählung etymologically stems from erzählen (to tell a story orally) and is “defined” as a long prose text with no special requirements regarding structure. Montauk is certainly that, but so is How Should a Person Be?, and so is Montaigne’s Essays, which incidentally is the source of Montauk’s epigraph, ending like so: “... Thus reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject.” Frisch, like Montaigne, is being coy. But name-sharing here is not the point. It’s the loose clothing these books have in common, barely covering the body of a writer. Italo Calvino’s eponymous “everyman” Mr. Palomar, for instance, feels much more personal than any number of meta-named narrators. And Jenny Offill’s actual marriage is a fine one, according to interviews, and she has stated she’s certainly not the narrator of the amorphously beautiful Dept. of Speculation, a novel about the evolution and dissolution of a family. But the book nonetheless feels incredibly personal.

In some ways the “real” plot of Offill’s book feels like that of Frisch’s: someone sits down (at a desk? beside a crib?), and tries to make sense of a relationship, only to fall away, again, and again in memory. The book is the experience of that fall, and we look for meaning within it, as does the narrator of the book, as does Offill. Dept. of Speculation is a search, and it’s a shaped record of that search. It is not a book that “knows.” A more proper novel would have been insufficient, too parochial a medium:

My friend who teaches writing sometimes flips out when she is grading stories and types the same thing over and over again.

WHERE ARE WE IN TIME AND SPACE?

WHERE ARE WE IN TIME AND SPACE?

But what do I mean by a “proper” novel? If Aristotle’s telos is central to every story, then how are these books any different? And what does that difference even mean? Perhaps a better question: why is it novels that look like this, and work like this, have a harder time finding large amounts of readers?

There is the old saw that some writers, even some American writers, are simply more “European.” This usually means a writer’s work is less “plot-driven,” fewer things “happen,” and more often than not these are books that don’t sell extraordinarily well and are deemed commercially unsuccessful. The problem with this assumption is the sand on which it’s built. The literature most often classically associated with the “American imagination”—not the American market—is entirely telos-driven. A thirst for meaning is inherent in that voice. Think of Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, Melville. Think of Henry James. Think of William James. All of them intensely personal writers, and all of them, it can also be said, were not particularly “religious.” This is not to say they were not preoccupied with faith, divinity, or transcendence. In fact, they all were, to some degree. But the work—the novels, stories, essays, poems, and lectures—was the conduit by which they considered the subject. The work did not “know”; it sought to know. This is the opposite of the religiously fundamentalist urge. The classically figured American imagination writes to better know a subject, to better know itself. The fundamentalist,
locus of the human mystery is perception of the world. From it proceeds every thought, every art.” Relatedly, DeLillo says: “Writing is a concentrated form of thinking. I don’t know what I think about certain subjects, even today, until I sit down and try to write about them.” It seems appropriate his work, often a headlong search for transcendence, rarely delivers on epiphany. We get close. We reach. But we fail. The closing lines from The Names:

There was no answer that the living could give. Tongue tied! His fate was signed. He ran into the rainy distance, smaller and smaller. This was worse than a retched nightmare. It was the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world. [sic]

And from a recent interview with Jenny Offill: “One of the odd things about being a writer is that you never reach a point of certainty, a point of mastery where you can say, Right. Now I understand how this is done. That is why so many talented people stop writing. It’s hard to tolerate this not-knowing.”

The genius of Aristotle’s telos is how it allows for the entire spectrum of readers. It’s not how much we know that counts first, but the action: “Most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action [translation H. S. Butcher].” Action, action, action—and thus we have Die Hard, The Terminator, and Dean Koontz. And thank goodness. But Aristotle follows with this: “Now character determines men’s qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse.” Character? Happy? The reverse? Now we’re talking humanity, ethics,
morality. We’re talking about the real fundamentals. We’re talking how should a person be, and what is the meaning of my life? The less the writer knows the answer to that question, and the more comfortable they are collapsing the space between themselves and the characters in search of that answer, the less likely the extra-religious will read. Certainly, the fundamentalist will not. Frankly, there’s just no point.

DeLillo’s take on writing, as “a concentrated form of thinking,” is also how I feel about reading. I read Karl Ove Knausgaard’s personal struggles to better grapple with my own. I read the fractured vignettes of Jean Toomer’s genre-mixing *Cane* to remind myself how so many voices live within us. I read the long and winding philosophical monologues of Javier Marías to light the unlit halls of my own head. I read Teju Cole and Annie Dillard to become a better seer of the world, and to remind me that to read the physical world is to read your self. Frisch said about writing: “What shocks me is rather the discovery that I have been concealing my life from myself.” I read for that same shock. I read to undo what I think I know, and it’s a lifelong process. The real fear of the fundamentalist is letting go of their book, their only book, and to admit onto the stage other voices, other searches, other ways of meaning, variation, which is to say mystery and human error. The irony here is the Bible is in fact not a “book” at all, but a library. The term Bible, itself, means “holy books” (note the plural), and is comprised of 66 books so different the fundamentalist Christian must often spend a lifetime relentlessly insisting on their sameness and singularity of supreme vision and meaning. And they’re welcome to it. As a younger man I would have been uncomfortable admitting how closely run the paths of religion and literature. Now I embrace their shared mission, even as their ends can be totally contradictory. I still return to my copy of the Oxford Annotated Bible, as it helps me better understand Faulkner and countless others. Only, I wish more from the other path would do the same, and err toward mine, maybe even pick up some Frisch. They would certainly learn a thing two about themselves, and, maybe more important, about what it is to be other people. Incidentally, my first copy of *Montauk* was a gift, given to me by one of those rare friends you make as an adult. Alex and I were talking about the books that affected us most, the books that changed how we write and how we read and how we think. That next day, he gave me his copy of *Montauk*, the original American paperback, a painting of a lighthouse and the Long Island shore on the cover, published in 1976, its pages yellowed like a smoker’s teeth, a book not easy to come by. I politely declined, said I’d find my own. He insisted. He said, you have to read this, and he set it in my hands. It turned out to be the very thing I was looking for.

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I Know My Soul

I plucked my soul out of its secret place,
And held it to the mirror of my eye,
To see it like a star against the sky,
A twitching body quivering in space,
A spark of passion shining on my face.
And I explored it to determine why
This awful key to my infinity
Conspires to rob me of sweet joy and grace.
And if the sign may not be fully read,
If I can comprehend but not control,
I need not gloom my days with futile dread,
Because I see a part and not the whole.
Contemplating the strange, I’m comforted
By this narcotic thought: I know my soul.

Two Young Men
Some Remarks on 
Stiller

If the following remarks on Max Frisch’s *I’m Not Stiller* are scattered observations rather than a coherent, well-organized essay, I blame it on the wealth of materials that I have at hand. I was privileged to know Max—if not as a close friend, as a close friend of his wife Marianne Frisch, been received as a guest in their homes in Zurich, the Ticino, and entertained them both at my wife’s loft in New York City. Knowing a writer in the flesh is an advantage, particularly to another writer, younger and eager not just to understand an older one as an author but how the author and person are joined at the hip.

Introducing Max Frisch to a class of writers to which he had consented to visit at the City College of New York where I teach, I referred to the deceptive pleasure of his fiction, where one sipped a cup of chocolate in which a poison had been skillfully concealed. I thought a smile flitted over Max’s features as I glanced at his face for a reaction.

I hope in the future to write about Max Frisch as I observed him, the still sharp memories I have that color my remarks on *Stiller*. It is not my favorite work of his, although it is probably the best introduction to his writing that follows. My fellow novelist, Jerome Charyn, said he liked *I’m Not Stiller* best when we first met Max in 1972. Max and Marianne were often guests at Donald Barthelme’s on West 11th Street. Donald was the writer who inspired the magazine I still edit, *Fiction*, and the Frischs helped us launch it. My choice of Max’s work from the moment I read its last page to the present remains *Homo Faber*. One can glimpse, however, the eerie presence of Max Frisch, his self-reflections in all three of his early novels, *Homo Faber, Stiller*, and *Gantenbein* (which I read in English translation as *A Wilderness of Mirrors*).

When I lecture on *I’m Not Stiller*, I begin not with that book but Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*. I am not a scholar of Frisch’s work (in my experience an aggressive breed of academics) but depend on my own intuitions. Frisch like Musil was a man with a solid grounding in a profession, architecture, as Musil was in psychology. (Musil actually invented a tool as a psychologist.) Max’s *I’m Not Stiller* I read both as a retort to and echo of Musil’s novel *The Man Without Qualities*. Both novels take up the riddle of identity, what Erik Erikson identifies as the “Identity Crisis.” Erikson’s disciple Robert Lifton would pronounce the man who embraces many identities as the signal hero of the Twentieth Century, the “Protean Man.” Musil and Frisch, however, write their novels about men (and women) whose multiple identities lead them to distraction (Musil’s Ulrich) or meltdown (Frisch’s Stiller). Both authors’ analysis sees the protagonist’s crisis of identity is not just personal but systematic of a national ailment; Austria’s in Musil’s novel, and Switzerland’s in Max Frisch’s *I’m Not Stiller*.

Musil finally is a mystic (despite the opinion of J. M. Coetzee who disdains that aspect of Frisch). It might seem inappropriate to start a discussion of *I’m Not Stiller* thinking about Musil and his search for the “Other” reality. Even in the apparently realistic frame of *Stiller*, despite the obvious plot, a man who denies his identity and gradually loses it, Frisch is trying to plumb a world that lies beyond what we think of as reality.
In a passage that recalls Borges as well as Musil, Frisch slips out of the role of Stiller writing his notebooks for the Defense Counsel and the Public Prosecutor to talk about himself and his own search for the uncanny.

Yes—who is going to read what I have written in these notebooks? And yet I believe that no one writes without the idea that somebody is going to read what he writes, if this somebody is only the writer himself. Then I ask myself, Can one write without playing a part? One tries to be a stranger to oneself. My reality does not lie in the part I play, but in the unconscious decision as to what kind of part I assign myself. At times I have the feeling that one merges from what has been written as a snake emerges from its skin. That’s it; you cannot write yourself down, you can only cast your skin. But who is going to be interested in this dead skin? The ever-recurring question whether the reader is ever able to read anything other than himself is superfluous; writing is not communication with readers, not even communication with oneself, but communication with the inexpressible. The more exactly one succeeds in expressing oneself, the more clearly appears the inexpressible force, that is to say the reality that oppresses and moves the writer.

*Stiller* ends not in its protagonist’s pathetic, banal meltdown as a sculptor, but with his mind “wandering,” trying to make sense of death. Stiller remains limited as Frisch writes his thoughts, and “communication with the inexpressible,” as Stiller understands it, is simply a brick wall, but not for the writer. “The inexpressible” is not only “reality” for the writer, but as Frisch hints, the vision of some way to touch the Unknown. This is where *I’m Not Stiller* has been tending all along; it has the same fascination with the world of myth that characterizes *Homo Faber*. Death drives both the plot and the novel’s moments of speculation. The comic notion that Frisch touches in the first pages of *Stiller*, that Stiller who calls himself “Mr. White” (a puckish teasing in naming which may suggest a colorless Swiss personality) is a man who has murdered his wife, slowly becomes a serious possibility. By the end of the book the reader must reconsider the confession of murder. As the book closes, the public prosecutor who had referred to the confession of murder as a kind of joke in his first interview with Stiller, “suddenly [becoming] good humored,” mentioning it, finally understands what Stiller as Mr. White confessed to long before. For in those last pages the prosecutor witnesses the macabre spectacle of Stiller’s wife as a priestess of death, and in the land of death herself at least a year before she dies. The obsession with death is continual in the novel; the contrast of Mexico where the horror of death is starkly in view, and Switzerland where it is camouflaged. I feel it in the world of the tuberculosis asylum where death is sanitized, seems to be confined; but its progress is only more brutally impressed on everyone who stares at the patients as in a fishbowl where death seems inexorable.

Frisch teases us throughout his novel, and in one of those skillful turns of plot Julika, Stiller’s wife, miraculously survives the asylum to be given a rebirth. Stiller, returning to Switzerland, also has a chance to begin all over; even as the novel begins from this unlikely point of rebirth, its narrative goes on, despite the comedy of Stiller’s denial that he is the man whom everyone says he is, neither Stiller or his wife Julika can escape their fate.
As they flee their death, “repetition,” which Stiller justly fears, entangled them in its coils. This is the note of Greek Tragedy enacted in the comic world of Frisch. It will be plotted even more ingeniously in Homo Faber, but in Stiller too Frisch’s plot is meant to arouse and then extinguish hope. Slowly we recognize that as a couple, Stiller and Julika are half dead. Most of the novel is a recollection of stories that tell us how they were caught up in a process of misunderstanding each other, though Frisch the novelist pulls the strings so as to make us hope that they can indeed escape and begin again.

In my notes on the end of the novel I write—“The horror of the public prosecutor knowing that Julika is the one with the angel of terror—that her lung is infected, that she cannot tell Stiller.” And I quote the following, clarifying for myself the deliberate refusal of the author to give us any sense of a final key to the mystery but to leave us as puzzled as we were before.

“Why does Stiller always want to change me? [Julika]
“Does he want to?” [Rolf, the public prosecutor]
“I know,” she said, “he probably means well and he is convinced he loves me.”
“What about you?” I asked, “Do you love him too?”
“I understand him less and less,” she replied after painful thought.
“Do you know what he’s always wanting me to do, Rolf?”...
After this, to take my mind off what she had said, but of course without being able to forget her horrifying revelation ...

The careful reader will note that Julika has not answered the Prosecutor’s question about whether she loves Stiller, a question that Stiller cannot truthfully respond to on his own behalf either, and we don’t know whether the revelation is about her lung or something referred to in “what he’s always wanting me to do...” Is it about her professional life, or the possibility of having a child? It is followed in turn by the prosecutor’s vision of Julika passing into the world beyond life, her “mouth open as in antique masks.”

I saw an utterly distorted face. I shall never forget this face that was no longer a face. Her mouth was open as in antique masks. She was trying in vain to bite her lips. Her mouth remained open as if paralyzed, trembling. I saw her sobs but it was as if I was deaf. Her eyes were open but unseeing, blurred by silent tears, her two little fists in her lap, her body shaking—there she sat, unrecognizable, beyond the reach of any cry with no personal characteristics left, no voice but a despairing body, flesh screaming soundlessly in the terror of death...later when I held her two little fists...

Observe Frisch’s laughter—after the page in which we see Julika transfixed by the horror of her situation, shaking silently, Stiller comes in and talks about how good she looks.

Stiller asked casually what I thought of Julika, ‘I mean as regards her health. Isn’t she looking splendid?’ We stood drinking, our left hands in our trouser pockets. When Julika came back with
the sweets she was wearing a woolen jacket and looking splendid. She had powdered here face but this wasn’t the only reason. She herself seemed to know nothing. I had the irritating feeling that it wasn’t the same person at all; as if I had merely dreamed of this woman.

At this moment in Frisch’s pages, the prosecutor becomes a chorus to the tragedy. Theology as understood by the religious existentialists, reality as absurd, holds out a vague hope but it yields in the prosecutor’s voice to scepticism, echoing Frisch’s and then to the strains that recall the bleak Day of the Dead in Mexico rather than the fairy tale landscape of the Swiss Mountains.

As Stiller and the prosecutor take a bucolic walk, the sun full in the sky, but the ground cold, the tragedy is foreshadowed.... The optimism of Stiller only increases the reader’s anxiety, as a slow drumbeat of horror begins to beat under the text. We can sense that there is no solution but death to Stiller’s marriage. It is emphasized by a long drunken conversation when Stiller, who cannot sleep after Julika’s operation, tries to solve the riddle of his incapacity to communicate with his wife, to find any kind of comfortable love with her. I read it as the author’s essay on the difficulty of finding an understanding with one’s partner. There is something heroic in Julika’s loyalty and Stiller’s falling in love with her not once, but twice, when he imagines by abandoning his former persona, as a sculptor in Zurich, he will be able to draw a response from her in a new identity, but it proves impossible. Is a fixed identity specific to Stiller, to Frisch, or is it just part of the human dilemma?

As the prosecutor talks of religion, the reader may recall that the prosecutor has sent the books of Kierkegaard to Stiller, and the advice the prosecutor gives now seems to echo Kierkegaard, “You keep trying to accept yourself without accepting anything like God. And now this proves an impossibility. He is the power, which can help you really to accept yourself.”

Yet Frisch undercuts this by having the Prosecutor, telling the story, admit to the reader, “I went on talking for a long time before finally coming to a stop. As I have said, I did not expect Stiller to listen; I only talked to avoid being a mute spectator of his weeping.”

And now Frisch clarifies what has dogged Stiller’s thoughts from the beginning, although we are seeing it from the perspective of the public prosecutor whom we know has been half in love with Frau Julika himself. “I suddenly had the monstrous feeling that from the very beginning Stiller had only seen her as a dead woman; for the first time too, I felt the deep unqualified consciousness of his sin, a consciousness no human word would obliterare.”

At this point several puzzling moments come into focus—the scene of the Day of the Dead in Mexico, and its fascination for Stiller; the landscapes of death that he passes through in his stories at least; the wrestling with death in the cavern between two men; and perhaps the seeking for death that he talks about when he describes his military service with the Communists in Spain. This evocation of death is not the real strength of I’m Not Stiller, though it certainly fulfills my search for the uncanny in his fiction. I don’t feel that the public prosecutor’s religiosity truly resonates and I don’t accept that Stiller has committed a “sin.” I think that the deeper stratum of the uncanny in the book has to do with his wanting to escape an identity that he has outworn, and that has little to do with either Julika or Sibylle,
the prosecutor’s wife, with whom he has had an affair, although Frisch in one book after another wrestles with his inability to enter into a successful partnership with a woman. He comes closest to stating the riddle his consciousness wrestles when he talks about time. It is at that moment, when Stiller and the prosecutor seem to see themselves in the young couple walking through time, through the seasons, that the book is talking not about a single, fallible Stiller, but the uncanny consciousness of human life, its passages and its inevitable end. There is a certain laughing joy in the narrator’s blessing on them and the love in which the anonymous couple seem immersed.

And for this reason I think that Frisch’s own chorus to the events of Stiller is spoken early on and put, with his characteristic whimsicality, in the mouth of a Jesuit priest at Davos.

[I]t was time, Julika stopped seeing her own behavior towards her husband, and people in general, as only a reaction, never regarding herself as the initiator.... Anyone who is always seeing himself as a victim, it seems to me, never gets wise to himself, and that’s not healthy.

I come back each time to *I’m Not Stiller* with renewed admiration, a deeper sense of what Frisch is wrestling with in the novel. To return, however, to my first impression, which still holds, that I prefer *Homo Faber*, I think it is because Frisch in the later book has let the plot dictate the narrative, and never impeded it with ingenious moments, the survey of a bookshelf, or the suggestion with dental records that do not match Stiller’s, that the man in question may indeed not be Stiller. While of course that is a suggestion that increases the ambiguity of the novel,

I don’t see where it leads. Stiller knows too much about Julika, more than he could have learned from others (as I read the book) to make it even remotely possible. Stiller’s rage at his former life, his disgust with it, is so complete that if it is only the acting of a fraud, it turns the novel’s pessimism into comic opera.

It is precisely because whatever genius Stiller possessed in his response to the smug disaster that he sees as Swiss culture, its architecture, he has lost at the end that the novel speaks an ominous truth. Stiller’s sculpture has turned into kitsch ceramics and his love is murderous, since it does not have a proper object.

There are often fulcrums in a book and in *I’m Not Stiller* there are so many—the balance in the intersection of the public prosecutor and his wife with Stiller and Julika for instance—it would be folly to try to do justice to the complexity of the novel in brief remarks. Even in these few moments of flyover I note how the shadow of death and the brightness of life alternate in its landscape. The picture postcard prettiness of the Swiss mountains at Davos is ominously “dissolved” in the darkening view from the hospital, “The familiar mountain peaks seems to have dissolved like a tablet in a glass of water, all that remained was an opaque grey broth.”

I am also struck by the sunlight that hovers over the couple walking into a hopeful world where work is a form of salvation.

How much the young man talks about the two conditions of his life, work and expiation: and work, that is the joy, the fever, the excitement, so that you cannot sleep for jubilation—a cry that rings out for hours and days so that you feel like running away from yourself—that is work,
the elation that wins people without wishing to, that puts no one under an obligation, ties no one and advances no one, that is not calculating and avaricious but behaves like the angel who has no hands for taking; work is a grandiose fever of the heart; a cheerful squandering from excess of joy; later, of course it turns out to be the finest sort of contact that is possible between human beings; unobtainable as soon as it becomes a goal, a need, an urgent objective.

And a page on, Frisch seems to speak of that young couple in love walking below the restaurant window, “No question yet is raised of what will come of it; there prevails only the complete sense of how much is possible in a lifetime.”

This last view persists in my mind when, at the end of the novel, Stiller’s work has degenerated into kitsch, a moment in which Frisch might have felt a poison in his own cup of Swiss chocolate. Was what he plotted for Stiller what he wondered might be his own fate as a popular novelist and playwright? Happily, it was not.
A Selection from *Abahn*

**Sabana David**

Night comes. And the cold.
They are on the road, white with frost, a woman and a young man. Standing stock still, watching the house.
The house is bare inside and out. The interior still unlit.
Beyond the windows a tall man, gray-haired and thin, looks in the direction of the road.
Night deepens. And the cold.
There they are, in front of the house.
They look around. The road is empty, the sky dark against it.
They do not seem to be waiting for anything.
The woman heads up to the door of the house first.
The young man follows her.
It’s she who enters the house first. The young man follows.
She’s the one who closes the door behind them.
At the far end of the room: a tall thin man with gray hair watches them enter.
It’s the woman who speaks.
“Is this the house of Abahn?”
He doesn’t answer.
“Is it?”
She waits. He does not answer.
She is small and slim, wearing a long black dress. Her companion is of medium build, wearing a coat lined with white fur.

“I’m Sabana,” she says. “This is David. We’re from here, from Staadt.”
The man walks slowly toward them. He smiles.
“Take off your coats,” he says. “Please sit.”
They do not answer. They remain near the door.
They do not look at him.
The man approaches.
“We know each other,” he says.
They do not answer, do not move.
The man is close enough now to see them clearly. He notices that they will not meet his eye.
She speaks again. “We’re looking for Abahn. This is David. We’re from Staadt.”
She fixes her large eyes on the man. David’s gaze, behind his heavy lids, is inscrutable.
“I am Abahn.”
She does not move. She asks:
“The one they call the Jew?”
“Yes.”
“The one who came to Staadt six months ago?”
“Yes.”
“Alone.”
“Yes. You’re not mistaken.”
She looks around. There are three rooms.
The walls are bare. The house is as bare inside as it is outside. One side abuts the road, white with frost, the other borders the depths of a darkened park.
Her gaze returns to the Jew.
“This is the house of the Jew?”
“Yes.”
In the park, dogs bark and howl.
David turns his head, looks toward the park.
The howling dies down.
It’s quiet again. David turns away from the park, back to the others.
“You were sent by Gringo?”
She answers:
“Yes. He said that he would come later.”
They are silent then, the three of them standing there.

The Jew approaches David.
“Do you recognize me?”
David looks down at the floor. She answers:
“He recognizes you.”
“You’re David, the stonemason.”
She replies, “Yes, that’s him.”
“I recognize him,” says the Jew.
David’s eyes are fixed on the floor.
“He’s gone blind,” says the Jew.
They do not answer.
“He’s become deaf.”
They do not answer.

The Jew approaches at David.
“What are you afraid of?”
David looks up at the Jew and then back at the floor.
“What are you afraid of, David?” the Jew asks again.
The gentleness of his voice elicits a shudder from behind those heavy-lidded eyes.
She answers:
“Nothing. He’s a member of Gringo’s Party.”
The Jew is silent. She asks:
“Do you know what that means?”
“Not for David,” says the Jew.
For the first time Sabana looks right at him. He is looking at David.
“But for everyone else, you do?”
“Yes.”
A sudden exhaustion sweeps over the Jew.
“You were waiting for us?”
“Yes.”
He takes a step toward David. David doesn’t flinch.

He comes closer. He lifts a hand. Gently touches David’s half-lidded eyes.
He says:
“You’ve become blind.”

David jumps back. He cries out:
“Don’t touch me!”

David raises his hands, made swollen and cracked by working with stone, and says:
“Don’t do that again!”

She looks from one to the other without moving. She says nothing.

The Jew backs away. He returns to the chair he was occupying when they first came into the house, the one near the table.

“You’re not scared,” he says, “You have nothing at stake. Take off your coats. Sit. You’re not going anywhere.”

They remain as they are, erect, alert, near the door.
Calmly, she speaks.
“You don’t understand. We’ve come to watch you.”

“Watch me.”

“Don’t try to run away.”

“I won’t.”

“It’s not worth the trouble.”

David is silent. Sabana points out the Jew to David.

She repeats what she said to the Jew.
“He knows it’s futile to try.”
“I do know,” says the Jew.

It’s Sabana who takes off her coat first. She puts it down near the door. She helps David with his coat.

Tucked into David’s belt is a gun.

They sit. Sabana pushes an armchair toward David.

She sits in another chair.

The Jew is silent.

She sits up straight, looks around. She looks out at the
road, the park, the cold. Everything is bathed in the same intense light, inside, outside. Nothing else is lit up. She looks over at the one sitting next to the table.

“We wait for daybreak,” he says.
Sabana’s eyes are blue—dark and blue.
“You’re Sabana.”
“Yes.”
The dogs howl in the dark park.
David listens to the dogs.
The howling dies down.
Silence.
David the mason reclines his head on the back of the chair, his hands draped along the armrests. He looks over at the far end of the room. He speaks.
“There’s someone else in the house.”
“It’s just me,” says the Jew.
“He’s here alone,” she says.
“Yes. Don’t be afraid.”
She is still looking around. She is perched on the edge of her seat, still alert. Looking around.
“David has to work tomorrow morning. He has to sleep a little. If you try to run I’ll yell and he’ll wake up.”
“Let him sleep. You keep watch on me. And I’ll stay where I am, over here.”
Slumber settles on David. He looks over at the Jew. She says:
“He’s falling asleep now.”
The Jew does not answer. Sabana speaks:
“The merchants’ police aren’t out tonight. Gringo made a deal with the merchants. They told him, ‘If you let us sell to the Greeks then we’ll give you Abahn the Jew.’ Gringo agreed. The police sleep tonight. The town is Gringo’s.”

The Jew does not answer, does not move.
“Are you going to try to run away?”
“No.”
The Jew’s exhaustion seems to grow.
“Why not?”
“I have no desire to save myself.”
They sit quietly for a moment. Sabana, alert, turns toward the frost-covered road.
David has closed his eyes.
“Why did you come to Staadt?”
The Jew shrugs his shoulders.
“To kill Gringo?”
“No.”
“Gringo is strong in Staadt. He runs the show with the merchants. He runs the government offices. He has his own police, army, guns. He’s been making the merchants afraid for a long time now. You understand?”
“The merchants of Staadt aren’t afraid of Gringo,” says the Jew.
“Since when?”
“For a long time. The merchants are afraid of the Jews.”
“And who is Gringo afraid of?”
“Gringo is afraid of the Jews.”
“Like the merchants?”
“You know that.”
“Yes.” Sabana looks at him.
“You don’t know what to do with yourself anymore, do you? So you came here?”
“Maybe at first. But then I found Staadt.”
“Like any other place?”
“No.”
They fall silent. David sleeps.
Sabana points at him, says to the Jew, “They all sleep.”
They look at each other. Still silent. She waits. He asks:
“Who are you?”
She hesitates. She looks at David.
“There’s nothing here,” he says. “I am not part of
Gringo’s party.”
She is perched on the edge of the chair, waiting. She
asks:
“Are you an enemy?”
“Yes.”
“What did you want?”
“I don’t know what I wanted anymore.”
They look at each other in silence for a drawn-out
moment.
“Who are you?” he asks again.
He waits. Her eyes narrow, searching. Her face is
unreadable.
She opens her eyes and says:
“I don’t know.”
The Jew slumps forward over the table. He rests his
head in his arms. He stays like that without moving. She
asks:
“You didn’t want anything?”
“I didn’t want anything. I wanted everything.”
Silence.
“And tonight?”
“Everything. Nothing.”
“Yes.”
His face can no longer be seen.
“One day you came to David’s workshop. You waited
until the workday was finished. It was David who saw you.
He asked you, ‘Are you Abahn?’ You said yes. He asked
you, ‘What do you want?’ You said ‘I wanted to talk to
someone.’ He said, ‘Who?’
You didn’t answer. You just looked at him. He said,
‘Are you looking for David? That’s me.’ You said yes. He
asked, ‘Why?’
You said, ‘Because you addressed me.’”
The Jew is silent.
“You remember.”
“Yes.”
“That’s when all this started.”
He doesn’t say a word, doesn’t move.
“I’m telling you, I’m explaining it to you, aren’t you
listening?”
He isn’t listening.
Sabana, at full attention, watches him.

— — —

The night deepens. And the cold.
Someone has come in, a tall man, thin, graying at the
temples.
Sabana watches him enter. The man smiles at Sabana.
She does not smile back. He says:
“I was passing by.”
They look at each other. He looks away, sits down next
to David, away from the Jew.
“Close the door. It’s dark, it’s cold out.”
He goes to close the door, comes nearer to her.
He gestures toward the frost-covered road beyond the
uncurtained windows.
Then toward the Jew.
“I was passing by. I saw someone crying. I came.”
The deep blue gaze of Sabana now fixed on the
newcomer.
“Who are you?”
“They call me Abahn.”
“His name is also Abahn, but we call him the Jew. Gringo had a meeting this evening. We’re guarding this one until he comes. He said he’ll come at daybreak.”

“Before the light?”
Sabana doesn’t respond immediately. Then:
“Yes.”
Abahn has noticed that David is asleep.
“That’s David,” Sabana says, “the stonemason.
I’m Sabana. We’re from the village of Staadt. From Gringo’s party.”
She turns then, gestures toward the Jew, resting his head on the table.
“I don’t think he’s crying.”
Abahn looks at the Jew.
“He is crying.”
She looks then at the one who is crying. Then the one who is speaking.
“He can’t be crying, he wants to live.”
“He’s not crying for himself,” says Abahn. “It’s an empathy for others that forces him to cry. It’s too much for him to bear alone. He has more than enough desire for himself to live, it’s for others that he can’t live.”
She looks at him with interest, his white hands, his smile.
“Who are you to know all this?”
“A Jew.”
She studies his smiling face, his hands, his manner, for a long time.
“You’re not from around here.”
“No.”
She turns away from the night and the cold. “We call him Abahn the Jew, Abahn the Dog.”
“The Jew, also? And the Dog?”
“Yes.”

“And the other Jews here? You call them that, too?”
“Yes.”
“And the dogs?”
“We call them Jews. And where you come from?”
“There as well.”
Her gaze returns to Abahn.
“Are you an enemy?”
“Yes.”
“Of Gringo only?”
“No.”
She does not move at all for a moment, her eyes open, vacant. Then she waves a hand once more at the one who is crying.
“We don’t know anymore whether he is himself. An enemy, too. He’s not from this place after all. We don’t know where he comes from.
“He’ll be dead at daybreak.”
Silence. She continues:
“They don’t kill them every single time.”
In the shadows her blue eyes train themselves on Abahn.
“There are no gas chambers here.”
He answers slowly, his gaze frozen.
“There aren’t. There never have been.”
“No.”
“There aren’t any anywhere anymore.”
“No, there aren’t any anymore.”
“Nowhere,” says Abahn.
Sabana’s gaze empties out once more. He says:
“Nowhere.” He looks at her, says again, “Nowhere.”
“No.”
She is quiet again. Then she gestures in the direction of the road, at something no one else can see. Her voice is flat, her stare vacant.
“The ones they leave alive are sent to the salt mines in the North.” She pauses.
“The ones they kill they bury at the edge of the field—” she gestures off. “That way.”
“Under the barbed wire.”
“Yes. No one knows that.”
He does not answer.
“It’s barren, no farming there. The merchants and tradesmen gave it to Gringo after the war for his parties.”
He has not taken his eyes off of her. He asks:
“There aren’t any more parties?”
“The last ones were deserted. It’s been a long time since then.”
“The young people don’t come anymore?”
She doesn’t know, it appears. She is distracted.
“I think so, I don’t really know.”
Her stare is always empty, her voice always flat.
“You could kill them one by one,” she says slowly, “in the Nazi gas chambers.”
“Yes. But not anymore. There aren’t any chambers anymore. Anywhere.”
“No. No, here you get the labor camp or a quick death.”
“Yes.”
Her blue eyes slash always in the direction of the road.
She says:
“It wasn’t these Jews here in those gas chambers.”
“No, it was others.”
“Others,” she pauses, “but the same name: Jews.”
“Yes. We wanted that.”
She asks nothing more.
He looks at the bare walls, the white road white with frost, the darkened park beyond.
“It was his house,” he says.

“Yes. And there’s a park. There. And in the park there are dogs.”
His gaze comes back to the space in front of them.
She gestures toward the back of the house that opens onto the park. “There’s this room that looks out on the park, the other you came from. If you try to run away, I’ll call out to David. David will wake up and he’ll kill you.”
He smiles. She says:
“That’s the way, here in Gringo’s houses in Staadt. They shoot, they kill. Unless we tell them that they don’t have the right, then they don’t have the right. Before it would take a little longer.”
“And whose territory are we in now?”
“The one who is the strongest. During the night that would be Gringo.”
“And in the day it’s the merchants.”
“Yes,” she says. “Before, a long time before Gringo.”
Abahn gets up, he walks back and forth across the room, going and coming, and then he sits near the Jew, on the opposite side of the table from him. She joins them. She sits with them. They look at the Jew. She talks, is quiet some more, talks again.
“He didn’t know where to go when he came here. He came here because he didn’t have anywhere else to go. He’s been here for a few days already, waiting for us. The merchants were also looking to get rid of him, as you see.”
“Yes.”
She looks at Abahn for a long time.
“And you?”
“I came to Staadt now, tonight.”
“By chance?”
“No.”
Silence. She is still focused on him.
“You’re alone as well?”
“Yes. With the Jews.”
He smiles. She does not return his smile. It is almost as if she doesn’t see it. She says:
“This house is being confiscated by the merchants, the park, too. Not because of the dogs; we don’t know what will happen to them. They find it hard to adjust to a new master. We don’t know what to do with them.”
“Maybe. Did the Jew have anything to say about it?”
“Not yet.”
He looks at her more intensely.
“Did you ask him that question?”
“Which one?”
“About what is going to happen to the dogs?”
She turns toward the dark park.
“Maybe later,” she says, “later in the night.”
David shifts in his chair. He opens his eyes.
Then falls asleep again. Abahn says:
“David wakes up when we talk about the dogs?”
“Yes. You guessed it.”
The same slowness creeps into their voices. He asks:
“Why did you let me in? For what?”
She says quickly:
“You came in.”
“Why did you speak to me?”
“You spoke to me.”
Abruptly his glare flares, then subsides.
“You’re not afraid of anything,” he says. “Nothing.”
Silence. He regards her slim form, erect, alert. Her half-lidded stare. She listens out the window: the dogs are barking.
Far, in the direction she listens, that of the setting sun, the dogs are barking. Muted but numerous.
The barking ceases. He asks:
“Are you afraid now?”

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She gets up. She walks toward David. She gestures toward Abahn. She speaks in a low tone. “They know each other a little, David and the Jew.”
She is listening to the sounds of Staadt outside.
“I think they are still coming.”
She turns in the direction of the frost-covered road, pauses.
“You said they knew David a little?”
“Yes. Some people knew him. David may have forgotten, but they knew him.” She pauses again. He says nothing. She turns to him.
“What did you say?”
“Nothing.”
They look at one another.
He asks:
“Who are you?”
She focuses on him, his intense gaze, interrogating.
“I don’t know,” she says.
His stare bores into her.
“I mean to him—who are you to him?”
She shrugs. She does not know anymore.
“Are you his wife?”
“Yes.”
“Are you his mother?”
She does not answer. She is thinking,
“You’re not his mother?”
“He wishes I were his mother.”
“You don’t want that?”
“No.”
The Jew raises his head. She sees him. For a long while she looks at him. Then she goes to sit down next to him again. She is quiet the whole time. Then she speaks to him in even tones:
“You wrote. You talked with people. You didn’t work.”
She is talking to Abahn.
“He walked in the streets, the avenues, night and day.
He went to see the shipyards. From time to time he went to the cafes to talk with people.”
“He spoke to them?”
“Yes, he asked them many questions.”
“And David too?”
“Yes, David too. From time to time you would tell them some things difficult to follow, as if they could understand.
And then it was explained to us what you were saying.”
“Gringo?” asked Abahn.
“Yes.”
She is trying to remember.
“He said, ‘Liberty.’”
“And how did Gringo explain it?”
“Money.”
“He said, ‘Underneath the truth.’”
“And how did Gringo explain that?”
“Crime.”
“He said, ‘Live into the future.’”
“And how did Gringo explain that?”

― Marguerite Duras

“Proof.”
She thinks. She asks the Jew:
“What did you say?”
“Don’t believe anything anymore,” says the Jew.
“Nothing. No one,” says Abahn.
“Not even you?” asks Sabana.
“Not me, not him, no one.”
“Not him?”
“Not him. How would Gringo put it?”
“Don’t listen to Gringo anymore.”
They fall silent. Sabana considers what the Jew said.
“He said, ‘You should be happy no matter what.’”
“How would Gringo put it?”
“He didn’t explain.”
Sabana, her eyes on the ground, in a dream, for a long moment. Then she speaks without shifting her gaze.
“Where would he go if they let him go?”
No one answers her.
“And if someone grabbed David’s gun?” she says. “I’ve never left Staadt. I don’t know anything about what’s beyond.”
“Are you thinking about the Jew?” asks Abahn.
“I’m thinking. Where would he go?”
And beyond that more, an unending chain all the way to the border.”
“Until when?”
“The sea. And then along the bottom of the sea.”
She is dreaming.
“It’s fully occupied?”
“Fully.”
Silence.
She looks away at the invisible distant border. The Jew, unmoving, watches.
“Other Jews,” she says. 
“Yes, and other Gringos,” says the Jew. 
“Merchants or no,” says Abahn, “other Jews, other Gringos, all the same.” 
She is still looking off into the distance. 
“It wouldn’t do any good to run away then,” she says. 
“No,” says the Jew. 
Again sounds the muted barking of the dogs, their growls rising, in the direction Sabana looks. 
She says: 
“Those are the dogs of the killing fields.” 
Silence. 
Abahn asks: 
“Are there many dead?” 
Sabana seems uncertain. 
“They say twenty million in all. I don’t know about the dead.” 
Sabana’s gaze returns to them. The Jew still watches. 

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The cold deepens still. And the night. The sky is nearly gone. The park completely in shadow. 
“It’s the ice,” says Sabana. “Outside you walk on the road—you slip, it’ll kill you.” 
“We are locked in then,” says Abahn. 
“Together,” says the Jew. 
Silence. 
The dogs howl, those belonging to the Jew, close by, in the park. 
Like every other time, David briefly rouses. 
Abahn stands, slowly turns around the room, then walks toward David, stops in front of him. Sabana watches him. 
“How old is he?” asks Abahn. 

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“Twenty-five,” says Sabana. “Married to Jeanne.” 
“Neither Jew nor dog, ever?” 
“No.” 
He gestures at David’s calloused hands. “A laborer?” 
“He’s not qualified for it, he works on the Portuguese crew.” 
He comes closer to David. Sabana does not move. 
“And whose gun is it?” 
“It’s Gringo’s.” 
“Taken just for tonight?” 
“Yes.” 
“To execute the Jew?” 
Sabana turns toward the Jew. He does not look like he is listening. 
“No. Just to keep him here.” 
“So it’s Gringo who’s in charge of the Jew’s execution?” 
“Yes. Gringo.” 
“You’re sure? Gringo?” 
Her eyes widen suddenly with fear. She gestures toward David. 
“Look, do you think he’s too young?” 
“No. He’s already got a gun on him, hasn’t he?” says Abahn. 
She turns back to the Jew. Eyes still wide. 
“You said something?” 
“No.” 
Silence. 
“Who will kill you?” 
The Jew doesn’t answer. 
“David?” asks Abahn. 
She doesn’t think, just answers: 
“Why would David kill the Jew?” 
The Jew’s voice comes softly, one could hardly understand what he said.
They are agreed on this. Gringo said to them, ‘Don’t get involved in this, the thing I ask of you.’ ‘Understood,’ said the merchants. And there you go, Gringo and his Jew to kill.’

‘Yes.’

The Jew smiles. She does not see. She speaks quickly “And there is Gringo with his Jew in his grip. And there are the police of merchants just waiting for Gringo to have killed his Jew.”

“No,” says the Jew.

“And there are the tradesmens’ police who are waiting to be able to say: ‘Here is Gringo, the one who killed the Jew.’”

“Yes,” says the Jew. “Like that.”

“And then Gringo who will be able to say: No, the one who killed the Jew is the one named David, a mason from Staadt. You’re mistaken, you’ve been fooled, it wasn’t me, it was David, a mason from Staadt.”

“Yes,” says Abahn.

“An unlucky Gringo?”

“No.”

“An acquaintance of the Jews?”

“Yes.”

Silence.

She walks away. Toward the window. Then a moan of anger, of sadness. She looks through the window at the night, lingering. Then roughly she turns toward the Jews.

“And if it isn’t David?”

They do not answer.

“Who would it be?”

Her question asked, she doesn’t wait for the answer. She answers herself, staring at them:

“It would be nobody, maybe?”

She turns toward him, the Jew, she sits there, before
him, in front of him. There’s a moment of clarity—the setting sun pierces the place and illuminates it with yellow light.

“Who are you to create such fear?”
The sun sets.
“Who knows?” says Abahn. “Suddenly out of the blue, one Jew too many?”
“Killed?”
“Yes.”
“The one who upset the merchants?”
“No, because the merchants agreed.”
“Who?”
“The one who agitated the other Jews,” says Abahn.
“We speak without understanding,” she says. “It’s so difficult to understand.”
“Yes,” says the Jew.
Abahn walks over to stand next to her. She notices him suddenly.
“Why did you come?”
“I saw someone crying.”
“A Jew.”
“Yes, I know them.”
“Racists are executed here.”
The blue eyes darken.
“I’m a racist,” says Abahn.
They do not take their eyes from one another.
“You’re Abahn the Jew, Abahn the dog?”
“Yes, that’s me as well. Didn’t you recognize me?”
“Yes.” She looks from one to the other. “You’re the one who will not be killed.”
“Perhaps.”
“The one who speaks?”
“I speak for the Jew.”
“The one who sees? The one who will speak?”

“Yes.”
“Who?”
“To those who understand.”
Sabana turns toward David, his eyes closed. She gestures. “And to him as well? The deaf and dumb? And to apes?”
“They too, yes,” says the Jew.
“Ha!” An explosion of silent laughter mars Sabana’s face.
“We will seek their ears,” says Abahn.
“Their eyes,” says the Jew.
“To understand them,” says Abahn.
“Their conversation,” says the Jew.
Silence.
She looks at them, first one then the other, then at David.
“And the others who are yet to arrive, perhaps?”
“Perhaps,” says the Jew.
“The night is long,” says Abahn. “Long and empty.”
She turns in the direction of the road. “And where did you both come from?”
“From everywhere,” says the Jew.
She takes one step toward the door that leads out to the park. She stops. A last light slides down the walls and goes out.
“They kill them quickly, usually,” she says. “Earlier in the night, on that meadow over there, not indoors. Each time they say: this will be the last one. Yet they always come back, again and again, so it seems.”
She wants no more to account for death.

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The Frisch Questionnaire

Many know the “Proust Questionnaire,” which Marcel Proust didn’t actually create, but made famous by answering two similar questionnaires at different points in his life—and which Vanity Fair has since prominently featured in their issues. Lesser known is the “Frisch Questionnaire” which Max Frisch created in 1967 and which is included in his Sketchbook 1966–1971. Below author Mark de Silva answers Frisch’s questions.

MF: Are you really interested in the preservation of the human race once you and all the people you know are no longer alive?

MDS: It doesn’t seem so, no.

MF: State briefly why.

MDS: There’s something pleasing in the thought that I am but one link in a chain of humanity that stretches out beyond the horizon, into a future I will never see. It’s to think of the human race as a kind of meta-organism, as the life built out of our lives, and it seems only natural to want this creature to thrive, even in my absence.

Yet the separateness of persons, and more obviously, the separateness of generations, cannot be gainsaid. Even if it is true, however liable I am to forget it, that my own experience of the world can’t be bracketed off from that of humanity at large—including those elements of it I’d rather not but should be thinking about (see ISIS)—what exactly has the future of humanity, the great unborn, got to do with how things are with me? Whatever dependency my life has on the distant future can only be notional.

Of course, I can say that I care about how things go for these future generations, that I am the sort of person who cares. And, actually, I have said these things. (It feels good to mouth the words.) But something as simple as my unshrinking carbon footprint seems to give the lie to all of this.

MF: How many of your children do not owe their existence to deliberate intention?

MDS: Any children I have are strangers to me. A bit like the future.

MF: Whom would you rather never have met?

MDS: There are at least two women I have met, many years apart, that it would have almost certainly been better not to, as knowing them has coarsened me in ways I am still discovering. They may feel likewise.

MF: Are you conscious of being in the wrong in relation to some other person (who need not necessarily be aware of it)? If so, does this make you hate yourself—or the other person?

MDS: If two wrongs really can’t be forged into a right, then I’m in the wrong in relation to a lot of people. Luckily, retaliation softens hatred, of self and other (Hammurabi understood this). That doesn’t mean they—the ones retaliated against—don’t come to hate me more, though. So I’m not sure my approach is something to commend. It’s definitely imprudent: When all the bridges are in flames, a man really can become an island.

MF: Would you like to have perfect memory?

MDS: I suppose everyone would want to, if you could toggle it on and off—say, if a drug could induce it temporarily. How interesting it would be to re-enter the past properly, as if it were present, instead of having the
one contaminate the other. I take it the question, though, is really whether I would like to have perfect memory only, where time, once and for all, becomes powerless to color my experience.

I would. Yes, those intriguing rewrites and wholesale forgettings—part and parcel of what we understand human life to consist in—would be lost. But a sort of time machine, and a new way of being, would be gained. Who can say if it would be better or worse than life as we now know it? If it turns out to be unbearable to see so clearly, as it might, well, a glassful of whiskey and a bottle of sleeping pills should fix that.

MF: Give the name of a politician whose death through illness, accident, etc. would fill you with hope. Or do you consider none of them indispensible?

MF: Which person or persons, now dead, would you like to see again?
MDS: Donald Davidson.
MF: Which not?
MDS: John Updike.

MF: Would you rather have belonged to a different nation (or civilization)? If so, which?
MDS: This nation suits me fine, inasmuch as no nation likely suits me well. That said, I have fantasized about growing up Sentinelese, childish and racist though the idea is.

MF: To what age do you wish to live?
MDS: 49.

MF: If you had the power to put into effect things you consider right, would you do so against the wishes of the majority? (Yes or no)
MDS: Yes.

MF: Why not, if you think they are right?
MDS: ...

MF: Which do you find it easier to hate, a group or an individual? And do you prefer to hate individually or as part of a group?
MDS: Hatred of groups is easier, as it’s generic. It is also less satisfying. There’s nothing like an individual for drawing out inventive, edifying forms of contempt from you.

I generally do my hating solo. But if I were to befriend a Naipaul or a Coetzee, I would gladly hate with them. Whomever they wanted to, really. By now they ought to know who is most deserving.

MF: When did you stop believing you could become wiser—or do you still believe it? Give your age.
MDS: 33.

MF: Are you convinced by your own self-criticism?
MDS: Yes.

MF: What in your opinion do others dislike about you, and what do you dislike about yourself? If not the same thing, which do you find it easier to excuse?
MDS: I think I’m disliked most, and most often, for my seeming hubris. Myself, I most dislike my capacity for boredom. Hubris, real or apparent, needs no excuse, and boredom may be beyond one.

MF: Do you find the thought that you might never have been born (if it ever occurs to you) disturbing?
MDS: Disturbing, no. It sounds more like a missed opportunity.

MF: When you think of someone dead, would you like him to speak to you, or would you rather say something more to him?
MDS: I always imagine myself speaking when it comes to intercourse with the dead. I may be summoning the wrong people.
MF: Do you love anybody?
MDS: Yes.
MF: How do you know?
MDS: By the mutual toll.
MF: Let us assume that you have never killed another human being. How do you account for it?
MDS: Fear, though not of the repercussions.
MF: What do you need in order to be happy?
MDS: This shouldn’t be a riddle but absolutely is.
MF: What are you grateful for?
MDS: My powers of concentration, which offset that tendency toward boredom.
MF: Which would you rather do: die or live on as a healthy animal? Which animal?
MDS: Die, I think; or live on as a mayfly and die the day after.
Left Behind: A. Igoni Barrett’s Blackass

One of the distinct advantages of using the Inexplicable Occurrence as the engine for a plot is that it usually comes right in the beginning. We learn of Gregor Samsa’s monstrous fate in the famous opening lines of “The Metamorphosis,” Gogol’s “The Nose” starts with the promise of “an extraordinarily strange occurrence,” and Philip Roth’s The Breast takes a somewhat more subdued approach at first—“It began oddly”—before really nailing it home in the second chapter—“I am a breast.” Even a novel with a prolonged Inexplicable Occurrence like Karen Thompson Walker’s The Age of Miracles doesn’t fuck around getting to its high-concept premise.

Because that’s the thing: these are very far-fetched stories, so it is in the interest of their authors to cut the reader off at the pass, to preemptively confront the fact that it is indeed absurd, and that the character, too, is apoplectic and confused, all of which performs two economical narrative functions: the reader accepts the premise, and the plot gets going immediately. The effect is rather like the shot of a starter pistol initiating a race—Boom! and they’re off!

And so it is with A. Igoni Barrett’s Blackass, a novel that squarely and deliberately falls into this tradition. Here, the I. O. is that an ordinary Nigerian named Furo Wariboko wakes to find himself transformed into a white man. Though this may seem like a far cry from an insect, in the city of Lagos an “oyibo” sticks out just as prominently:

... a good number of the inhabitants of these neighborhoods have never held a conversation with an oyibo, never considered white people as anything more or less than historical opportunists or gullible victims, never seen red hair, green eyes, or pink nipples except on screen and on paper. And so an oyibo strolling down their street is an incidence of some thrill. Not quite the excitement decibels of seeing a celebrity, but close.

As Furo walks down his streets on his way to a very important job interview, he discovers “how it felt to be seen as a freak: exposed to wonder, invisible to comprehension.”

As he goes about his day, though, the discomfort of exposure becomes outweighed by the numerous benefits of his new skin: he not only gets a job at the interview but is given a high-level, salaried position; strangers help him acquire food and shelter; a beautiful woman all but insists he go home with her; and in general his presence lends power and influence to whatever situation he’s in. Furo, who soon names himself Frank Whyte, gradually becomes enamored of his metamorphosed self and conspires, first extemporaneously and then deliberately, to become Frank Whyte forever and leave Furo behind for good.

As Furo moves through Lagos, Barrett does an extraordinary job evoking the city’s nuances. It functions as a kind of cultural tour, in which Furo’s transformation acts as impetus—not only in terms of how people react to Furo’s whiteness, but also how he reacts to their reactions. This perspective duality—i.e., that the citizens Furo comes across collectively represent a cultural attitude, while Furo’s, though of course cultural too, is more personal—provides the most fun and the most resonant
insight throughout the novel, especially since everything else about Furo is still undeniably Nigerian, including his accent, his phrases, and his very language. Numerous times Furo’s authenticity curbs the suspicion some locals have of oyibos. (There is even a passing satirical stab at Africa’s perfunctorily canonical literature, as when Furo remembers his secondary school teacher droning, “The white man in this book is a symbol of progress. Okonkwo fought against the white man and lost. Progress always wins, that’s why it’s progress. Now tear out a sheet of paper, you have a test.”)

Throughout the first two-thirds of Blackass, I kept wondering what this novel would be like if the main character were a woman. I thought this not only because high-concept conceits like this invite such speculative imaginings but also because the culture of Lagos as described in the novel strikes one as severely patriarchal, and at times it felt like Furo’s story wouldn’t acknowledge the contrast. Syreeta, the woman who takes Furo home with her, for instance, seems representative of a certain aspect of the book’s culture: in order to flourish she must (or feels she must) depend on men to support her. Furo, suspicious of such a motivation, tells her he has no money. She responds with a “hardened” expression, “Did I ask you for money?” Syreeta allows Furo to stay with her; she feeds him; loans him money; takes him clothes shopping; and the two of them even form a sexual relationship.

At one point she brings Furo along to her friend Baby’s house, which turns out to be a large mansion. Within the opulence of the home are “five ladies...all clutching cut-glass goblets in which cognac swirled” and “six children...all of them wooly-headed, fair-skinned, half-white.” Furo recognizes these “types” as the kind of women who “in a school system where money, sexual favors, and sugar daddy’s influence had black-market value in the acquiring of grades...graduated from university with little trouble.” Furo continues:

Within toddler years after graduation the most successful of them ended up as Baby and her friends: sipping cognac in the mansions of their moneyed husbands. These women were hustlers, plain and simple...

For Furo, a man inside this culture, this is an expected view of Baby and her friends, but what’s troubling is the way the novel deals with Syreeta. First of all, Furo doesn’t see what is obvious to the reader: that Syreeta isn’t out for money but a child with a white man. But more importantly is how this scene carries over into the rest of the narrative. Syreeta, by the end, isn’t given space or agency to make her character feel like a genuine attempt to include the cultural lives of women.

Before he meets Syreeta, Furo meets a writer named, like the book’s author, Igoni. It’s a brief exchange (Furo asks to stay at Igoni’s place; Igoni declines), but a serendipitous one. Igoni soon discovers, unbeknownst to Furo, what really happened to Furo. In his investigation Igoni even meets Furo’s sister Teneka, who has become a Twitter celebrity with her anxious pleas for her brother’s safety. The two stories are paralleled in alternating chapters, so there is a sense of inevitability in their convergence.

But in the novel’s greatest misstep, the final confrontation between the two men is sullied by this fact: in the interim between meeting Furo and finding him again, Igoni has transitioned into a woman. The timeframe is small here, a few months, maybe. Yet Igoni—unnamed when we first meet her as a woman—has already become
a convincing enough female that she can move around in a culture hypersensitive to otherness without suspicion. Her explanation for her decision—or, at least, the closest we get to one—relates not to inner identity but to the way, in Nigerian culture, “manhood and its machismo are attributed to the seed, which then follows that the failure to make a man is the egg’s burden.” Raised by a single mother, Igoni “cannot be my mother’s son,” and so “it must be that I’m her daughter.” As a novelistic abstraction, this makes some sense, but as the first account of Igoni’s transgender identity, it not only lacks resonance but also foundation: this is a character we met once in the beginning and then again later while investigating Furo’s life, both of which times there is nary a mention or hint—not, of course, that everyone closeting their true gender identity would necessarily display signs of anything. I mean this more in relation to craft, i.e. that Igoni isn’t a well-developed character, and since he functions so practically in the early stages of the plot, he didn’t really have to be (and since she shares her name with the novelist and is a writer herself there’s a hint of metafiction going on here but since I have limited space in this review I won’t go into it, except to say that it doesn’t really add anything and in fact may be just kind of superfluous and befuddling), but when Igoni’s sudden transition from male to female is—obviously—being juxtaposed with Furo’s magical transformation from black to white, both the flimsiness of Igoni’s character and the abstract reasons given for her choices, the novel clumsily clashes an astute satire on race with an ill-conceived, and, as I’m about to suggest, offensive, portrait of both women and transgendered men.

Okay, so let me unpack all that a bit and provide a little context. Furo, on his first night with Syreeta, discovers that his ass is still black, a blight revealing his previous (and true? truer?) self. Anxious to be completely rid of all traces of his past, he applies whitening creams to his ass every night. The bleach in these creams really does a number on his skin, leaving a sore on his butt cheek “the size of a coin, raw-red in the centre and ringed by encrusted ooze.” As he attends to his wound it suddenly hits him: “It was easier to be than to become.” Now, in the context of Furo’s story, this line can be taken all kinds of ways, each with complicated implications. The first would, of course, be that his black ass points to some truer essence of Furo’s identity, thus the elemental “to be” conjugation. But if this suggests that Furo’s ambition to become Frank Whyte is wrong (i.e., that he’s fighting against his true self) or that it’s futile to begin with because, like the dark of his butt, it won’t simply scrub away—if that is how one understands this line then there is something curious about the word “easier,” which implies complacence, comfort, a diminishing agency, even a giving in to something inevitable. Yet one can hardly fault Furo his improvised ethics, especially considering how much it got him and how quickly—to condemn him outright seems needlessly moralistic. And yet again, one also can’t extol him either; his pilgrim’s progress should not be celebrated—after all, it’s really nothing but desperate opportunism stemming from a life filled with dismal prospects and even bleaker realities.

All of which is to say that within the context of Furo’s narrative, Barrett folds the reader into these kinds of circuitous considerations and ethical conundrums—like, e.g., since Furo is initially a well-drawn character you end up kind of rooting for him to succeed in his duplicitous endeavor but then you realize you’re cheering on what amounts to the exploitation of a racist system that only perpetuates (or at least doesn’t damage) the system itself: only Furo stands to gain in this novel.
So all of this is challenging and confusing and great but, as stated, the introduction of Igoni’s underdeveloped gender identity completely ruins this, because my earlier question about what would happen if a woman were to be in Furo’s position wasn’t intended to draw a reductive comparison between race and gender, and neither did it hope that the novel would. But it does, at first implicitly and then explicitly: when Igoni and Furo finally meet again, Furo thinks to himself, “It had happened to Igoni, too.” Even if we’re meant to take this as reflective more of Furo’s naivety than the novel’s core belief, it’s still a wanting conclusion—because, then, are we supposed to put that much thematic weight on Igoni? We barely know her, yet we’re meant to ethically differentiate between her decision and Furo’s Inexplicable Occurrence? Because obviously Barrett wouldn’t want us to think there’s a one-to-one parallel between them, right?

It’s difficult to tell, truthfully. Because in the end, Blackass is not a novel that does justice to the women in the story (like Syreeta, or Tekena, or even Igoni), nor to the women of the book’s culture. Instead of granting Syreeta a richer conclusion than she’s given (which is that she reveals she’s pregnant, much to Furo, but not the reader’s, surprise) and allow her space as a woman to contrast Furo’s experiences in the world of men. Because that’s what’s missing here: a full acknowledgment of the fact that the world Furo navigates is not just white-dominated but also male-dominated, and that by not fully acknowledging this—or acknowledging it clumsily—the novel seems not to see Syreeta’s full potential. Instead, we end with Furo, a man either too ingrained in his own culture or too selfish and simple to value Syreeta and treat her with humanity, and Igoni, a character who shares a name with the novel’s male author and who then becomes a woman—these are the symbolic figures (or, as Igoni puts it, “his black ass and my woman’s penis”) the novel rests on. Barrett’s writing brims with talent and skill, and I don’t mean to suggest that Blackass isn’t the work of a gifted and promising author. But it’s disappointing, by the end, and also sort of dispiriting, and it’s made all the more depressing by just how accurately Blackass inadvertently enacts how patriarchy works: the men set the terms and conditions, the symbols and the metaphors, and the women just get left behind.
Three Poems

The Animal

I live with an obscure animal.
At night he eats anything I do during the day.
During the day he eats anything I do at night.
The only thing he doesn’t eat is my memory. He gets a rise
from pointing out my smallest errors and fears.
I don’t let him sleep.
I am his obscure animal.

Questions

now that you’re sailing through my blood and are familiar with my limitations and wake me in the middle of the day to make me lie down in your memory and push my patience too far tell me what the devil i am doing why do i need you wordlessly coursing through me alone you the object of my passion why do i want to fill you with just me and encompass finish you off mingle with your bones when you are my only country (with me) against the beasts of oblivion

One Man’s Wake

He goes around concerned more than usual about time, life, other minor things like being, dying without having found himself.

He was single-minded about this and on rainy days he would go out and start asking if they had seen him aboard some woman’s eyes or somewhere along the Brazilian coast in love with its pounding surf or most likely at the funeral of his innocence.

He always had words or pale and miserable pieces of love and of violent winds in reserve, he had been about to enter death thirteen times but came back from force of habit, he said.

Among other things he wanted someone else to understand the world and this terrified loneliness itself.

Now they’re holding this scary wake here inside these walls on which his curses still come rolling off, the rustle of the beard, still full of life, falls from his face and no one who can smell him will ever guess how much he wanted to enjoy the mystery of innocent love and give water to his children.

As he returns his borrowed skin and bones to neglect, he makes out his own figure in the distance and runs after himself, so there’s no doubt now that it will soon begin to rain.
A Selection from *Quiet Creature on the Corner*

Someone knocked on the door, and I went to open it, already knowing who it was: the eldest son of the neighbor lady, a crazy kid that had this obsession with coming to ask me for a nail; for the hundredth time I said I didn’t have any more, but, like always, he needed to nail something—this time it was for nailing a beam, yes, nailing a beam in the ceiling above his mattress. He was almost shouting, banging, banging, banging, until he bled. I looked up because that was the direction he pointed so vehemently, I looked and saw the split ceilings in the corridor: I just need to borrow one nail, the kid was repeating, one loaned nail, that's all. The kid was gagging, and, as usual, he suddenly fell silent and returned to the apartment where he lived, with such a distressed expression that it seemed he'd just practiced a defeat that no other child was even capable of imagining.

While mother was watching TV, seated on the shredded sofa, I went downstairs to see if anything was new, and as I descended I thought of her—that it really was a good idea for her to go to São Borja, because there was every reason to believe that it was all headed for collapse here in Porto Alegre, and I wouldn’t know what to do with her.

Around the building downstairs it was nearly a jungle, damp, parts of it always flooded, frogs croaking ceaselessly. There wasn’t anyone there.

I leaned an arm against a column, stared down at the floor, my slit-open sneaker. I could take advantage of the silence to write a poem, pull a piece of paper and pen from my pocket: images of things undulated, pursuing me, perhaps a thin stem, very thin, adrift on the breeze. That was when I heard someone singing, a high-pitched voice. I looked around—undulating things, the fine stalk, very fine, adrift on the breeze would have to wait for another time. I went looking for the person who was singing. It had to be nearby, it wasn’t coming from upstairs in any of the apartments. My steps drifting, I looked in all the corners, the voice quite high. I went toward the ruins behind the building, where the voice seemed to be coming from, ah, it was the girl that lived on the top floor, Mariana if I’m not mistaken, seated on a chunk of ruin, younger than me, singing a romantic ballad by a singer who was hideous but provoked hysterical screams from girls in the auditoriums on the TV shows: hey, I said to her, you all alone out here?

The girl kept singing a while longer, then suddenly stopped and said with the sky the way it was today, so full of stars, with the moon so high, it was likely that the Druidesses would be descending by the bunches. This girl was like that, always talking about Druidesses and other strange beings. She said she never went to school, that she went every day to her hideout on the top of a hill, and stayed there singing all morning long.

When she started up with the thing about Druidesses my first reaction was to think that I was sleepy, that I’d go to bed, or maybe get back to that poem.

But a second later, when she began to sing, I saw that, no, it wouldn’t be so bad to spend a little time there. It wasn’t cold. I stayed, wandering through the ruins, and she started singing a song that wasn’t so bad. The night was clear and the ruins were yellowed by the moon.
Suddenly I realized I was so close to the singing girl that I could almost feel her breath. I didn’t say anything. She stopped singing. I noticed there was a wall covered in dots that hid us from the building. I hit her with a kiss, and she fell with me onto the wet earth, my tongue passing through a muffled murmur in the girl’s mouth, for sure a scream if I were to take my mouth off hers—and it was too late, I needed to suffocate that scream. I came right as my dick went in, and that dry murmur, the shout I suffocated by crushing my mouth against hers, stopped. And I got up.

I went back to the apartment. My mother was sleeping on the shredded sofa with the light on. I went to my room, threw myself on the bed, and fell asleep.

I awoke in the middle of the night to voices outside. I got up, went to the corner of the window, and saw brigadiers talking to some guys that were getting out of a red Escort, and a station wagon with a spinning light on top. The wagon had parked diagonally in front of the Escort; one of them started cuffing the guys, the other pointing his gun.

It had become routine to be awakened during the night by troubles like these in the neighborhood. Police, car thieves, drug traffickers, even on calm nights like this one, it wasn’t strange for shots to ring out, and there I was, like on so many other late nights, peering from the corner of the window, not wanting to be seen, because if I were I’d certainly fall under some kind of suspicion.

I sat down on the bed, hearing the brigadiers’ siren. After that the silence returned. In the living room my mother was snoring. Tomorrow she’d go to São Borja.

I saw a bolt of lightning cut the sky, everything went blue, then came the thunder. I returned to the window and another lightning bolt illuminating the sort-of clearing where they were constructing the building next door. The Escort was still there; I doubted I’d be able to sleep; a downpour was starting to rail against the window, the water blocking my view outside; I thought how my life was really taking its time figuring things out; and my mother snored as if to say: don’t even tell me. And I was still there, staring at the drops that wouldn’t let me see outside, unable to sleep, with not even a way to take a walk in the street due to the rain. I went to the living room, the light was still on, and I could’ve stolen my mother’s wedding ring right off her finger, and even taken my time rolling out since she wouldn’t wake up, but that wedding ring probably wasn’t worth a nickel, and I was a coward anyway; I called out to her, asked her to make me a tea because I was feeling woozy, ready to vomit.

Early the next morning I took her to the bus station—she was leaving at eight—the rain had stopped, but the sky hadn’t opened up, clouds were moving along lashed by a wind that seemed to come from the south, the temperature had fallen and my mother kissed me, I said that she was doing the right thing by moving to another city, and the bus left.

I went up Borges Street and jumped on the bus back, and right when it was passing along the ridge of cemeteries, I looked from up there down at Glória again—the church towers—I coughed, spit out the window, crossed myself furtively, laughing to myself, pulled the cord for a stop, got off, said hello to a neighbor who had his kid in his lap, took a shortcut that led over to my building—I could already smell the eucalyptus in the clearing of the next-door building—I saw a paddy wagon and two brigadiers talking with a guy who saw me and said: that’s the man.

There were five prisoners in the cell where they stuffed me. I’ve never seen people as ruined as those five, there
That night the five of them made a big racket
masturbating, the bunks squeaking, the guys slapping the
walls, their labored breathing audible when they came,
nearly bursting. I was the only one lying on a mattress
directly on the slab floor. Waiting out the sleepless night,
I knew that if I stayed there much longer I’d end up
participating in the communal jackoff session.

Then they were snoring and it was dark, the only light
a single lamp that was oscillating in the drafty corridor.
The window in that little hole had iron bars that left such
a narrow space between them that not even an arm would
fit; I took a board from under one of the beds, pushed it
against the wall, got on top of it, and peered out at the
night through the bars. A guard was passing hurriedly in
the distance in front of me, a rooster began to crow.

While I waited for it to get light I remained there,
seeing if maybe some verse might emerge; maybe I’d have
to get accustomed to this, to these guys, discuss a way of
getting out of here; or maybe it wouldn’t be so rough, I’d
find some company in the five guys, if I stayed with them
through what would come, with the five pent-up and
stinking bodies, eventually letting me see them without
repugnance, capable of putting an arm around them,
talking with them about something, planning something
with the ugly and spent men.

When it gets light out I’ll turn to the interior of the
cell, and the newspaper with the story about me will be
passing from hand to hand, and this will calm me, restore
my sleep, because the five will see proof that I am one of
them.

The day was breaking and I walked around the cell,
and for every eye that opened, every stretch, yawn, fart,
belch I was there watching, and I did the same myself; I
also stretched, yawned, pretended to fart, belched, and this

were scars and occasional holes all over their whole bodies,
mouths completely toothless, one of them with a hairlip
that had never been fixed—and even worse than toothless
was the guy with only one rotting, snaggletoothed canine,
bleeding.

But before that I had waited hours for the sheriff. The
delicate searched me all over, took a wad of papers with my
poems on them from my pocket, spread the papers over
the sheriff’s desk, and when he arrived they started asking
me if I had brothers, a mother or a father still living, and
when I told them how my father took off and my mother
and I had fallen into poverty, that I had to leave school
to eke out a living for us, the sheriff seemed to take a
real interest: he leaned toward me, thumped me on the
shoulder, and yelled for me to tell all about that time, that
was the reason for everything, that was where everything
had started.

Go ahead, he concluded impatiently.

So then I told him about that time, an assortment
of things from here, leaving things out there, and then
later, later there was last night, and his eyes bulged at
me, another blow to the shoulder when I said I’d stayed
at home, that I’d gone to bed early, early since I had to
take my mother to the bus station. He called over a police
reporter, a completely blond man—the tufts of hair
coming out of his ears, even those were super blond.

“Let’s hear it,” the reporter said, gathering up the
papers with my poems.

Then came the jailer to take me to the lockup.

When I came in one prisoner asked me what time it
was, another if I had something to give him, another that
he’d strangle me at night, another that he knew I was a
poet, and I should write a poem in charcoal beside his
mattress. The fifth one didn’t say anything.
The metal bars half opened and I went out, the jailer steering me by the arm down the corridor, I heard the murmur of the sheriff’s room, but when I got to the door they all went silent, two flashes exploded, I noticed a huddle of reporters in a corner taking notes, then, suddenly, the huddle broke and they also went quiet, and in the middle of the reporters appeared Mariana’s scared expression. She looked panicked, regretting that she’d reported me to the police, and from the looks of it she’d ask me for help if she could, she was so young and was so flagrantly scared, there, in the middle of those reporters asking her questions; I went toward her, but when I got close various arms detained me; Mariana took three steps in my direction, slightly lifted her arm as if to reach out to me, maybe to undo her denunciation, but she knew it was already too late.

They pulled her away, and took her through a door next to the sheriff’s desk. I felt a touch on my shoulder, looked back, it was a man wearing a hat and a black overcoat—he reminded me of a photo I’d seen of a street in Vienna in the thirties—and he didn’t take his hand off my shoulder, telling me I was coming with him, I was leaving this place, I was going to a clinic in São Leopoldo, and he handed me a package, saying that there were some books of poetry and some paper for me to write on.

Wow, I sighed to myself, my entire life looks like it’s about to change. More flashes exploded, and I said that yeah, I was ready, we could go.

The reporters and photographers stopped at the door to the sheriff’s office, the man opened the car door, I got in and said, softly: and now São Leopoldo.

Translated by Adam Morris.
Seven Lives of Bluebeard

Out of the gateway,
Through the wide world,
Into the tempest
Beaten and hurled,
Vain is thy wandering,
Sure thy despair,
Flying or staying,
The chamber is there!

—Rose Terry Cooke, “Bluebeard’s Closet”

Perrault’s Blue Beard

There was a widower of great wealth, Charles Perrault’s story begins, who in looking for a wife, turned to his neighbor, “a lady of quality” with two daughters, both of whom are described as perfect beauties. Blue Beard, it seems, has no preference for one or the other; he leaves it to his neighbor to decide. (How easy, one notes, it must be to leave to another a decision between two perfections.) Unfortunately for his prospects, the blueness of his beard is a cause of aversion—a beard is never just a beard—and neither daughter can bear the thought of marrying him. Besides, Perrault mentions: there is the nagging problem of Blue Beard’s previous wives. What happened to them anyway?

In order to win one of the daughters over Blue Beard invites his neighbor, her daughters, and their friends for a weeklong stay at his country house, where they pass the time “playing tricks upon each other” and so enjoying themselves that the younger daughter begins to think that perhaps this man’s beard isn’t so blue after all. She agrees to marry him.

Married now, Blue Beard informs his wife that he must travel for business and entrusts the house to her, permitting her full run of the estate except, of course, for the room to which this key opens—imagine him, with something between excitement and resignation in his look, holding it out to her between two fingers, the rest of the set dangling heavily below.

He departs. His young wife invites several friends over and while they are perhaps once again playing tricks upon each other, she, drawn by insatiable curiosity, sneaks off with the key to the forbidden closet. At first, this nameless girl cannot see anything for the darkness, but as her eyes adjust to the gloom, she finds that the floor is covered in clotted blood and, above, ranged along the walls, hang Blue Beard’s former wives. His latest, sure now to join her predecessors, flees from the room, desperate to cleanse the key of its stain. Despite washing with water, scrubbing with brick dust and sand, the stain proves permanent.

Although it constitutes the main action of the Blue Beard plot, the rest of the story is, despite its tension, of less interest: the young wife is condemned to death for her trespass, though being a gentleman of propriety, Blue Beard grants her fifteen minutes of prayer, during which time she calls on her sister Anne—who wisely did not marry the man and who, fortunately, happens to be visiting—to run to the tower to see if she can spy their previously unmentioned brothers, who also, fortunately, happen to be on their way for a visit. Three times during that fifteen minute reprieve (one imagines Blue Beard cartoonishly sharpening his scimitar while never forgetting...
that, just like a key, a sword is never just a sword) Anne calls down to her sister an oddly evocative phrase: “I see nothing but the sun, which makes a dust, and the grass, which looks green.” (As if the grass itself, like her heretofore gentle husband, dissembles.)

Her brothers arrive in time, storm the castle, and put Blue Beard to death, saving their insubordinate sister, who because her late husband has no heirs, stumbles into his fortune. The moral, we’re told in the straightforward manner of the fairy tale, is that curiosity is “a mortal bane,” which is true in this case not for the curious, but for he who would fetter her.

On being blue

“The color blue, the color of ambiguous depth, of the heavens and of the abyss at once, encodes the frightening character of Bluebeard, his house and his deeds, as surely as gold and white clothes the angels. The chamber he forbids his new wife becomes a blue chamber in some retellings: blue is the color of the shadow side, the tint of the marvelous and the inexplicable, of desire, of knowledge, of the blueprint, the blue movie, of blue talk, of raw meat and rare steak (un steak bleu, in French), of melancholy, the rare and the unexpected (singing the blues, once in a blue moon, out of the blue, blue blood). The fairy tale itself was first known, in France, as a conte bleu, and appeared in familiar livery between the covers of the Bibliotheque bleue.” (Marina Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde)

The Scene of the Crime

Perrault’s story has some curious gaps: how long after his wife’s party disbanded did Blue Beard return? Or, if he returned immediately, summoned by knowledge of his wife’s transgression, what happened to her guests? More curiously, we’re left with a great imponderable: what justification did Blue Beard have for killing his first wife? Perhaps, as in Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “Sonnet VI,” it was his first wife’s trespass into “an empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless,” a space that did not so much contain secrets as the possibility of them, that roused the man to his bloody destiny.

Or maybe he came to this fate simply because he could; because women have from time immemorial been victim to men whose violence is implicitly condoned; because feminine curiosity has always been viewed as insubordination. In Marina Warner’s reading, Perrault’s Blue Beard is a retelling of the story of Adam and Eve in which Blue Beard acts as the vengeful and jealous god. It is through the breaking of an arbitrary rule that the Biblical pair are condemned. Through a happy ending—this Eve gets away with it—Perrault undermines such rules, but does not go so far as to condemn them. This is how things are, we’re told in the moral: sometimes they end well, more often they do not. (One in seven are poor odds when life and death are on the line.)

He leaves the drawing of conclusions to his readers and to the later writers who reinvent the tale.

“The Gold Key”

Anne Sexton’s Transformations, a collection of poems reimagining the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm, opens
with “The Gold Key.” Bluebeard does not make an appearance in this poem, but he haunts it, as a bogeyman and a consequence. The key’s secrets, Sexton writes, “whimper / like a dog in heat” (a key never being just a key) and is the instrument that unlocks the book that follows.

Sexton uses the key to both chastise curiosity—“The boy has found a gold key/ and he is looking for what it will open. / This boy! / Upon finding a nickel / he would look for a wallet.”—and delight in it: if this boy (“He is each of us.”) had not found the keyhole, these transformations wouldn’t come about. If Bluebeard’s wife didn’t turn the key and discover her husband’s terrible secret, we would have no tale. Every tale begins with a transgression, as so many of Sexton’s poems in Transformations do: a curse, a broken promise, an immoral decision.

The Brother Rescues His Sister

According to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folk Tales, a system for collating folk and fairy tales by plot, The Bluebeard Tale falls under the heading of Supernatural Adversaries and, within that heading, Tales of Magic. Variant tales include stories of younger sisters or daughters kidnapped by tigers, carried off by the devil, diabolic beings, or by a dragon. These stories are grouped not by the action that leads to a young woman finding herself in trouble, but by the manner of her rescue. As Aarne-Thompson-Uther arrange it, in this type of tale, “The brother rescues his sister(s).”

It may seem odd, given that the brothers in Perrault’s version of Bluebeard have only a brief, if vital, cameo, that the tale is classified by their role. After all, it’s the young bride whose decision leads to trouble: she marries Bluebeard; she finds she cannot resist the temptation of the key; she asks for a fifteen minute stay of execution and urges her sister to call out for help.

I suppose it makes sense the deus ex machina gets recognition in a world in which bad things are always happening to women. If not for the manner of rescue, how could we distinguish this story of a woman being unjustly punished from the countless others like it?

“In Bluebeard’s Castle”

In her feminist retelling of the story in “Bluebeard’s Castle,” Angela Carter seems as intent on subverting the moral of the story as she is with undermining the A-T-U classification. If the bride was inexorably doomed from the moment she agreed to marry the richest man in France, Carter decides that her salvation can at least be complicated by the manner of her rescue.

It is in updating her means of deliverance that later writers take apart the tale in revitalizing ways. Carter, like Helen Oyeyemi after her, pulls the rug out from under the classification: her bride has no brothers and so no brothers will save her. It’s her mother, a pistol-toting, “eagle-featured indomitable” woman who comes to the rescue, with her hair whipping wildly in the wind as she races across the causeway connecting Bluebeard’s castle—so like a ship upon an ungovernable sea—to the mainland as the tide rises around her.

In Carter’s retelling, woman can be victim and heroine. Given permission by the writer to fully express and embody her humanity, the bride becomes recognizably human. Like her male counterpart who for so long defined what was acceptable (simply by being), she is capable of transgression and redemption. More than even the salvation of her heroine, Carter’s most revolutionary
move may come at a moment early in the tale: after she has been deflowered and given the keys, the bride admits: “I was not afraid of him; but of myself.” This moment of consciousness reaching an awareness that the loss of virginity and the bounds of marriage have altered her in more than superficial ways signals a shift in the Bluebeard story. This bride is granted agency and with it an understanding that she is complicit in whatever follows, even if it is unjust.

On Keys

“No one who disdains the key will ever be able to unlock the door.” (Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*)

“A key has this sense of having a journey packed up within itself—it leads you to the lock, but you get there by some route that’s not necessarily logical the entire time.” (Helen Oyeyemi, interviewed at *Broadly*)

“Green Air”

Bluebeard is a familiar monster in the fiction of Rikki Ducornet, though no less terrifying for this familiarity. In “Green Air,” a bitter mash-up of Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little Match Girl” and “Blue Beard,” Ducornet considers the fate of one of the wives who is not saved. Ducornet’s condemned wife is not murdered. Instead she is imprisoned in a cedar chest. Her trespass was the same as that of the others, but in giving voice to a victim after the punishment has been meted, Ducornet imagines just how this woman—how many women—might respond: with rationalizations. “She considers that if some aspire to the realms above the moon, her husband has chosen to dwell beneath it and to shoulder the planet’s shadow. Surely it is this that has corrupted his mind and darkened his heart.”

In this version, the banished bride reasons that her husband, once so kind and charming, must be burdened with great responsibility, that surely there is a reason for his change in behavior. It isn’t until she opens another door—the cover of the diary her husband also stows in the chest—that she realizes the awful truth: “her nature—humble, generous, and kind—does not assure interest or compassion.” It is a cruel lesson, made crueler by the contents of his journal, which reveal her husband’s erotic dreams about another woman. These dreams infect the imprisoned woman’s mind “like ferrets,” and, worse than death or physical torture, alter her dreams, condemning her to a cruel fate, a living mortification and eventual madness.

A Brief Note on Beards

“Flemish scientist Jan Baptist Van Helmont (1580–1644)...believed he had discovered the true meaning of beards. Known today as a pioneer in chemistry, Van Helmont...recognized a direct link between beards, virility, and the soul, but unlike Olmo [another beard theorist], he considered this to be a lamentable rather than honorable connection. Beards did indeed signal the condition of the masculine soul, but they were unfortunate marks of original sin. By Van Helmont’s reckoning, Adam was created in the Garden of Eden without a beard, but eating the forbidden apple stirred in him carnal lust such
that he ‘deflowered’ Eve. A beard then sprouted on his chin as a sign of shame.” (Christopher Oldstone-Moore, in Of Beards and Men)

Bluebeard

In Bluebeard, Max Frisch’s last novel, we are presented with the monster not from the view of his intended victim—if one thing is certain, it’s that Bluebeard knows each wife will fail—but through the consciousness of the alleged monster himself. That Frisch’s Bluebeard has, as we’re informed in the first pages, been acquitted of murdering one of his ex-wives “due to insufficient evidence” is of little consequence: the real trial is ongoing. Rather than easing his guilt, this indeterminate verdict haunts the doctor. As with many of Frisch’s characters, he is a man—a fact not to be overlooked—burdened with a faulty memory and a bad conscience. (In his Paris Review interview, Frisch was asked about this. He replied, “I don’t know sin. I know guilt....”) His narrator’s guilt is, more than the crime itself, the central focus and impetus of all the novel’s action.

In situating the crime in the nebulous regions of memory, Frisch reveals he’s less concerned with exploring monstrosity than he is in teasing out the implications of uncertainty. As a consequence, we’re left uncertain as to whether Schaad is in fact a murderer: he cannot claim innocence because he is as in the dark as we are. Through its silences and omissions as much as through its revelations, the narrative, voiced by the accused, leaves the reader unsettled, in a murky territory where truth seems impossible to suss out. Although Schaad may have been a man who would never hurt a fly, as his ex-wife’s housekeeper puts it, his “essential coolness,” on display during his obsessive games of billiards, leaves the reader suspicious that he is capable of much worse than an occasional cutting comment.

That Frisch seems less concerned with exploring the monstrosity of Perrault’s Bluebeard does not mean that his character is not himself a monster. He is garrulous, condescending, verbally abusive, a mansplainer, incapable of understanding and lacking in empathy...yet none of this, even taken as a whole, are fit to condemn him entirely. He may look like a murderer, his jealousy may have provided motive for the crime, but these questions are elided in Frisch’s narration. Instead, we are given a character whose obsession hinges on his own uncertainty.

For a man as assured as Schaad appears to be—during their testimony, several of his ex-wives paint him as a man of strong opinions, if also spineless—the dismantling of his character during the trial whittles away his opinion of himself, reducing him to a set of actions without a center. Billiards help, runs a refrain in the novel, a set of mechanical gestures with mathematically determined outcomes. (Yet, predictably, even these outcomes cannot be predicted with complete accuracy.)

It is only after Schaad is reduced to this set of gestures that he is capable of becoming a murderer. After traveling to his home town to confess the crime, he crashes his car into a tree in an attempt at suicide. He fails on both accounts: a student has been charged with the murder and Schaad is still alive, his desperate bid for consequence has failed.

Frisch’s reworking of the tale is open to multiple readings. Does Schaad represent an attempt at dismantling the patriarchal system that Frisch himself played a part in maintaining (see, for example, Montauk)? Is he the latest in a line of heroes more conflicted by their own guilt than the
hurt they inflict? Or might he be the blockhead unable to understand the complexities of intimacy, a man undone by the tightening spiral of marital dissolution whose failures render him monstrous in a life-sized way?

**Mr. Fox**

Late in Helen Oyeyemi’s *Mr. Fox*, a novel inspired as much by Bluebeard as the tale of the Robber Bridegroom, the eponymous character admits to being ill-equipped for love: “I’m not capable of it, can’t even approach it from the side, let alone head-on. Nor am I alone in this—everyone is like this, the liars... Love will never be real, or if it is, it has no power. No power.”

Mr. Fox, who during the course of the novel has with reluctance undergone a course in compassion and aesthetic refinement at the hands of his fictional muse Mary Foxe—a character he both created and has fallen in love with—still has some way to go in understanding his sublimated violence against women, violence that manifests itself in his popular but crudely written stories in which awful things habitually happen to women. A skeptical reader would see in this admission a sign of the inability of men and women to come to terms.

Oyeyemi’s novel, however, takes a more optimistic view as it progresses through a series of stories—presumably co-written by Mr. Fox (with his “blue-black mane of hair”) and his troublesome muse—that reveal a slow and stubbornly dawning awareness that even in fiction violence against women is a pervasive and dangerous problem. That it has its real-life (yet of course still fictional) counterpart is reflected in Fox’s treatment of his long-suffering wife Daphne, victim not only of her husband’s emotional immaturity but his love of his creation as well. The danger, Oyeyemi seems to warn us, is that the imagination, rather than being contained to our heads, spills over into reality; indeed, it shapes reality itself. It is a weapon as much as Bluebeard’s sharpened sword. As Mary argues: “It’s obscene to make such things reasonable.”

*Mr. Fox* is full of barred doors, thwarted curiosity, and frustrated desire. The male response—to eliminate what stands in the way of his desire, to jealously watch over his possessions, to control them—is constantly undermined by the plucky Mary Foxe, a woman who, like the rebelling characters in Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or Queneau’s *Flight of Icarus*, takes on flesh and blood (that can be spilled) and manages to escape her creator’s grip by the power of her own imagining. Much like the near-victim of the folktale, Mary riddles her way out of someone else’s story.

**Apologia**

In her poem “Apologia,” Vievee Francis examines the crime from the point of view of its intended victim. Like Oyeyemi, Francis’s narrator is defiant, not only questioning her husband’s dictates, but doing violence to the very system in which such impulses can stand: “When you left, I went to your swan’s coop / snapped every slender neck / in the lot.”

This act is mirrored later in the poem when, after wandering the castle for months, seeking out her enigmatic husband “object by object, lair by lair,” she finally opens the chamber door and find his past on display, “like birds brined and preserved on drying hooks.”

“How angry I was,” this woman admits, as if giving voice to all the prior victims who stood where she does now, “to have a key I couldn’t use.”
Testimonial (Supported in Belief / Verified in Fact)

Who could have imagined, only five minutes to save your son. A roaring heard in open sunlight. Fear felt together. The net (noose) tightening. Some breakdown in communication. A wrong turning. Life a warning. God no guarantee. Move now at breakneck speed. Many places to hide and none. Indeed, I could camouflage myself in reeds and thickets. Lather myself in mud and lie down in the rocky river bed. And they might pass me by. But even if I could disappear, no hiding place for my son. For what if they overtook me, caught me? In such circumstance, his fate linked to mine. Trapped.

So I slicked down his body with water—hurry up, hurry up—from the oily stream where we greased our guns. Secured a breathing mask to his tiny face, still pale in color and sun-deprived from the fresh womb. Enough concentrated oxygen to keep him alive a half day or more. Then I tethered a cow to a tree so that it would not pull away once the painful work began. I started to ease my son into the cow’s anus with two hands a lot like the way we loaded a long shell into one of the big guns. The cow tensed but, to my surprise, offered little resistance. I slapped the hard round buttocks and sent the animal off at a slow trot, knowing that it would not run far.

I dropped down into my hiding place.

Those of us—the men, only the men—who survived awakened to a world covered in white clay. Ground leaf branch and tree covered with the white stuff of witness. We ran about in every direction at once, like shy birds hard to catch. As we soon discovered, it was no accident or miracle that we had survived. They had deliberately spared us. Dead littered the contested flexible boundaries of our town. They had ripped apart each male child. Pieces of skin tissue organ scattered over the fields like some strange harvest. Patterned rows of spinal columns like newly planted trees. Lengths of intestines like dew-whitened vines. Tufts of hair on the breeze. Twigs of bone under our surveying feet.

Unidentifiable.

I could not find the cow.


We marked out a circle and worked through the night to dig a collective grave, our fierce spades slicing into the earth and flinging freed dirt into the air, our mouths spitting red tracers of talk and tobacco into the sky. We gathered what we could into boxes and baskets and buried it, then came with our weapons and stood around the steepled dirt. Uttered their names.

Some wept. Others remained silent. (Sad faces, silent petitions.) Some burst into hymn while others danced our calamities. (If a man dances alone he will not dance for long.) Tired, the older men handed over their dance to the younger. Many of us would mark this occasion with an annual return to the grave—attempting to attach some definite meaning, some magical intent to our loss. Others enacted something secret—and probably offensive—behind closed doors and shuttered windows. Any ritual leaves out too much.

All of us would dream at night about the return of our sons—barely recognizable creatures, disguised, terrifying us out of our senses. Lookalikes in a deathly masquerade.
We returned to our shops and jobs, mourning taking on our habits and thoughts. And the murdered boys lingered on in the beautiful thought of revenge.

One night many years later, when I was an old man, I drifted about my house, restless, under some desire which failed to find appropriate satisfaction—food, coffee, books—so I decided to make a round through the woods—insomnia calling me forth, sheep by sheep—familiar territory even in the dark, navigating less by sight than by feel. I soon reached the outskirts of the sleeping town where I decided to stand guard. What was at stake? The war had come and gone. So my actions were a thing pre-done, anticipatory, a thing re-done, commemorative, routine, habit, both imitation and wishful act. Many such nights before. A drowsy spectator of star and moon in bright relief against dark sky. An old man wandering until the tug of sleep pulled me home.

Wandering this night as always, invisible brush and leaves a dark chorus filling the air with the disembodied chirps of crickets. I heard another sound. The movements of a shapeless animal? No. More like—I’m certain—shoes crunching leaf- and vine-covered ground, heels snapping dry branches in two. I stopped and stared into the dark. Saw nothing at first, only tree-jammed dark. Then a form broke the night, burst into vision like a lantern. A man. Growing larger the closer he came. So tall he had to walk stooped forward to keep his head from tangling with the branches. Dressed sharp as a tack as if he’d just come from a dinner party. I didn’t think to raise my rifle. Instead I backed away. From this man. Little more than white flesh on a pole. Never having earned the richness of color that was his birthright. Who I knew to be my son. Smelling of shit. Whose only validity was blood.

He sat down on the log, bowed his head, and started to run his fingers over the abandoned bark. Seen with single intention. A restlessness in every inflection of his body. Lost and needy. I tried to hide my fear. What he might do to me. Who he might have become. Would he spit accusation in my eyes? (Innocent. I tell you. Innocent. Tell him. I would never summon a ghost. I let go long ago. Forgive me.)

I speared the rifle barrel-first into the soil, then sat down at the other end of the log. We sat for a spell, he at one end, me at the other. Shared space. A family affair. I gave him water from my steel canteen but he could not swallow. I spoke the words of a father, but he could only stammer. So I remained quiet. Unasked questions. Watching my son. His hands balled into fists, clutching something hard-earned and unsayable. I took his shoulders into my hands, though I was afraid of his skin. Afraid for him too. What would the others make of his return? Would they be jealous? They whose sons had not escaped the coffined clay? Would I need to hide my son again?

“I’m dead,” he said.


“I spoke no reply. And we sat the silence of anxious vigil.
Selections from “Song of Myself”

1
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

17
These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
This the common air that bathes the globe.

39
The friendly and flowing savage, who is he?
Is he waiting for civilization, or past it and mastering it?

Is he some Southwesterner rais’d out-doors? is he Kanadian?
Is he from the Mississippi country? Iowa, Oregon, California?
The mountains? prairie-life, bush-life? or sailor from the sea?

Wherever he goes men and women accept and desire him,
They desire he should like them, touch them, speak to them, stay with them.

Behavior lawless as snow-flakes, words simple as grass, uncomb’d head, laughter, and naïveté,
Slow-stepping feet, common features, common modes and emanations,
They descend in new forms from the tips of his fingers,
They are wafted with the odor of his body or breath,
they fly out of the glance of his eyes.

It is time to explain myself—let us stand up.

What is known I strip away,
I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.

The clock indicates the moment—but what does eternity indicate?

We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers,
There are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them.

Births have brought us richness and variety,
And other births will bring us richness and variety.

I do not call one greater and one smaller,
That which fills its period and place is equal to any.

Were mankind murderous or jealous upon you, my brother, my sister?
I am sorry for you, they are not murderous or jealous upon me,
All has been gentle with me, I keep no account with lamentation,
(What have I to do with lamentation?)

I am an acme of things accomplish’d, and I an encloser of things to be.

My feet strike an apex of the apices of the stairs,
On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between the steps,
All below duly travel’d, and still I mount and mount.

Rise after rise bow the phantoms behind me,
Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there,
I waited unseen and always, and slept through the lethargic mist,
And took my time, and took no hurt from the fetid carbon.

Long I was hugg’d close—long and long.

Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have help’d me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.

For it the nebula cohered to an orb,
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and
deposited it with care.

All forces have been steadily employ’d to complete and
delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

51

The past and present wilt—I have fill’d them, emptied
them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a
minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the
door-slab.

Who has done his day’s work? who will soonest be
through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove
already too late?
The Frisch Questionnaire

Many know the “Proust Questionnaire,” which Marcel Proust didn’t actually create, but made famous by answering two similar questionnaires at different points in his life—and which Vanity Fair has since prominently featured in their issues. Lesser known is the “Frisch Questionnaire” which Max Frisch created in 1967 and which is included in his Sketchbook 1966–1971. Below author Idra Novey answers Frisch’s questions.

MF: Whom would you rather never have met?
IN: The man on the subway yesterday who splashed his hot soup on my lap.

MF: Are you conscious of being in the wrong in relation to some other person (who need not necessarily be aware of it)? If so, does this make you hate yourself—or the other person?
IN: My friend the poet John High passed along these questions to me and I repeat them to myself whenever I start hating myself or anyone else, as the problem is usually driven by something beyond any single conversation: “When did you stop dancing?” “When did you stop singing?” “When did you stop being enchanted by stories?” “When did you stop finding comfort in the sweet territory of silence?”

MF: Would you like to have perfect memory?
IN: I would like to have a perfect calm. If such a thing is even possible, even once.

MF: Give the name of a politician whose death through illness, accident, etc. would fill you with hope. Or do you consider none of them indispensible?
IN: I would not wish illness anyone. Except Donald Drumpf. And maybe that villainous Martin Shkreli who raised the price of Darapin.

MF: Which person or persons, now dead, would you like to see again?
IN: I’d like to have breakfast with Miguel Cervantes and find out what he ate before writing Don Quixote.

MF: Which not?
IN: I have no desire to meet Stalin.

MF: Would you rather have belonged to a different nation (or civilization)? If so, which?
IN: I don’t know if I belong to any one nation now.

MF: To what age do you wish to live?
MF: Let us assume that you have never killed another human being. How do you account for it?
IN: I call my accountant.

MF: What do you need in order to be happy?

MF: What are you grateful for?
IN: The letter B.

MF: Which would you rather do: die or live on as a healthy animal? Which animal?
IN: I have long suspected I was a horse in my past life. I do best with a vegetarian diet and feel freest in fields.

IN: I wish to live to the age to see the bees thriving again and the bats, too, happy and upside down, hissing away in their caves.

MF: If you had the power to put into effect things you consider right, would you do so against the wishes of the majority? (Yes or no)
IN: No.

MF: Why not, if you think they are right?
IN: Self-doubt is integral to democracy.

MF: Which do you find it easier to hate, a group or an individual? And do you prefer to hate individually or as part of a group?
IN: So many questions about hate. Yikes.

MF: When did you stop believing you could become wiser—or do you still believe it? Give your age.
IN: I don’t give out my age or wisdom.

MF: Are you convinced by your own self-criticism?
IN: Depends on the time of day.

MF: What in your opinion do others dislike about you, and what do you dislike about yourself? If not the same thing, which do you find it easier to excuse?
IN: I excuse none of it.

MF: Do you find the thought that you might never have been born (if it ever occurs to you) disturbing?
IN: I don’t remember being born. But my mother says it happened.

MF: When you think of someone dead, would you like him to speak to you, or would you rather say something more to him?
IN: Silence is a form of communication, too.

MF: Do you love anybody?
IN: Oh yes.

MF: How do you know?
IN: Because I rush home to see them.
A Selection from “Advice from a Caterpillar” from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

“What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar sternly. “Explain yourself!”

“I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid,” said Alice, “because I’m not myself, you see.”

“I don’t see,” said the Caterpillar.

Alice thought she might as well wait, as she had nothing else to do, and perhaps after all it might tell her something worth hearing. For some minutes it puffed away without speaking, but at last it unfolded its arms, took the hookah out of its mouth again, and said, “So you think you’re changed, do you?”

“My real self, you mean?” said Alice.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘real’,” said the Caterpillar.

“Oh, I think I know!” said Alice.

“You don’t know anything!” said the Caterpillar.

“A piece of information,” thought Alice, “is a piece of information, but I don’t think it’s a very useful one—unless you happen to think of something to ask for it.

“Which brings me back to the beginning of the conversation. Alice felt a little irritated at the Caterpillar’s making such very short remarks, and she drew herself up and said, very gravely, “I think, you ought to tell me who you are, first.”

“Why?” said the Caterpillar.

Here was another puzzling question; and as Alice could not think of any good reason, and as the Caterpillar seemed to be in a very unpleasant state of mind, she turned away.

“Come back!” the Caterpillar called after her. “I’ve something important to say!”

This sounded promising, certainly: Alice turned and came back again.

“Keep your temper,” said the Caterpillar.

“Is that all?” said Alice, swallowing down her anger as well as she could.

“No,” said the Caterpillar.

Alice thought she might as well wait, as she had nothing else to do, and perhaps after all it might tell her something worth hearing. For some minutes it puffed away without speaking, but at last it unfolded its arms, took the hookah out of its mouth again, and said, “So you think you’re changed, do you?”

“I’m afraid I am, sir,” said Alice; “I can’t remember things as I used—and I don’t keep the same size for ten minutes together!”

“Can’t remember what things?” said the Caterpillar.

“Well, I’ve tried to say ‘How doth the little busy
bee,’ but it all came different!” Alice replied in a very melancholy voice.

“Repeat, ‘You are old, Father William,’” said the Caterpillar.

Alice folded her hands, and began:

“You are old, Father William,” the youth said,
And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?”

“’In my youth,’” Father William replied to his son,
“I feared it might injure the brain;
But, now that I’m perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again.”

“You are old,” said the youth, “as I mentioned before,
And have grown most uncommonly fat;
Yet you turned a back-somersault in at the door—
Pray, what is the reason of that?”

“In my youth,” said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,
“I kept all my limbs very supple
By the use of this ointment—one shilling the box—
Allow me to sell you a couple?”

“You are old,” said the youth, “and your jaws are too weak
For anything tougher than suet;
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak—
Pray how did you manage to do it?”

“In my youth,” said his father, “I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife;
And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw,
Has lasted the rest of my life.”

“You are old,” said the youth, “one would hardly suppose
That your eye was as steady as ever;
Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your nose—
What made you so awfully clever?”

“I have answered three questions, and that is enough,”
Said his father; “don’t give yourself airs!
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?
Be off, or I’ll kick you down stairs!”

“That is not said right,” said the Caterpillar.
“Not quite right, I’m afraid,” said Alice, timidly; some of the words have got altered.”

“It is wrong from beginning to end,” said the Caterpillar decidedly, and there was silence for some minutes.

The Caterpillar was the first to speak.

“What size do you want to be?” it asked.

“Only one doesn’t like changing so often, you know.”

“I don’t know,” said the Caterpillar.

“Alice said nothing: she had never been so much contradicted in her life before, and she felt that she was losing her temper.

“Are you content now?” said the Caterpillar.

“Well, I should like to be a little larger, sir, if you wouldn’t mind,” said Alice: “three inches is such a wretched height to be.”
“It is a very good height indeed!” said the Caterpillar angrily, rearing itself upright as it spoke (it was exactly three inches high).

“But I’m not used to it!” pleaded poor Alice in a piteous tone. And she thought of herself, “I wish the creatures wouldn’t be so easily offended!”

“You’ll get used to it in time,” said the Caterpillar; and it put the hookah into its mouth and began smoking again.

This time Alice waited patiently until it chose to speak again. In a minute or two the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth and yawned once or twice, and shook itself. Then it got down off the mushroom, and crawled away in the grass, merely remarking as it went, “One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter.”

“One side of what? The other side of what?” thought Alice to herself.

“Of the mushroom,” said the Caterpillar, just as if she had asked it aloud; and in another moment it was out of sight.

Alice remained looking thoughtfully at the mushroom for a minute, trying to make out which were the two sides of it; and as it was perfectly round, she found this a very difficult question. However, at last she stretched her arms round it as far as they would go, and broke off a bit of the edge with each hand.

“And now which is which?” she said to herself, and nibbled a little of the right-hand bit to try the effect: the next moment she felt a violent blow underneath her chin: it had struck her foot!

She was a good deal frightened by this very sudden change, but she felt that there was no time to be lost, as she was shrinking rapidly; so she set to work at once to eat some of the other bit. Her chin was pressed so closely against her foot, that there was hardly room to open her mouth; but she did it at last, and managed to swallow a morsel of the lefthand bit.
Blood on the Wall

One might tell their truth through a fluidity of masks; but persona is a mask that has hardened in place.

Personality, like scaffolding, is useful up to a certain point; after that, it is an impediment to our development.

Behind what’s referred to as personality—buoying it up, and determining its worth—is the force of our Being.

We scramble the first half of our lives to assemble a self; and, in the second half, if we are wise, to dismantle it.

The self is a labyrinth, at the heart of which waits the spirit, hoping to be found.

The advice given Orpheus—never to look back until he had reached the upper world—should be good enough for us.

Whether or not we’re aware of it, our biography is perpetually being written—by the books on our shelves.

There are books, like experiences, that measure our distances and cannot be read until we reach their shores.

What do we look for in a good book, painting, music or conversation? A stretch of runway to take off, and return us to ourselves.

The ardent reader goes to confession every time they pick up a pen and, helplessly, bares their soul in the book margins.

We are captive to what we create.

Art alters the artist and, in time, recreates them in its own image.

Our character shapes all our relationships—including with the Muse.

Writers write to silence the voices in their head.

When the Voices are silent, confess ignorance.

Don’t wake a sleep-walker, they say. The same applies to life long day-dreamers: children, artists, thinkers, mystics, lovers, or revolutionaries.

A great artist is composed of three: the reckless drunk who creates, the professional bore who edits, and the heartless critic who assesses.

If you wish to know an artist better, try living with their obsessions.

To aestheticize is to anesthetize.

Utopia is to live in a world where the only terrorists are artists.

True artists disturb the false peace, also known as complacency.
Self-peace: our first step towards world peace.

The path to peace is littered with dead selves.

False divisions among mind/body/soul are the origins of perversions.

Fear of success betrays a greater self-mistrust than fear of failure.

For the sake of a good line a poet, like a comedian, must be willing to risk everything.

We write what we do not know, but need to learn.

From what you have, create what you have not. The poem teaches the poet.

Just be yourself, they say. Which one, I think?

All that I am, I am not. And, all that you are, I am.

I do not think, therefore I am.

Poetry is a way of speaking with others, in hopes of overhearing ourselves.

There is poetry for every region of the soul.

Uncontrolled, self-loathing can consume the world.

As we make peace with ourselves, we become more tolerant of our faults—in others.

Cruelty is hereditary.

To bridge the gulf between art and artist, this is the spiritual work.

If “the wound is the place where the Light enters us,” then we must keep our wound clean.

To evolve means we’ve been listening.

One definition of success might be: refining our appetites, while deepening our hunger.

How to acquire a third eye? Don’t blink!

Those who only trust in their senses cannot differentiate between magic tricks and true mystery.

So long as you trust in anything else, the miracle shall be withheld.

The guardian of the riddle must speak in riddles.

To receive what we need most, we must first give it away.

The love we hold back, in turn, holds us back.

Bare necessity: a sturdy perch from which to watch the world.

Our ego does not return the care we lavish upon it; eventually, it will betray us.

The higher the aspirations of a writer, the less of an authority they are on their work.
Those periods we refer to as dry spells are often secretly fertile—when our very souls are being rewritten and readied for fresh utterance.

Where there are demons, there is something precious worth fighting for.

We can still become who we once were.

To grow older is to grow tired...of pretending.

Turning 40: when we begin to repeat ourselves and, hopefully, to overhear ourselves, as well.

Turning 40: when our free pass, unconscious living, is revoked.

Social Media: a chance for masses to practice the writer’s ruse—creating an aspirational persona.

Facebook: where we go to deceive others, and end up believing our own illusions.

Addressing an imaginary audience used to be considered madness. Now, it’s called social media.

The poignancy of persons speaking to themselves, in public: how the virtual world mirrors the real.

Virtual world: an extension of our fear of being silent and alone.

To write is to shed skins, spiritual striptease before a fully-clothed audience.

Writing: talking to the page, like it’s the last person on earth.

There are many ways to donate blood; writing is one. Aphorisms are the echoes of our silences.
Anthropoid Man

For an artist, life is a resource for work. For other people, work is a resource for life.

The Schadenfreude of Freude.

Whoso has a need to seek, seeks even that which he needn’t.

You can scarcely make the impossible impossible.

The transience of a beginning as protection against the finality of the end.

Manthropoid.

Defining one’s limitations means testing the limits.

Light cannot be shed on itself.

Need reality have a sense of reality?

Self-reflection is the first through the door.

Making the impossible possible and the possible impossible are communicating vessels.

Soliloquies of a ventriloquist.

The soul is the difference between one’s innards and one’s inner self.

Shake hands with your own devil.

——

Translated from Czech by David Short.
You Lose Your Virginity, but You Acquire Your Identity: A Conversation with Volker Schlöndorff

Volker Schlöndorff, if he is known to American readers, is known probably for his Palm d’Or-winning direction of the 1979 art house breakout classic, *The Tin Drum*. While having run in the same circles as German New Wavers like Herzog and Wenders, Schlöndorff’s career in film has been decidedly unique, decidedly literary. From his early work as an assistant director on an adaptation of Robbe-Grillet’s *Last Year at Marienbad* to the adaptations of Heinrich von Kleist, Günter Grass, Marcel Proust, Margaret Atwood, Ernest Gaines, and Max Frisch which followed, Schlöndorff’s direction is known for a deft and polished style.

His friendship with Frisch began as he prepared to adapt *Homo Faber* to the screen, and continues even after Frisch’s death in a strange way. He is at work now on a new film whose origins lie in Frisch’s short masterpiece, *Montauk*. After we talked by phone, Schlöndorff sent me an essay he had written on identity. The following parts jumped out at me as I edited this interview:

This is not a question which keeps me sleepless at night. It rather is an exclamation, an expression of exasperation. Is it not a nuisance to be asked to define my identity, as if without one, I was a nobody—like a cloth or an accessoire without a label....

Recently I wrote a lengthy autobiography and, whether I wanted or not, I had to find out who I was. I came upon quite a few identities, some lost, some found again. Let me try to enumerate them without any priority. I am not sure I was somebody when I was born, but to speak with Raymond Queneau’s Zazie: *a vie m’a fait ce que je suis*—life made me what I am.

... During the first screening of the finished film [the adaptation of Frisch’s *Homo Faber*] on January 1991 in Zurich, [Frisch] was as happy as if he had landed a successful coup. The greater part of his family was there and he introduced some architect friends, people from the theatre, his first wife, his daughters, and others who remained in the shadows. After the screening he shook a few hands but didn’t want to speak with anyone. They should see the film, he wasn’t up to discussions. And that’s exactly what we did later among a small circle at his home. Frisch was very pleased. “If we had another six months, we’d come up with another ending.” He didn’t tell me what he meant by this. Only that it would come to us. He really did not want anything to be terminal.

At one of my last meetings with Max Frisch, he took me down into the underground garage, showed me his Jaguar, polished to perfection, held out the keys and said, “It’s yours now. I won’t need it where I’ll be going. It’s especially useful for pulling up in front of hotels. There’s always a room available....”
MD: I appreciate your taking time from what I imagine is a very demanding film production schedule. Your next film will be an adaptation of *Montauk*, correct?

VS: This project we turn to, *Montauk*, is actually not an adaptation of Frisch’s novel *Montauk*. It’s of a novel written by Colm Tóibín, still to be published, which is sort of an homage inspired by Frisch’s book. Of course, his autobiographical questioning in *Montauk* is nothing but a quest for identity. So you catch me at least working on him at the moment.

MD: What was your first encounter with Frisch’s work?

VS: Oh god. It must have been in 1959 or so in Paris, in the theater.

MD: His plays?

VS. Yes. We were almost all still school boys back then. We had liked the entire bourgeois touch of it, when we were seventeen also. But that was not an encounter. That was the first work where I became just aware of Frisch. Later it was probably reading *Stiller* or *Homo Faber*, but much later in the late 60s or so. Again, just as a reader. It was a long way from Paris until Frisch and I got together. In 1975, the tycoon Charles Bluhdorn, who had just bought Paramount, found that in the archives of Paramount, or in their properties, they owned the rights to *Homo Faber*, which Anthony Quinn had bought for them, or insisted they buy, because after he did *Zorba the Greek* he thought *Homo Faber* would be a nice Greek tragedy!

MD: I suppose *Homo Faber* is a nice Greek tragedy.

VS: So I don’t know whether they, whether at the time Quinn bought the rights it wasn’t based on a misunderstanding, because somebody told him this was a modern Greek tragedy, or whether he thought that he could play Walter Faber in an adaptation. Anyhow, this was a meeting in 1975, at a hotel in Zurich. I was told Charles Bluhdorn was very impressed if indeed this could be adapted. I did not think that one could make a movie out of *Homo Faber*. I thought that the father and the daughter relationship is—well, cannot be depicted on film. So nothing came of it then. But ten years later I thought, “Why didn’t you do it?! This was the perfect story.” And in the meantime I was myself in the midst of a Walter Faber-ish depression, such that I called Frisch about the rights. He answered that, if it’s November now, by the end of the year the rights would return to him. And so in January, of that next year, whatever it was, 1989, I was at his doorstep in Zurich and we started to talk about adapting *Homo Faber*. So it had been a long break in coming to be.

MD: It’s a remarkable film, the adaptation, which is known as *Voyager* in the U.S.

VS: Thank you. I think it’s one of my best, but somehow there was a trans-cultural problem as my New York agent told me after reading the screenplay. He said that the trans-cultural gap is too wide and I did absolutely not understand what he meant. I went ahead and did it anyhow, and then of course, the film had whatever, a million and a half or two million spectators in the cinema in Germany and ever since, many millions more on television re-runs. But it didn’t work at all in the United States and so I had to question myself. I came to the conclusion that for Americans, if in a story someone is punished by a blow of destiny or whatever, there has to be a reason for it. Meaning there has to be guilt, and it has to be understandable why he is punished, and in the Greek tragedy, well, the gods punish without reason. So this film didn’t work for the American audience.
Mary Duffy

That is the nature of Greek tragedies and that’s why you can’t translate them for American culture somehow. It’s not...there’s no irony. It’s not ever a question of what is artistically better or worse. It’s a fact. So besides the shock of an incest relationship in *Homo Faber*—that’s always hard to represent. Even ten years earlier, I had thought it could not be done. There was something in this whole notion that didn’t work. Funny enough, it worked for Sam Shepard. And, even though he is an American film icon at the same time, his own plays are somehow tragic, also, almost in the Greek way: that of the fates dragging us blindly, or how would you say?

MD: Absolutely it works with him, and Shepard is a very interesting figure himself in the American film and theater landscape. *Curse of the Starving Class, True West*...

VS: Right. You’d be interested to know Max Frisch agreed to the casting of Sam Shepard not based on a photograph but because he read a play or two of his and he said, “Yeah, I think he can do it. Play Faber.”

MD: That makes perfect sense. In terms of a film that didn’t find its audience in the U.S., I’m actually reminded of a film Mike Newell directed, an adaptation of a Beryl Bainbridge novel called *An Awfully Big Adventure*, also about unintentional father-daughter incest, which sounds, you know, sort of awfully titillating. As a subject of tragedy, it works, as a trope in literature, and as you’ve just discussed, it’s debatable how well it can be accomplished in film. At least for an American audience. In the case of adapting Frisch I think you’ve done remarkably well; literary adaptation is sort of the hallmark of your career.

VS: Absolutely. I mean, I’m laughing because I can’t help it, even though nowadays, the last twelve or fifteen years—yeah, I think it’s been fifteen years, I did not do literary adaptations. I’ve been directing the screenplays either from others or written myself. But these works remain literary films, and the one we are doing right now, with Colm Tóibín, we first wrote the screenplay, but at the same time he started writing a novel, because he had never written a screenplay before. So Colm felt he...I mean, he often sends me stuff that looks like a chapter for a novel and then I transcribe, translate it into a screenplay. So in that sense, it’s yet another adaptation. Even though it’s an original screenplay, it’s also literary adaptation.

MD: That is fascinating. I’m under instruction of course to talk Frisch with you, but I would be remiss on a personal level if I did not talk about your film (one of those which is not, as we’ve been saying, a literary adaptation) *Strike*, which is about the trade union movement in Gdańsk, the birthplace of the Polish Solidarity movement.

VS: Oh my god! How did you come upon that?

MD: Well, I grew up in Poland. VS: Oh good, that makes sense.

MD: I lived in Poland from 1987 to 1991, and I was present for the fall of communism. My father knew Lech Walesa through his job, and I’m just a fan of anything that deals with Poland. So as I watched *Strike*, I was sort of remarking to myself, “Well, Schlöndorff must be the most linguistically as well as literarily prolific director, to have done a film in Polish as well.” Because, I mean—

VS: Well, no. I mean, I know Poland, I like Poland very much, but I don’t really speak Polish. I more or less understand. Because it was too late in life, I could not remember the vocabulary. For more than ten years now I’ve been teaching at Andrzej Wajda’s Master School of
Film Directing in Warsaw; I teach in English of course. But yes, I’m quite immersed in Polish culture. All together, it’s been four films I’ve made in Poland. The Tin Drum, The Ogre, Strike, and what is the number four, I thought there was another one. I can’t remember right now.

MD: The Tin Drum and Strike being two very different films about Gdańsk.

VS: Of course! The German point of view, and the Polish. Two very different periods of life there.

MD: And how did you come to invest in telling the story of that latter period?

VS: It really was because of the city, itself. I came to know it while doing The Tin Drum, and then in Poland again while filming The Ogre. I like Poland in general. I like that part. I consulted with Andrzej Wajda you know, whether I could do a film on this lady [the Norma Rae-like real-life subject of Strike] and he said, “Absolutely, on one condition. Never meet her.” But of course, the first thing I did, I went to pay her a visit in Gdańsk, in her apartment, in her tiny place, and I found her fascinating. All she wanted to do was to talk me out of the film, you know, don’t make a film on her. She would never agree to that, but she wanted me to make a film on Walesa and how he betrayed Solidarity because he was a KGB agent. But there’s not much to that, if you look into it.

MD: This is far afield of our topic, but it’s a place that’s had some influence on you, it seems, so I couldn’t resist putting in a word for Gdańsk. But Frisch....

VS: Yes, back to Frisch and identity. When Max Frisch died, we had become very close friends and he left me his Jaguar. I’m still driving it today, 23 years later. But when he died, I sat down and I wrote a long, long piece for Michael Ondaatje’s literary review in Toronto, whatever it’s called. You probably know it.

MD: Brick, I think?

VS: Right, yes. That was published in 1994? Well, it was the year after Frisch’s death. It’s of no interest for our interview. Now, anyhow, it describes my relationship with Max and how we became friends and then some thoughts on adaptation, and his thoughts about adaptation, which everyone was asking me “Why don’t you do Stiller? It’s more dramatic than his other stuff, it’s easier to adapt.” But you know, to me this problem of identity is nothing that touches me that much. I feel that’s very much a thing of the 50s. I love to live, and I cherish having multiple identities, not only language-wise, which speaking different languages can provide different identities. So I never really got to Stiller.

MD: The jumping off point for the issue is examining how identity functions from many angles, including the literary, personal, public, psychological, etc. Initially, I was going to write a piece about my grandfather, who was Jewish and hid that fact from his family for many years. It’s been in the back of my mind as I have been reading Frisch, but it’s much more subtle in his work than something as blatantly about identity as hiding one’s identity.

VS: Yes, back to Frisch and identity. When Max Frisch died, we had become very close friends and he left me his Jaguar. I’m still driving it today, 23 years later. But when he died, I sat down and I wrote a long, long piece for Michael Ondaatje’s literary review in Toronto, whatever it’s called. You probably know it.
he was very much identical with himself. He was very Swiss in his identity.

MD: I might have to explain that for our readers. I don’t know many Americans who know what that Swiss stereotype is like, that stalwartness to the point of being boring.

VS: I’ve actually written a long piece about identity.

MD: Inspired by Frisch?

VS: No, just my own considerations on the subject.

MD: It seems you’ve led a very multicultural existence.

VS: Yes, from childhood.

MD: You might easily be described as what we call in America a “third culture child,” to the extent that you grew up in Germany and France.

VS: And before that I grew up in America! From March ’45 until I went to France in ’56, there were simply more Americans in my surroundings.

MD: Oh right, you grew up in Wiesbaden. [Near Frankfurt, a large center of American military life in Germany.]

VS: Yeah, so I always say I grew up in Little America.

MD: I was going to ask you, as I was thinking about what that upbringing and that time and place might have been like. For someone like myself, familiar with your work, when I think of “German film” I literally think of Volker Schlöndorff. I think of Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders. New Wave. Those are German filmmakers to me. When you were growing up, what was German film like?

VS: It was dreadful, you know, melodrama and whatnot, soldier movies, showing how all these brave innocent German soldiers were fighting and dying for nothing. Because they had to, because they had been betrayed by the Führer. Nothing—nothing was the mentality of the movies, the mentalities of the audience.

MD: And were you exposed to a lot of American films?

VS: Not a lot—only. Only American films. I became a filmmaker thanks to On the Waterfront, The Blackboard Jungle. American culture was not only films, but also reading the American novels. I mean, Faulkner I found too difficult at that age, but, but Hemingway and Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis and all that. All those books. I didn’t read any German books.

MD: Those, like On the Waterfront, Dreiser and Lewis, certainly are the American social justice novelists of the time.

VS: Yes. And I had the privilege to work with one—Arthur Miller, who had done a draft of the screen of On the Waterfront. It was so great to meet him. He was exactly what you’d expect him to be. But yeah, Max Frisch is very hard to count upon on this American market. Look, I mean Montauk, we finally found a used copy, it’s out of print.

MD: Did you not know it has just been reprinted? One of the founders of The Scofield was responsible for working with a publisher called Tin House, and they’re reissuing Montauk now, so it’ll soon be back in print.

VS: Oh well, we’ll have to take a look.

MD: But going back to Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman is actually one of my favorites of yours. I’m a fan of drama adapted for the small or big screen. I want to ask if you cared to share an example of a literary adaptation that—hmm, maybe did not come out, I won’t say did not come out well, but did not come out the way you had intended.

VS: Oh my god, yes. No, no. I mean, one does not
always succeed. The main failure of my professional life and work is in my eyes, at least, is the Michael Kohlhaas adaption, Der Rebell [released as Man on Horseback in English-speaking countries]. You know, that was a dreadful film. It was a dreadful experience. But it’s something I, at the time, absolutely wanted to do. Too much too soon.

**MD: Too much too soon might have been true by beginning with Young Torless, another adaptation.**

**VS:** Well, he was such a thoroughgoing German character. Even right now, you know, the search for absolute justice and absolute doing right and all that. German character is so prevalent in that story, ending up with the opposite end, fanaticism...but I just didn’t get it at the time. So this is my worst encounter with literature. Ever since I’ve said I’d rather work with living than with dead authors because with the living ones you can talk. I need to talk with a writer to better understand his book. I’m too stupid to read in-between the lines, and when you talk with a writer you get the feeling not from, you know, verbatim what they wrote, but from the kind of person they are. Then I usually understand what their book is about or how the book came into being, what was the life lived, what experience behind it.

**MD: With the exception of Swann in Love, it seems like you stuck to living writers with The Handmaiden’s Tale, A Gathering of Old Men, Death of a Salesman.**

**VS:** Proof—proof would have saved me from some major mistakes, even on Swann in Love. There’s this—you know, I mean just one book! If I had read this book, The Hare with Amber Eyes—

**MD: I love that book.**

**VS:** I love that book, too! And that’s where I understood who Swann was, who he really, actually was.

Swann was one of these Ephrussi’s. Charles Swann was Charles Ephrussi—and actually the vitrine was there. Ephrussi’s vitrine is that proof. I’m speaking of when Proust writes, “When I look back at my life and I see so many lost loves...and I see them like they were in a vitrine, you know, objects one next to the other.” He’s literally describing the apartment and the shrine and the vitrine of netsuke Ephrussi had, and Proust just lived around the corner from that, from them. Jeremy Irons was still great in the film, but if I had known, he would simply have spoken French with a light Russian accent, because Ephrussi came from Russia. And, he was doing this literary—no, this fashion magazine. Through reading The Hare with the Amber Eyes, I understand all of a sudden, all the French scholars had been mistaken as to whom Swann was.

**MD: Swann was not Charles Haas. He was Charles Ephrussi. But no second chances, I suppose.**

**VS:** When I read this book, I said, “Now. I would like to do Swann again. I would know how to do it right.”

**MD: With the exception of Swann in Love, it seems like you stuck to living writers with The Handmaiden’s Tale, A Gathering of Old Men, Death of a Salesman.**

**VS:** Proof—proof would have saved me from some major mistakes, even on Swann in Love. There’s this—you know, I mean just one book! If I had read this book, The Hare with Amber Eyes—

**MD: I love that book.**

**VS:** I love that book, too! And that’s where I understood who Swann was, who he really, actually was.
Quicksand: A Conversation Regarding the Max Frisch & Identity Issue

Identity is a dirty word for a lot of writers and thinkers who cling to the concept of objectivity. Like all dirty words, it’s a talisman of polite society’s fears, and a way to narrow the possibilities of those saddled with explaining their own identity at every turn. So what happens when two writers of color discuss identity without having to take on the cramped and exhausting posture of nursemaid, teacher, awakener, cruise director? This conversation.

MJ: What were your first feelings when you heard we were going to explore Max Frisch for The Scofield’s Identity issue?

KG: I saw him as a jumping off point to hopefully talk about the chosen theme. I thought his work could provide some initial framing (to be added to or to be taken down) as other writers explored the issue.

Frisch seems like one of those writers who a certain type of writer—yes, I realize the shade in any phrase that starts “a certain type,” but believe me, there is none there—uses as a talisman. A kind of secret password to enter a particular group.

I think all writers have a writer like this: someone whose name is shorthand for identifying those artists and thinkers who are simpatico to your approach and view of the world. Viewing Frisch through that lens, I thought it would be interesting to talk about him in terms of identity.

I don’t know about you, but the names used as touchstones vary widely amongst my artist friends, depending on race, class, gender, and sexuality. I usually see Frisch’s name used this way amongst white boys.

The thing about having our talismans, though: they let us know who we can let in, but they can also exclude others. And as white boys and white girls run the literary world, those talismans take on a loaded meaning, outside of the original artist’s work.

That’s why I think Frisch is another way to talk about identity. Does that make sense?

MJ: I love the idea of writers as talismans. I believe the one that gained you entry to the bedroom of every guy I dated in high school was Burroughs, but I digress.

Here’s what I thought when I was told it was Frisch: Who? Some distant bell clanged in my head to the tune
It claims this knowledge absolutely, chides you as you try to defy it, imprisons you for claiming otherwise. It allows you no respite from its assumption.

To me, this idea that you cannot escape the identity the world gives you looks a lot like the underpinnings of the struggle minorities in this country face. “You are not this, you are that,” we are told, nevermind what we know to be true. My truth is not the truth, or if it is, it’s the truth for a very small amount of people, but not anything that can or should inform the dominant narrative. And man, that really bugs me. It’s the spectrum we’re all thrown up against every day, and left to find our way back from it while those who live free of assumption—or rather, those who are assumed to be good/right/proper—go on about their daily business, you know, building the world to suit them and shit. Sometimes I just sit back and think, “Do you all have any idea how much I could be getting done if I could stop dealing with your assumptions for a damn minute?”

of *I’m Not Stiller*, and I remembered some people being really into that book in college (and to your point about that—a highly varied group), but other than that, I had to do what everyone does when they don’t know or remember enough about the works of a single author: Google the hell out of him. Reread portions of his work. And the whole time I did that, I did it with this panic, this “Oh no, I don’t know about enough about this major person who says major things to other major people,” and then I just stopped myself. I mean, literally shut my laptop and said aloud, “What are you doing?”

Because honestly, this is something I’ve been doing my whole life, this kind of mad dash to catch up to the shorthand of intellectual America, never mind if it never actively spoke to my intellect. And I get annoyed by that, the immigrant kid who is still so afraid that someone is going to figure out everything she does not know.

Here’s what did: I talked to Scott Cheshire, whose idea this issue was in the first place. I talked to him freely and emphatically, as I always do about even the most hyper-charged subjects. I said things like, “A white man talking about identity? Just the optics on that are so shit I want to run. Why? Why now?”

Scott—while owning his whiteness and blindspots—had some great things to say. He talked specifically about the premise of *I’m Not Stiller* and what it helped him understand about the fraught nature of identity.

So the premise of *I’m Not Stiller*—a man accused by the Swiss government of being someone he claims not to be—gets to the heart of identity in an immediate and interesting way. The system the protagonist is facing, the traps and existential pitfalls inherent in it. The outside world insists you are one specific person.
MIRA JACOB & KAITLYN GREENIDGE

It's such a nebulous word, too, “identity.” I think that’s why I had a “shrug” reaction to the theme being paired with this writer because it seems like a word that has so many meanings and uses it becomes almost meaningless, when you are talking about cultural criticism. It feels like a word that oftentimes stops a conversation rather than starts one—or it does in our current, grandchildren-of-Reagan cultural moment...

MJ: I absolutely think each of us has an identity that exists outside of and in contention with our assigned societal role.

At this exact moment my Facebook feed is full of various levels of glee over the passing of Antonin Scalia. I find it interesting that there’s a need out there to say, “This is my devil and I delight in his passing.” In other words, to align oneself to progressive liberalism by celebrating a man’s death. And yet I find myself doing it, too, if not outwardly on Facebook, then inwardly, where I feel that his passing is somehow a gift to me / my kind. It’s straight up ancient Rome in my heart.

I agree with how much nothing a word like identity can start to take on from sheer oversaturation. All the same, when it came up for this issue, I felt something prick me in a way that the Love issue did not. What about you? Did you or do you feel an onus to be extra alert in this issue of The Scofield? Why or why not?

KG: I don’t care about Frisch. Let me just say that plainly. I don’t know that “identity” is even a theme because everything is arguably about identity. “Identity,” as it’s being used here, feels like a point of stasis. A paralysis. An idea or a stance frozen in amber. I don’t know that it always has to be that, though...

KG: Yes, to that last question. As Toni Morrison says, “Racism is a distraction.” It really, really is.

So, I think “identity” is often used as a code word to dismiss the artistic efforts of marginalized people. Artists who are poor or colored or femme or female find their work slapped with the label of “identity.” It excuses a white audience from taking it seriously, from empathizing with the characters, from recognizing people baring those labels as also human—and also, that those works are actually works.

“Identity” gets used as a label and suddenly all talk about craft or intentional art or artistic choices goes out the window. The maker is assumed to be some sort of idiot savant who can only create art out of themselves—not like straight white male artists, whose work is inherently universal, and so who can talk about anything but themselves. And to whom we extend the artistic courtesy of assuming their work is not autobiographical and they are not reduced to their work.

“Identity” was also used as a kind of slur in the 90s, when cultural conservatives manufactured faux outrage over supposed “PC culture” (which is really just outrage at people demanding to be treated as people).

So for those reasons, I got excited that a white male symbol extraordinare was being saddled with that very fuzzy word “identity.”

The interesting thing about identity: there are many people, regardless if their identity is culturally dominant or marginalized, who claim to feel this disconnect of the self from identity.

I wonder what the purpose of identity is, when it can be such a tortured concept for many of us? I guess it is a really easy way to make sense and meaning of the world and of the senseless.
I think the term can mean so much more. And if we do want to discuss otherness, or more specifically, the ways in which our political, economic, and cultural economies force those who are different to carve out parts of themselves or whittle themselves or mask themselves, let’s find a better term for that. Because “identity” is so wan and unspecific that it masks the hard conclusions we come to about those economies and gets in the way of the very clear thinking needed to discuss, dissect, and eventually dismantle them.

I was very, very lucky in that I grew up in a home that valued blackness and girlhood. Growing up, blackness and femininity in my household were always understood as identities and sources of strength and places of innovation. How about you?

MJ: What was weird about my growing up was that we were one of such a small minority—mine was the third East Indian family to move into New Mexico, as far as we know—that once I figured out where we were from, I mostly felt like a form of extraterrestrial life. India was far. Add to that the fact that we’re not even mainstream Indians (not Hindu, not from the north, not the majority of what you find in the States) and you’ve got a lot of missing info where identity-formation is concerned. I didn’t have any Indian dolls, wouldn’t have understood any Indian movies, and could not have named a single Indian character beyond Haji, the sidekick to blond cartoon Johnny Quest.

(I write this and I see a lot of Indians shaking their heads at me. This is a thing that happens a lot, I say I didn’t grow up with that experience of culture and Indians assume that I’ve come out terribly damaged, or self-hating, or them-hating.)

But growing up that way was actually really freeing. Tradition and expectation are so heavy in India, so
stifling at times, and way out there in the desert, we were just trying to survive. My mother was a feminist and a political junkie. My father wore cowboy hats and said “howdy, partner” a lot. I spent a lot of time avoiding quicksand on the banks of the Rio Grande. I was semid-deral in the summers, and mostly a loner, and the one thing I for sure did not know was that I was a girl. This would lead you to think I thought I was a boy—that wasn’t exactly it, either. I thought I was something in between. I got along with boys and girls pretty much equally. I had one of those back-of-the-mind thoughts—you know those ones you never say out loud but they somehow inform everything you do? My back-of-the-mind thought was that one day I would figure out if I was more a boy or a girl and then choose to be that outwardly. I was pretty surprised the day I figured out that wasn’t going to happen. (At fourteen. Yes, really.)

The funny thing about all of this put together is that if I had to root my identity to one thing, one thing I knew for sure, it would be New Mexico. I knew that landscape before I knew anything else, and I knew it intimately. I love it the way I love my family—that casual kind of foreverness. When I see it, it feels like seeing my own body, the me before I was me. Do you have a place that you’re attached to like that?

KG: That description of the landscape and how it informs self is so fascinating. I hadn’t thought of it before—how environment plays into identity, but of course, it does. It influences everything—certainly language. I don’t think I’ve ever really belonged anywhere, though—most environments I experienced through a deep sense of longing, the longing of the not-really-invited guest, of the poor relation. Places are mine but not really. Part of this is the nature of growing up black in a predominantly white region like New England. Part of this is the nature of going from upper-middle-class to poverty-level-income to barely middle-class in the space of a decade, from seven to seventeen. And all the other ways I have belonged—but-not-really in the years since.

I suppose that longing and that discomfort and that unease is as much a part of my identity as my femmen-identity and blackness I described above. I don’t feel comfortable if I am in a room of people who are all the same—unless maybe if they are women. Even then, though, if they are women all from the same background, it sets my teeth on edge. For the most part, I find homogeneous groups of all kinds both a beautiful dream and an unsettling reality.

But, um, you grew up with quicksand?! MJ: Things you need to know: quicksand is a real thing that happens in the Rio Grande. Sometimes a good rain would come to us in the north and shift the riverbed and things would get weird. I’d lose my shoes, or a toe ring—nothing too bad but still, you know, unsettling. The earth just tried to eat me. The real way you escape, by the way, is you move your legs in small circles, allowing for the water in it to build around your ankles and loosen you from the mud. I know that now because I’m an adult and watch things like YouTube videos on how to escape quicksand. When I was growing up though, all I had to guide me was this weird piece of advice from Yoda or Land of the Lost or something: If you struggle in quicksand, you’ll only sink deeper faster. And that’s where the advice ended. No seriously—nothing so bold as “this is what you should do,” just: DON’T FIGHT THE THING TRYING TO KILL YOU OR IT WILL KILL YOU. Let’s call this “Baby’s First Existential Crisis.”
Drinking Alone by Moonlight

I.

A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;  
I drink alone, for no friend is near.  
Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,  
For he, with my shadow, will make three men.  
The moon, alas, is no drinker of wine;  
Listless, my shadow creeps about at my side.  
Yet with the moon as friend and the shadow as slave  
I must make merry before the Spring is spent.  
To the songs I sing the moon flickers her beams;  
In the dance I weave my shadow tangles and breaks.  
While we were sober, three shared the fun;  
Now we are drunk, each goes his way.  
May we long share our odd, inanimate feast,  
And meet at last on the Cloudy River of the sky.

II.

In the third month the town of Hsien-yang  
Is thick-spread with a carpet of fallen flowers.  
Who in Spring can bear to grieve alone?  
Who, sober, look on sights like these?  
Riches and Poverty, long or short life,  
By the Maker of Things are portioned and disposed.  
But a cup of wine levels life and death  
And a thousand things obstinately hard to prove.

III.

When I am drunk, I lose Heaven and Earth.  
Motionless—I cleeve to my lonely bed.  
At last I forget that I exist at all,  
And at that moment my joy is great indeed.

——

Translated by Arthur Waley.
A Selection from *Albina and the Dog-Men*

He awakened with his eyes fixed on a skylight. A few clouds in a strict straight row slowly passed through his field of vision like seagulls with rickets. To him, it seemed that the gray line was immobile and that it was the cement caravel that moved toward the port of all hopes. He thought he felt a flesh heart beating in each of the plaster Saint Peters. The night had a perfume identical to the white bitch. The night, with its promise of moisture, was Albina’s sex. He made a long howl toward the moon, mixing it with an even longer sob. His dog side, plus his human side, plus his love all combined now in a braid that arose from his bosom and faded into infinity. He left the cabin, first on four legs, then on two, and began to dance on the deck, inviting the plaster sailors to join him.

His enlarged foot, his soft foot, his disgusting foot had completely deflated. With a violet half moon on its instep, the once monstrous foot was now warm, vibrant, agile, collaborating as an equal with the healthy foot. He was no longer Drumfoot! But who was he? He stopped dancing, scratched the back of his neck, made three small barks, and, squatting on his haunches, began to think. This withdrawal into himself in search of his true identity produced a feeling of melancholy, of anguish, of disgust. He heard no voice and perceived only absence.

He found himself without a homeland, with no roof over his head, amputated from any world; he was in a void, a nothingness, a barren land, without a central ego that might assure him of the authenticity of his person. The mask of “Drumfoot” was lost, the illusion of his presence dissolved! He spit out phlegm trying again to be the common policeman as happy as a dog without fleas.

A shiver of contempt ran through his body.

There was no going back. He’d set his course and cut his ties; his ship was sailing on the high seas. There was no port that could protect him from the incomprehensible waves. There he was, exposed to the ocean’s tempests or calm immensity where his internal gaze would wander unendingly. He barked hoarsely. He tried to cling to the memory of his mother, but not even that gave him a solid point. The blurry features of his progenitor, fused with those of his grandmother, which were sharper.

The old woman ate everything. More than a woman, she was a brutal male. Her husband, Aniceto González, alias The Sausage, was a corrupt soldier, a rapacious army man who specialized in massacring smugglers and extracting sacks of cocaine like a veterinarian castrating cats. He was drowned in the cesspool behind a cheap bar, buried in five hundred gallons of fecal matter.

Drumfoot’s grandmother Pancha failed at being a whore because she was so skinny and ugly, so she became a bandit instead. The experiences of The Sausage, who never stopped telling her about the techniques used by the smugglers he chased to cross the border between Bolivia and Chile, was like a Bible for her. She brought in myriad kilos of drugs. The drug traffickers treated her like a beast of burden and gave her just enough to pay the rent, put clothes on her back, and food in her mouth.

What she had she shared with Minina, who would later be Drumfoot’s mother, one of seven children, educated by beating and always with a frightened expression on her face. The Sausage had sex with Doña
to tie him to those two witches, begged asylum at the military outpost and became a soldier like his grandfather.

These were all the memories he had; the others had leaked out of him as if he were a ship with a hole in it, flowing out into the ocean of oblivion. They were no longer his remembrances. Behind him spread a white stain. He jumped off the caravel into the sand, dug a hole, filled it in, and drew a cross on it. Drumfoot: buried forever!

What did he have left? In his infinite desert wandered an eternal love.

— — —

She was awakened by some prolonged, soft barks, as delicate as the fluttering of the wings of a sugar swallow.

Albina arose from her dream still in the form of a temple. She saw herself composed of many levels, with towers of white stone and walls covered with carved reliefs depicting groups of men and women making love in complicated positions. The temple emerged from the center of a swampy lake covered with large, fragrant lotus flowers. Above her central entry there was a monumental silver T on which a copper asp lay dying, held in place by three golden nails. The incredulous reptile was muttering an incomprehensible poem that mixed with the melody of the canine chorus:

Mkhan dan slob dpon dpan po rnams
Mikhan po gser gyi mehod rten hdra
Dpan po hgyur mcd rib o hdra
Slob dpon dri med sel sgon hdra

Amid the mists of her stupor, she saw a group of dogs dressed in monks’ saffron robes, all chanting those...
words, which became a cloud of sweet and sinuous arrows. Something like a mouth opened in the center of her chest, and she could understand each word of the exotic poem:

The process of reception has three phases:

*The Monk, who is like a golden urn,*  
*The Witness, who is like a mountain of granite,*  
*The Teacher, who is like a crystal sphere.*

She was surprised to find herself thinking, “There is no defect in the splendor of a golden urn; there is no defect in the peak of a solid mountain; there is no defect in the transparency of an immaculate crystal sphere.” She was recovering her memory!

She was facing the possibility of change. A tremor ran through her body, and the metamorphosis began immediately. Now transformed into a white bitch, without dangerous words in her head, invaded by intense and delightful sensations, she freed herself from the bonds that kept her a prisoner. Cautiously, so she would not awaken the snoring people, she came down from the roof of the truck and, followed at a respectful distance by the pack in heat, approached a handsome barker.

The first thing she sniffed was the sweat stain he had on his back. The old cockroach had transformed into a sun broadcasting its moist rays to his four extremities, none of which were swollen. They were all beautiful in their elegant slenderness. She sniffed his anus and sex.

No aggressively fetid odors came from those parts, only sweet fragrances that entered her nasal passages like a river of honey.

In turn, the male put his snout under her tail and licked the posterior lips with a soft, flexible tongue dripping with amorous saliva. She did the same with his red extremity. Then they looked at each other. The murderer had turned into an angel. The whiteness of his fur was not a change in pigmentation; that hair, now almost transparent, was full of a light that arose from his palpitating heart.

He did not try to possess her. He stood there, staring straight into her pink irises without blinking. The other dogs approached and surrounded them, panting.

Slowly but surely, the bitch and the dog transformed into Albina and the person who had been Drumfoot, now a handsome man. He fell to his knees before her.

The first word he spoke was “pardon,” and then he wept.

Albina, without understanding what she was doing, joined her fingers together, moved them over the head of her gentleman to trace a seven-pointed star, and, emerging from her final moments of sleep, allowed words dictated by another being to come to her mouth:

“That the Monk is a golden urn because he knows how to empty himself. The splendor of the always-invisible truth is love. Nevertheless, you persist in trying to keep the treasure. You will have to learn to be a Witness, like the peak of an unmovable mountain that sees the seasons pass without imprisoning the clouds, the wind that slips along its flanks, or the light of the stars. If I am the moon, you are the hunter who shoots his arrows without reaching it. You can only capture the miraculous bird by renouncing its capture.”

He realized that she did not know what his name was. Just like his father, he had never been named. The only name he’d ever had was the infamous “Drumfoot.”

“My goddess, give me a name,” he implored.

She did not have to think it over, and replied immediately, “From now on your name will be Lohan,”
servant of the sublime light. You will never take revenge. You will never get involved in conflict; you will go on seeking me because you still haven’t found me.”

Albina returned to the top of the truck, tied herself up with the ropes, forgot what she’d said and done during that hour, and fell asleep. Lohan whistled, calling the dogs. They all rubbed against his legs. He patted them, one after another, and then went off with them to take refuge from the cold night among some rocks.

——


A House Escapes into the Sky, but Loses its Form
The Frisch Questionnaire

Many know the “Proust Questionnaire,” which Marcel Proust didn’t actually create, but made famous by answering two similar questionnaires at different points in his life—and which Vanity Fair has since prominently featured in their issues. Lesser known is the “Frisch Questionnaire” which Max Frisch created in 1967 and which is included in his Sketchbook 1966–1971. Below author Jason Porter answers Frisch’s questions.

MF: Are you really interested in the preservation of the human race once you and all the people you know are no longer alive?

JP: I admire how this question immediately puts me on the defensive. It is true. Not only do I not think humans are going to evade extinction, I have found myself bargaining with God, despite not believing in God, pledging that I’d sign on to any deal that assured me that humans would make it just long enough so that I don’t have to be here to witness the end. I’m so selfish and cowardly it doesn’t even come down to whether people I know are still alive. I just don’t want to have to hunt down my neighbors for fuel and food. I also don’t want to be hunted.

MF: State briefly why.

JP: Why I’m not concerned with the preservation of the human race? I don’t know, but wonder if it isn’t connected with a certain level of indifference that I have cultivated in order to not collapse against the extreme howl of empathy. I mean to say, I eat animals, and I walk past homeless people, and I watch people live in bombed out hovels for reasons I don’t understand but suspect are connected to our very reasonable gasoline prices. I watch these bombings on machines assembled by children. Sometimes while watching I eat chocolate that also involved distant child laborers. And I don’t want to even think about why my underwear is so affordable. I suspect the detachment involved in being able to do all that contributes to some ambivalence I have toward the future viability of the species. I also didn’t bother to have children and I don’t believe in God so I have admittedly taken a lot of chips off of the table.

MF: How many of your children do not owe their existence to deliberate intention?

JP: Most of the children I don’t have owe their lack of existence to deliberate intention.

MF: Whom would you rather never have met?

JP: I have such a privileged life. Nobody has done me such harm worthy of this question. Even the people I think deserve life imprisonment, like Dick Cheney, I can’t say it wouldn’t have been interesting to meet him, and who knows, after meeting him maybe I’d feel less absolute in my judgment and decide to reduce his sentence to fifty years.

MF: Are you conscious of being in the wrong in relation to some other person (who need not necessarily be aware of it)? If so, does this make you hate yourself—or the other person?

JP: Both. First I hate myself for being in the wrong. Then I hate the person for making me hate myself. Then I hate myself for hating the person.

MF: Would you like to have perfect memory?

JP: I’m going to trust evolution on this one and assume that the costs of perfect memory would outweigh
the gains. I’m thinking mostly in terms of emotional consequences, since forgetfulness is a beloved and well-documented coping mechanism. There are entire economies built on humans’ desire not to remember things. Most people rush home from work so they can watch TV to help them forget everything that happened to them that very same day.

Also, up until now, and probably even now, the additional energy needed for us to have that kind of mental capacity, to remember every last thing, doesn’t seem sustainable. If I have to eat a bison to fuel my big brain so it can keep solving complex problems, how many additional bison would I have to eat to fuel a brain that could do all of the practical things it currently does, plus remember everything? And what kind of body would I need to carry that brain around?

Of course, in a sense, we already have perfect memory with computers, or at least we will have it startlingly soon. But I’m not convinced the energy needed for that is sustainable either. And even if it is—maybe the computers become smart enough to solve the problem—I’m not sure I like where things are going. When the computers outpace us, what will motivate them to exist, and what will it take to fuel that? And for what purpose? This actually scares me more than the fact that we will soon all be killing each other for water, if only barely.

Also, if you could remember everything, would you also still be able to experience new things, or would all experience be memory?

The short answer is no.

**MF:** Give the name of a politician whose death through illness, accident, etc. would fill you with hope. Or do you consider none of them indispensible?

**JP:** I consider none of them indispensible. Evil is out there. It fills into the openings available to it. Look at the race for the Republican presidential nomination. There are numerous eager vessels all vying for the same evil.

While I say that, and believe that, I also must admit there have been moments—Justice Scalia’s recent passing for example—where I felt temporarily cruel and impolite for thinking what a relief there’s no more of that guy while making note of an extra bounce in my step.

**MF:** Which person or persons, now dead, would you like to see again?

**JP:** I have trouble answering questions like these without further specifics. Would I see them all dead and decomposed? That sounds terrible. Would my seeing them inhibit some growth of theirs into death that I wouldn’t understand because I’m still occupied with life? Would my seeing them again reverse all the emotional progress I’ve made in learning to live without them? Or would it enable me to finally let go by having one last farewell, seeing as it’s rare we ever know for sure it’s the last time we will see a person until they are gone?

**MF:** Which not?

**JP:** I would like to pass altogether on the business of resurrection. My hands are already full resurrecting myself on a daily basis.

**MF:** Would you rather have belonged to a different nation (or civilization)? If so, which?

**JP:** I would be curious to have experienced life as part of a civilization that has a more harmonious and respectful relationship to the natural world. We are conditioned to readily dismiss this type of answer, whether coming from ourselves or another, because we have trouble imagining life without toilet paper and modern bedding. It does admittedly sound like an invitation for death by gangrene or tooth decay, but is
that really so much worse to slow death by cancer? I don’t think we can objectively know with any certainty that modern existence is more pleasant.

**MF: To what age do you wish to live?**

**JP:** 80, but with the caveat laid forth in the first answer wherein I am assured I won’t have to witness the very end of humanity. This actually comes up more than you’d think, or probably more than is healthy. My wife likes to hypothesize about who amongst our friends and loved ones would make ideal candidates for an apocalypse survival team, whereas I feel very firm on my preference to have a suicide cocktail waiting for me behind a break-in-case-of-emergency glass case.

**MF: If you had the power to put into effect things you consider right, would you do so against the wishes of the majority? (Yes or no)**

**JP:** At first glance it feels like this question hinges on how one could possibly verify that they are in fact right, but what we conveniently overlook is how subjective and disingenuous our measure of the majority is. As the lone global superpower, dwindling or otherwise, we act as if our democratic process (itself a ritual that let’s us pretend we aren’t ruled by a corporate oligarchy) is a safeguard against some individual or faction acting against the will of the majority, but a true election would include the whole world, since it is the whole world we are bombing, and overheating, and exploiting financially.

Look at our second President Bush. He wasn’t even elected by a majority of the people who voted, and yet he thought it right to invade Iraq, because his gut (and cadre of neocon advisers) told him it was the right thing to do. There were more people who didn’t vote at all than who voted for him. And none of that takes into account the wishes of the rest of the planet. Sure he put enough political pressure on Congress (again a dubious measure of a majority considering voter turnout and that the Senate affords an equal vote to Wyoming and California despite the latter having sixty six times the population of the former) to give it their seal of approval, but I think more telling is the euphemism they attached to the campaign, The Coalition of the Willing. Anyway, that’s just one example of this proposition not working out well.

Ironically Jesus, who Bush said he called on for spiritual guidance, felt like he was right, and he may have been powerful enough to turn the nails that kept him pinned to a cross into loaves of bread, but he nevertheless yielded to the will of the majority. Or do I have that all wrong? I must confess I only went to church when I visited my grandparents and could never actually stay awake.

**MF: Why not, if you think they are right?**

**JP:** Because people are frequently wrong.

**MF: Which do you find it easier to hate, a group or an individual? And do you prefer to hate individually or as part of a group?**

**JP:** I definitely prefer to hate as an individual. When it is in a group it starts to get creepy and I’m drawn in sympathy to the subject of the hatred—a very ineffective way to hate. But in general I find it hard to hate, or better put, I am only able to hate in general. Once you look at specifics it tends to break down. If all I know is that a person is standing outside an abortion clinic making women feel terrible about a difficult choice they’ve made, yes, I’ll hate them, and the whole group they are in. But each one probably has a tragic back story, or maybe the same person was a veterinarian who once helped remove porcupine quills from my dog, and I didn’t even realize I was supposed to hate them. Or what if all those hated people are capable of change?
MF: When did you stop believing you could become wiser—or do you still believe it? Give your age.
JP: I think it is less about wisdom and more to do with learning to let go and yield to life (and death). I am forty-three.
MF: Are you convinced by your own self-criticism?
JP: I am rarely unified in my self-criticism. It can be so harsh and exacting that were it the only voice I considered I'd have crawled under a rock to die. Fortunately more and more I have been able to see the criticism as a tool, rather than a truth, and that has greatly upped my quality of life. It's a valuable tool for an artist. But it can be debilitating if it isn't put away at the end of the day.
MF: What in your opinion do others dislike about you, and what do you dislike about yourself? If not the same thing, which do you find it easier to excuse?
JP: Fuck you.
MF: Do you find the thought that you might never have been born (if it ever occurs to you) disturbing?
JP: Do you mean, like I'm just imagining this, but I don't really exist? Or the idea that what if on the night (I don't know why I can't picture my parents doing it at an afternoon picnic or on the kitchen floor after pancakes) I was conceived one of them postponed the act because of a headache? Or my mother married somebody else with smaller ears before my father had a chance to propose to her? Not only do I not find it disturbing, I can't figure out what would be disturbing about it. It was more disturbing to speculate the time of day I might have been conceived.
MF: When you think of someone dead, would you like him to speak to you, or would you rather say something more to him?
JP: This is interesting to me, in that when thinking about dead people who touched my life while they were alive, even if I'm thinking about how little was said, or how I never asked the right questions, or how I knew them without really truly knowing them, or vice versa, I never feel like should they return for some magical conference orchestrated by a genie or mystic that I would suddenly know what to say or ask. Just because we were able to transcend the laws of nature in regard to communicating between life and death for this magical meeting, that doesn't mean we’d also be able to transcend the laws of communication.
MF: Do you love anybody?
JP: I love you.
MF: How do you know?
JP: I don't.
MF: Let us assume that you have never killed another human being. How do you account for it?
JP: I wouldn't want to disappoint my mother. I also think I wouldn't be able to enjoy my life after doing something like that. And I've never once had the urge. Even in the handful of times I've had suicidal fantasies, I've never really had the urge to do the killing part. We all will die soon enough. What's the rush?
MF: What do you need in order to be happy?
JP: Sleep.
MF: What are you grateful for?
MF: Which would you rather do: die or live on as a healthy animal? Which animal?
A *Holocene* Diary (15 Sketches)

On Keeping a Diary

We write ourselves. The very nature of being impels us to attempt to transliterate our experiences, despite our suspicion that we will fail. Whether it is to resist erasure or control the narrative of our identities, the diary in all its forms offers a way to prove our existence. For Max Frisch, the diary was a way to locate nodes of identity, to question life’s experiences, interrogate language, contradict oneself, and reconsider the art of memory.

And so I am keeping my own.

Frisch’s *Sketchbook 1946–1949* is a perfect door to his entire body of work, an archive seemingly freed from any responsibility, one that unbraids personal and political. By calling them “sketchbooks,” he acknowledges their impermanence, as though the coral-colored rubber on the end of a pencil might expunge each word.

Filled with repeated titles like “On writing,” “En route,” and “Café Delfino,” these postwar diaries reveal a cathexis for the unwritable and unsayable. In Frisch’s *Man in the Holocene*, his masterful novella that functions as an ode to omission, negative space plays a crucial role when Geiser, the widowed protagonist, must confront his memory loss and mortality during an impending environmental disaster in the Swiss Alps. The parable is revealed strikingly in single lines that often repeat the same thing. Gaps between sentences not only embody the cognitive and topographical erosion that takes place in the book, but also represent the limits of language and the uncertain role of the author. Frisch shows readers both how powerful and unnecessary language is under his restraint, giving us the bare minimum to tell the story.

In his *Paris Review* interview, Frisch likens this minimalist approach to that of cinema telling his interviewer that he wants to conjure emotions without words, the way a film does. And so his default mode of writing operates the way a camera would, which is similar to the mechanism of the diary. Often, both intend to simply preserve, but ultimately abolish, a memory or experience.

Geiser does not explicitly keep a diary, but Frisch records and rerecords enough daily happenings to make the entire book feel like one, a catalogue of conflict between Geiser’s self and his memory that is only reconciled when the natural world intervenes.

So I don’t intend to answer anything in my sketchbook; it’s simply a place for me to do as the original meaning of *essay* suggests, which is “to try.” I also want to do what Max Frisch does best, which is to ask.

And there are many questions; Frisch was obsessed with the revelations unlocked by asking. In *Holocene*, Frisch asks us to question a man alone in his alpine home, rain thrumming constantly all around him as he loses his ability to plait past experiences into a narrative. Frisch asks us: How does loneliness implicate one’s self? How is identity defined, and how much of it is owed to forgetting?

On Cinema

I watch *Holozän*, the film adaptation of *Man in the Holocene*, on YouTube in a series of twelve grainy installments. A particularly sluggish example of slow
Technology and Remembering

In America today, it might seem that Frisch’s words are mostly remembered as proverbs, a kind of existential gospel that lends itself well to social media. Here’s one: “Technology is the knack of arranging the world so that we don’t have to experience it.” In an early passage, Geiser watches his television screen malfunction as it broadcasts a sunny London tennis match: “the screen slips slowly or swiftly upward or downward, and in the end there is nothing but a tangle of black and white stripes.” Here, as in his lavender simile, nature (in this case the storm) and technology are bound together.

Frisch’s criticism would have only sharpened if he were alive today, as our increasing pixilation and editing of life’s experiences via Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc. supposedly threaten to sever the umbilical cord that connects us to “real” awareness. But these applications also allow us to brand ourselves, to identify ourselves on our own terms. In *Holocene*, Geiser tacks up things he wants to remember—facts about geology, tips on how to prevent being struck by lightning, his beliefs—as though he were participating in an analog Tumblr or Facebook.

In his solitude, as the ownership of past experiences surrenders to his dementia, Geiser’s identity threatens to disappear. *Cogito ergo sum* gets a little more complicated. Does identity exist without anyone to perceive it? Can your identity be given to you by someone else? Through Frisch’s sensitive *literary vérité* style, the reader can understand Geiser’s identity even if he himself does not. Frisch wished to emancipate identity from the self, from one’s experiences, and arrive at a startling conclusion: our identities are defined not by who we are, but by who we are not.
The Interview Age

In his Art of Fiction interview for the Paris Review, one can easily imagine Frisch as he is in his author photos: tortoiseshell glasses and arched, larval eyebrows, a perpetual pipe either in-hand or held between his nonexistent lips, bracelets of smoke unwinding in the spacious apartment. The conversation is full of his trademark mix of discomfort and ease, and perhaps unsurprisingly he answers the conventional interview-type questions (If you could remember only one thing, what would it be? If you could have written only one book, have one wish, etc.) with more certainty than the introspective ones.

But it is 1984 at the time of this interview, and Frisch is 73, the same age Geiser was in Man in the Holocene. This must have weighed on Frisch’s mind, at least a little bit. In discussing his life, the interview frequently veers into the topic of death, shading the whole occasion with a kind of anxious, casual morbidity.

Ironically, Frisch acts suspicious of not just this interview, but of interviews themselves, calling them a vulgarity and claiming that, after the Stone Age and Iron Age, we are now in the “Interview Age.” Barthes would most likely have agreed—in a Saturday session for The Neutral from April 1978, he refers to questioning as terrorism, declares that the interview has replaced criticism, and even goes so far as to deduce that questioning is “perhaps the worst violence” because of the power dynamics involved.

But while Frisch might have agreed generally with this, he uses questions in a different way. He follows Rilke’s instructions from Letters to a Young Poet, reframing questions not as something to answer, but as something to live.

The Importance of Being Switzerland

“What does Swiss art say?” wrote Alain Badiou in Cinema, answering it himself: “That Switzerland is a burden to itself.” This is certainly true in Holocene, which documents the ways in which we lose ourselves. That Switzerland lacks a national language further intensifies the neutrality it has come to be associated with, and one that in Frisch’s novella proves crucial when considering Geiser’s failure to communicate. Ironically, it is neutrality that seems to be the surest route to self-destruction, and Geiser must watch as his national identity converges with his true self. (I do not know though if Frisch intended for Geiser to represent postwar Switzerland, where national memory might in many ways be less of a gift than a curse.)

At the library I pick up Barthes’ The Neutral, a collection of open-ended lectures delivered in the late 70s. In its own way it is a kind of performed diary, a spoken sketchbook. Barthes’ definition of neutrality insists on the pleasures of free association and the idea that an author and reader collaborate to activate a text. The lectures describe “the opposition of two virtual forms,” and insist that language is built on sacrifice. Many ideas seem compatible with Frisch, most importantly the fear of a world that increasingly rejects “I don’t know” as an answer.

Love in the Holocene

But the deep, deep tragedies of infancy, as when the child’s hands were unlinked forever from his mother’s neck, or his lips forever from his sister’s kisses, these remain forever hidden, underneath the other legends of the palimpsest.

—Baudelaire
Memory as Writing

An unquestionable aspect of Max Frisch’s brand is an air of literary authenticity and rebellion underpinned by a cunning use of form. He might like his readers to consider his cinematic, economical prose a testament to what rewards lie in the deliberately uncreative, in the believable or unimagined. But let’s remember that Frisch began his working life as an architect, and that eye for design and form never left him. Consider, for instance, that his diaries are not confessional entries, but episodes carefully crafted for publication. Unlike Kafka—whose own war diaries chronicle the maladies (existential and bodily), political turmoils and isolations that now serve the Prague writer’s readymade myth—Frisch always wrote with a readership in mind. Frisch (like me) was writing diaries on deadline. I don’t consider this literary fraud—it’s the crux of Frisch’s entire bibliography, the friction between fiction and reality, the meaninglessness of the written “I.” Calling Frisch’s diaries “unliterary”—literal accounts of intimate experiences meant to be kept private—would merely discredit them; for Frisch, transcribing an experience truthfully is unthinkable. Geiser retrieving his past and failing is a kind of cruel art, just like writing. Both memory and writing require a visit into a library of forgotten experiences, and only sometimes do we emerge with anything that closely resembles reality.

On Rome

Not long ago I spent two days in Italy on a visit to my girlfriend, who was studying abroad. It was the closest I’ve ever been to Geiser’s cabin in the Alps, but if Frisch reminds me of this time it is not because of proximity,
but the general concerns the book and I share about time and memory. I was curious, or afraid, about visiting Rome for only 48 hours. I thought I would leave without any memories, just a double-exposed snapshot.

But I found that spending only a day or two in a foreign city guarantees remembrance, even if my memories are likely inaccurate. I return to my Roman experiences so frequently, turning them over and over in my mind, that they are surely left in ruins. Over time, this has mattered less to me.

If I am like a film, like Frisch wrote, I let these false memories of Rome develop me: littering pizza crusts like seeds on the dirt floor of a park overrun with stray dogs; the luxurious grime; reading the same page of Kundera for an hour in a café; the resinous perfume of pine trees.

“What is Rome like?” I had texted my girlfriend before I visited.

“There are ruins everywhere,” she texted back the next day. “They’re just a part of the city like everything else. Children play on them.”

The Interview Age

My greatest fear: repetition. —Max Frisch

In his Paris Review interview, Frisch shares an anecdote about a cousin whose wife had died very young: Not long before her death, they had filmed a short movie of her walking a few steps in a meadow. The cousin could not stop watching the footage. “He wanted to see it again, and again, and of course he kept hoping the the next time there would be just a little bit of a different movement,” Frisch says in the interview. “It was exactly the same movement, and that was more dead than her body was dead.”

Though the husband kept hoping his wife would resurrect on the screen through a false movement, a visual ghost note, the home video instead locked her body into a cycle of lifelessness. Frisch understands the danger in this and how it relates to one’s identity. Unlike a memory, which has opportunity to bloom and—for better or worse—redevelop itself continuously (much like an identity), film functions as an anti-memory, abstracting experiences and identities into something entirely untrue: A kind of optical semantic satiation. Film belongs to a grammar of the dispossessed simply because it is bound by laws of repetition, and this revelation appears repeatedly in Frisch’s work. Even Geiser, trapped by his amnesia, must live his life on a loop, like a doomed film.

Ghost

If you add a t after the s, Geiser becomes the German word for ghost.

A Rain Diary

Page 41 of Holocene is merely a catalogue of times and similes comparing the rain to other things.

11:20 a.m., the rain “as pearls on the windowpane.”
11:30 a.m., the rain “as silence.”
3:20 p.m., the rain is “like cobwebs.”
No rain at 4 p.m.

Later, at 11:30 p.m., Frisch again mingles technology in with descriptions of nature: “Rain as a glittering in the
beam of a flashlight.”

I find refuge in the novella's beautifully unbearable, diaristic elements, even if I do not know entirely why. One of my favorite moments in the book is on page 40, which is simply a brief list of what Geiser knows:

Fish do not sleep.
The subtotal of energy is constant.
Human beings are the only living creatures with an awareness of history.
[...]
Since when have words existed?

Max Frisch’s Dream

I stay awake rereading a morbid dream preserved in Frisch’s sketchbook. In it, German ships are drifting below the surface of a lake, and Frisch wonders how the passengers are still alive. He wakes up from the nightmare and looks out of a boarded window, in awe of the moonlight’s glint on the railroads. He does not specify whether his waking up and peering out of the window is a part of the dream or reality. I know it doesn’t matter. I read the passage so many times that when I finally fall asleep to the loud silence of the space heater, I dream the same dream.

On Cinema

In life, unlike cinema, we cannot cut to black; unlike a novel or an essay, we cannot press the return key a few times to give the impression time has passed, or that a new passage has begun. We have to endure what Frisch calls the “unfolding” of time. Still, Frisch returns endlessly to language and film—especially their blanknesses—as metaphors to help understand the compromise of being and time. He knows that writers can sculpt with negative space, that they can speak louder than the words themselves. I think of Frisch as an unwriter (no coincidence that Man in the Holocene was winnowed down from 600 pages to around 150).

(Waiting for the 6 train, I catch site of myself in the subway reflection as it passes, and it too becomes a kind of cinema, its windows capturing the stills of my body shifting weight, frames that flicker, bringing to my attention the absences, the metal of the subway becoming the cuts that break up my reel of bodies.)

On Writing

And so we write ourselves. The world grinds and will grind on its axis and the night will forgive the day eternally, and we might like to think our writing changes something, but it probably does not. Yet we still do it.

Stories, and language, are more or less meaningless, Frisch declares. Memory too. “The rocks do not need my memory,” Geiser remarks toward the end of Holocene. In fact, most things yield zero meaning to Max Frisch, but this isn’t necessarily a negative thing, and Geiser eventually realizes this, accepting his senescence as a part of nature. Forgetting can be a beautiful thing, I think after finishing Man in the Holocene. Maybe because it is inescapable. We all will forget and be forgotten. As Geiser’s tacked-up pages assert, even the memory of the world changes, forgets itself. A more accurate thought might be that I want forgetting to be redeeming somehow, to be able to accept it. I think this might be especially harder for a writer to do.
Stories, our own and those of others, are just as much about forgetting as they are about remembering—often they are the same. It’s what I think Geiser does throughout *Man in the Holocene*, documenting his loss so that he can finally isolate his identity from body and memory. Maybe, Frisch seems to suggest, we tell ourselves stories not only to live, but in order to die.
We All Frontin’: Identity and Internalized Racism

It was 1 AM, about. I had just stepped off the 6-train, and felt the chill of the night in the underground station. I raised my chin, zipped my coat, and walked hurriedly up the steps, away from the rumble of the carts.

The night was chilly. I pushed a clenched fist deep into my pocket, keys jutting out between my fingers, and in the other hand I held my mobile phone—all routine. I headed north towards Garrison Avenue on Hunts Point, sidestepping dog shit and a few tip-filled condoms. An ambulette sounded off in the near distance. About sixty yards out ahead of me, I could see the blurry contours of a body, slow-moving. Prostitute, I thought. I dipped my head and doubled the pace. If you’re not tryna’ fuck, they’re not tryna’ talk, so there was no physical concern. After about a five count though, I turned my chin up slowly—in the hood, another glimpse is always necessary, however short. Definitely not a prostitute, I determined. Right then something changed. The prospect of it being anything other than a woman, or even a blue-and-white, was alarming. Speculation alone woke me up, hiked my senses. I squinted hard, looking first at the breadth of the shoulders, and then at the hips. I still couldn’t tell. But another ten yards in I came to discover the truth. The moving figure was a black man, a black man just like me.

Immediately I felt uncomfortable. This feeling didn’t occur after any productive thought or recognized triggers. It outright invaded me. I was confused. Of course we don’t just welcome discomfort into our bodies. Of course discomfort is not always logically processed before the feeling settles in either, because it’s not something we necessarily have to understand in order to feel. But I do know that wearing a wool shirt can be uncomfortable, and so might being in a less crowded space with an ex-romance. In this moment though, I just couldn’t figure out what it was. This bothered me. It made me anxious too. I looked up again, and the black man flipped on his hoodie. I became more uncomfortable, but I was also a lot less confused about this feeling. Actually, no. I wasn’t at all confused about the feeling, but was naturally resisting some truth in the form of “confusion.” Admit it, I told myself—this black man makes you uncomfortable, and not in the least because it’s 1 a.m., or because it’s the South Bronx even. It was his blackness that scared me, and what that could mean in a world so very physical—a world that seemed to belong specifically to people like him and me. A world where I knew violence could solve desperation, and criminality created opportunity. In this world, bordered off from all else, I could die because he was fighting to live. You’re scared of him Edy, I thought to myself. Admit it.

But how? Nah. Hell no. I tutored Rikers Island students in Creative Writing; mentored ex-felons for years. I remember sitting in court with a mentee, 15-year-old fighting a gun charge. I was one-third of his entire family, and when he got convicted, I was the only family he had left. So no. Why was I feeling this way? I had just started working at a non-profit, full-time, teaching justice-involved adolescents. Fifteen of them, packed into a classroom, screaming and cursing at full-throat. This had to be a false alarm. How could I fear what I understood to be a different version of myself? And not because fear isn’t a sensible reaction to a stranger, even when it’s
an intra-racial encounter, but fear provoked exclusively by an identity you own seems indecent—a biological impossibility almost. Anxiety produced by an identity you perform and project outward onto the world, could, in the end, be self-destructive. What if I took a false step, or made a wrong move, and he reacted violently against me, for the mere fact that I’m me? So no, this couldn’t be possible. I looked at him again. We had the same detail in our walk, the same hunched over posture, some modest sag to our jeans, the same positioning of our hats. Damn. I wondered then if he loved books, or if he had studied Literature in undergrad like me? I wondered if he was he just trying to get home, and was simply minding his own business? I wondered if he took note of my distrustful eyes, and thereby asked all of these same questions? He did. I was sure, because he didn’t live outside of the conditioning. No one does. On the morning walk to the train, I spot a police vehicle at the red light. In the back there’s a young Latino kid, handcuffed. That’s one. I arrive at the train station, and on the other side of the turnstile, detectives have cornered another black youth. He is being questioned, while handcuffed. That’s two. I grab breakfast and the paper before heading upstairs to work. On the front page there are a slew of black girls fighting in a McDonald’s restaurant. Headline: Savages! That’s six. The workday is over. On the commute home, a group of teenaged Dominicans are brawling on the train. That’s nine. I arrive, undress, and turn on the television. A show is on. I’m unsure of the title, but a young black man is walking-the-perp, a gang of white cops parading behind him. That’s ten. Before bed, I sign onto Facebook. Photos of friends appear on my newsfeed, most of them posturing—simple self-parodies of a culture that makes gun-touting a necessity, not a fashion. That’s eleven. I scroll past an R.I.P dedication, above an uploaded photo of a mural on the brick wall down the block from me. Some nigga I used to know—clapped over a dice game. That’s fourteen. All of this in one day. Day after day. Year after year. This is why I was sure he asked those questions about me. The same ones I asked about him. Because it’s all we ever see. We are forced to ask these questions to survive. The enemy has been color-coded, and the fact that these representations seem ubiquitous is not chance alone. It is not natural either. It is the consequence of a careful strategy. These thoughts calmed me in a weird way. They tricked me into believing my fears were justified. But more than anything else, they made me angry.

Then he reached for his waistband. He could’ve been stashing drugs, or preparing to pull them out. He could’ve been heading somewhere to serve a customer. Or it could be a gun, I thought. Guns are an ever-present reality in this physical world. I know niggas on my block who carry guns to the store, stash guns in their cribs, bring guns into the club, carry guns on dates—all in all, guns are a part of their get-up. Carrying a gun becomes a passport of sorts, allowing for access into and out of a locale without hassle or questions: a ghetto-wide marker of “citizen” status. A gun is a currency of its own in the urban space. But the problem is some people are walking around with counterfeits. They carry guns for its outward value, so that other niggas respect them. But in the hood we know who’s who. We know who’s ready to use it and who’s not. We know the ones that won’t brag about the guns they carry, or brandish it for cool points. Of course this brand of authenticity doesn’t make crime any more acceptable. But it does affect our understanding of these particular actions. It does legitimize death. Still, the fronna’ and the real nigga are carrying a gun, and the gun is central
Why do all my friends front like they’re not wrestling with these problems too? If we’re not honest about this discomfort, there’s just no way any of these conversations about race can be honest. When we lie about this bias, or deny ourselves the chances to struggle with it in community, we help build the false division that exists today. On one side, there’s this dope progressive team, where all the “non-racist” folks chill. And on the other side, there’s this bad team, where all the self-congratulating racists live. This is dangerous. Not because we know that some folks are shameless in their racism. That brand of honesty is actually helpful. But because the so-called “good people” create a deceptive space, where a non-racist status is both falsely, and widely, declared. I thought of my black and Latino friends, who stay actin’ funny in spaces that aren’t mostly white and “safe,” but always talkin’ that liberation shit. I thought of my black and Latino friends, who dedicate all their time to race-work, but had they not known me, would’ve crossed the street at any time of day, clutchin’ their purse and all, if I was walkin’ the same block. We all frontin’, I thought. The conversations shouldn’t be about who is or who isn’t. The useful dialogue begins when we admit that we all are. This forces us to wrestle with the nasty truth. This destroys all hiding places. Only then can we work towards decolonizing the mind, and undoing the way we’ve been programmed—a crime perpetrated against us all.

Wass’ good, Ed, the black guy said, as he approached me.

Oh shit, Sean, I didn’t even recognize you from deep, I answered.

to the iconography of the ghetto. This reality made me uncomfortable that night.

But no one enjoys being shot, and though it may seem so, no one is shooting anyone else for fun. These firefights are about the street’s economics. Taking back the very opportunities denied us. These incidents are about love and security, about families, both in the homes and outside. The bullets are about resources, territories: cash equivalents. All the same dealings of America but on the micro level, wearing dark skin. Young black and Latino youths negotiating where they can and cannot go, who’s allowed on the block and who isn’t, who’s bargain-worthy and who’s not. These beefs are about respect, because in retribution there is integrity. And in the hood, integrity is social capital. We must understand these rules if we want to live. This is why I was afraid that night.

But understanding the hood in this way doesn’t make the idea of danger any less dangerous. Context, in fact, is what produced the most fear in me that night. That black guy wasn’t responsible for the conditions of the ghetto. He was a victim of my unjust anxieties. But what if he did have a plot? I thought. What if he did want my wallet? What if his desperation had made me a target? Understanding the ghetto in this way—the wants and needs, black and brown frailty, the defeatism widespread—creates a stalemate of the mind, a constant clash between emotion and reason. I love the hood deeply. But I should probably be suspicious of this love. And the conclusion, if any, isn’t at all that I shouldn’t love the ghetto, but that my love should be judicious, in a way that challenges the hood, and forces my friends to reckon with their ideas of right and wrong, good and bad.

This is why honesty matters, I thought. What’s it worth pretending I’m not having these unhealthy thoughts?
Selections from *Drafts for a Third Notebook*

In the street outside the building the black rubbish bags that shine even when they're not wet. I have the green ones that only shine in the rain. Where do they take all the rubbish from Manhattan? When my rubbish bag, the green one, is out on the street all by itself, I wonder if they're allowed. My green rubbish bag is big enough for two or three days, so that on some days there are only black bags outside the building. And then they've gone. As if by magic. The idea of our daily rubbish not disappearing, of these black and green rubbish bags piling up and piling up until you can't drive or walk along the street—it's a stupid idea, I know, but it often comes to me when I put out my next rubbish bag.

At night it comes like a vision:

Rise and walk.

It sometimes happens as I get dressed and then I sit in the rocking chair, before I've put my shoes on, or stand, barefoot, at the window; the empty streets outside look wet, there's always a gleam over the roofs so that you can see the silhouettes of the silos and smoke curling up from little chimneys here and there—

Just as it was ten years ago!

The woman asleep there is a different one.

I'm still the same.

— — —

My new book is printed and is on sale, BLUEBEARD, the cover is blue and pleasing. What have I written? A grotesque caricature, a masterly grimace—as my last book? The penultimate one would have deserved to be my last.

— — —

Sitting with a friendly smile at the stone table that has been dedicated to her, sipping an aperitif, is the former mistress of the house. Everything here is as it used to be, of course, only the trees are taller. What else can we talk about? That afternoon light over the valley is soft and the old house, that was our house for fourteen years—or for seven years, it had to be whitewashed inside again, yes, that was necessary and expensive. Was I still in good health? She lives in Berlin (as I know) in the bright art nouveau apartment that has become her apartment. If I did have a question she would, I think, answer more openly than ever. As far as finances are concerned, everything has been sorted out for the rest of our lives. At one point she takes my hand that's on the stone table between my glass and the ashtray. Her biography, my biography, a point of intersection in the past. When, later on, (we haven't emptied the bottle) I accompany her down the street, she takes my arm and asks whether I feel lonely.
I cook for myself—

My circle of friends among the dead is getting bigger and bigger. Soon I’ll be the oldest among you. Only my mother and my sister are still older, my father’s getting younger and younger than me. Actually we hardly knew each other, my father and I, and I seldom think of him. The time will soon be here when my brother and I will be the same age. He was the better brother. When I ask whom I miss most among the dead, I can’t make up my mind. I eat alone—

The dead are difficult because they’ve never known the people that I’m involved with today, Alice, for example. And the people I’m involved with today were children when Hitler invaded Russia or not even born when the first hydrogen bomb was dropped, and at the same time they know all sorts of things my dead never knew.

I wash up—

Am I lonely?

I dry the dishes—

Sometimes I like being alone.

—

The Heart Is the Record

Mark Twain, driven to melancholic worry at the failure of his mind, complained he could recall whatever in his youth, “whether it happened or not,” but little in his dotage but what he dreamt.

Even then he understood. Absent the private cosmogony that’s each of our pasts, we tend to see ourselves as flawed and, as flawed, useless. Absent memory, absent a record to confirm our words, what we say happened can never have happened. “Gone to pieces,” as Twain lamented, he’d been stripped of the ruse by which we call ourselves “selves.” Twain minus memory was no longer Twain.

If the old man’s grief doesn’t echo ours, it must surely sound our dread. For most, a firm hold on our past is no less than a firm hold on our existence: despite everything, the notion that we are our memories naggingly persists. The holes of our forgetting, therefore, we fill with the proxies we’re convinced we need to prove our worth. The pieces of our pasts we dislike or fear, we hide away and swap for fakes, our forgetting no longer needed.

Yet none of this trickery does more than scratch our wounds. Our confoundment before the flux that is the way of things has led us to a perverse belief in and bent fascination with a uniquely discrete, mutually exclusive “self,” which, despite its manifestation in the form of rapacious egotism, vanity, conceit, and selfishness, we nonetheless deem to be the arbiter of all known truth. But we deem wrongly. We’re obsessed with a lie.

It’s only by means of the past that we sustain the illusion that we have and have ever had a “self,” and it’s only by means of memory, and of our consciousness of our memory, that we have the past, which is to say “time,” itself an illusion in the service of the illusion of the “self.”

This belief in and reliance on the structures of time and memory, in other words, is what shores up our belief in and reliance on the “self.” But collectively it’s all a tower of rags and bones tossed up in a mire, and we trapped within it subsist in permanent collapse, wondering at every turn how we got here, and why everything we struggle to contain decays like the wreck of Ozymandias, and why our lives so rarely amount to more than disaster, despair, and strife.

If only the shade of Emily Dickinson could follow us about, whispering in our ears: “That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet!” Moment by moment, she must have intuited, we fall away only to moment by moment return—again and again—until at last we fall into something other and beyond, and yet always here. There’s nothing to hold onto, and no “thing” to hold. Most of us don’t realize this, but each of us suspects it. And it’s terrifying.

The specter of our “self”-lessness—this is our greatest fear, greater even than our fear of death, without which we wouldn’t—couldn’t—fear death. And fearing this specter, we presume our fellows fear the same, and stumble into the darkness of distrust, since so long as we fear, we will distrust. This is the fix, no doubt, this the honest rub. We who don’t fear are we who trust—our “self”-lessness included. We who trust, trust our fellows. But it’s the rare person indeed who’s found comfort in the ceaseless freefall of existence, and who then truly trusts. It’s the rarer person still who trusts her fellows truly.

The result of this madness is an absurd system in which every one of us, without exception, must possess complete
D. FOY

documentation to show everyone else who we are and have been, where we are and were, with whom, at what time, and why. Without this documentation—the birth certificates, credit cards, social security numbers, licenses, resumes, and passports, among others, that legitimate our pasts, that identify us and, finally, make us who we “are”—well, we’re suspect at best, menacing at worst, and branded as pariahs until we can “show” we warrant better. In today’s world, our very lives depend on our ability to prove our past. Without such “proof,” quite literally, we cannot live.

It’s our nature to remember. Memory is our core means. This compulsion of ours to record our memories, on the other hand, to forge visible proof of our past, isn’t our nature but a deeply embedded meme, passed from person to person, generation to generation, and culture to culture for millennia, from as far back, and likely further, as 32,000 years, when some painter from the Aurignacian people painted the first image on the walls of a cave.

The image the painter painted may have helped others, but first it helped the painter by “proving” the painter’s experience. It didn’t matter whether the painter painted it from “real” life or from imagination. The image was on the wall, a fact, now, incontestable as the wall itself: I witnessed the event this image represents. I was there. This image, made by the human I am, cannot be refuted. It testifies my experience, which testifies my life. I live now and, so long as this image survives, will have lived still. I am I.

Today’s multi-trillions of records testify as much to the tenacity of our compulsion to prove-our-selves-by-proving-our-lives as to that compulsion’s inexorable sway. It can’t be helped, it seems. It’s almost as if each record, great or small, were a part of us. That the big view reveals the entirety of civilization, every manmade thing, to form a single colossal record, makes this rather plain.

And yet from the moment we make our records, like all matter everywhere, they’re being ground to bits by entropy. We know this. We know our records, like us, will pass. And they do. This is why we ceaselessly replace them. This is why we’re obsessed to record as much as we can of the endless rubbing of matter against matter that constitutes our lives. In the face of our dread, we can no more destroy our records (or cease to create them) than we can tear out our hearts. And so we’ve designed a way of living that depends on both, the records to have a life and our hearts actually to live.

None of the philosophical and medical literature produced since Galen stepped onto the scene in 212 CE, says Mary Carruthers in The Book of Memory, her study on memory in the medieval West, suggests that our various faculties obtain from the heart. Prior to Galen, however, and at least as far back as Ezekiel in the sixth century BCE, memory was likened to a storehouse into which the jewels, coins, flowers, and fruits of our days—priceless treasure—were conveyed from the heart for a lifetime’s trust. Before our perceptions reached the mind, antiquity believed, they must first have gone through the heart. Until they did, they could never reach the mind, in which case memories couldn’t be formed.

For many, though, the heart alone was the seat of memory. The ancients, in fact, held that to know something “by heart” was literally to have put an
experience in the heart to be rendered as a memory—thus, says Carruthers, the word record for the myriad forms of documentation we create to prove our experience. “Memory as a function of the heart,” she says:

was encoded in the common Latin verb recordari, meaning to ‘recollect’ (itself from re- ‘restore’ plus cor [gen. cordis] ‘heart’).... The Latin verb evolved into the Italian ricordarsi, which clearly influenced the early use in English of ‘heart’ for ‘memory.’ Chaucer often uses the phrase ‘by heart’ as we still use it.... The Middle English Dictionary records an early twelfth-century example of herte to mean ‘memory’; there is an Old English use of heorte to mean ‘the place where thoughts occur,’ cogitations.... It seems probable that the metaphorical extension to memory of the English word heorte was made on the direct analogy of the Latin metaphor in recordari and its derivatives.

But it wasn’t as though some speaker of Latin decided one day to fashion a fancy word for the bond between us, our knowledge, and the ways we acquire and keep it. By and large, we’ve always done our best to ensure that the words we make reflect our understanding of the things they name, the way quiet water reflects our face. We’ve wanted to know our words speak the truth of the world as we see it. Our distant forebears, who only spoke the language the ancients learned to write, forged their version of the word “record” to denote memories and remembering because they believed the heart not merely the seat of memory but the source of that remembered.

This faith was sound. Prior to the invention of writing, and especially of print, we perceived no division between our environment and us. We didn’t think ourselves alone, we didn’t think ourselves apart, we didn’t even think ourselves mere parts. Prior to the invention of print, actually, we judged ourselves no less than the umbilicus mundi, the navel of the world—integral to all and as inseparable. If the world and we were one, and if the world and knowledge were one, then we and knowledge were also one. Simile held no sway. Akin was unknown. We were truth. And the process of living was timeless, a continuous act of give-and-take, of sharing the world with the world and of taking the world to the world, and any sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell was always one recollected, restored, recorded. Always remembering, we were always home. Life was an ongoing reunion of hearts, homecoming without end.

Ezekiel’s words of faith in the synergy of memory, home, and heart suggest that faith’s longstanding. The words of saints Luke, Jerome, and Benedict, in concert with such figures as Hugh of St. Victor, document that faith’s indelibility even as they record the lineage of its perversion over the course of nearly two thousand years.

Ezekiel and the people to whom he preached knew neither writing nor books. In contrast, the priests who wrote in Ezekiel’s name five hundred years later were sophisticated writers and thinkers, as were the theologians who succeeded them.

The distinction is critical.

The point at which orality succumbed to literacy was the point at which, having been cloven from the natural world by the troll of science and “reason,” spiritual man was himself forever split, from himself, first, and from his
fellow and we haven’t been the same ever since, neither does the world today much match the world we were given.

This transformation, says Charles Eisenstein in his essay, “The Sojourn of Science,” was effected almost single-handedly with and because of written words and characterized by the reduction of “process to number and becoming to being.” What’s more, and a whole lot crazier, we’ve apotheosized dialectics and dissected and infinitesimally categorized mind and matter, as well, and we’ve done it all according to fantastical notions having little if nothing to do with the nature of things—time and the self not least among them.

Eisenstein is far from alone in his views. The famous scholar of language, Walter J. Ong, for instance, notes that next to sound, a harmonizing sense, sight is tyrannical and destructive: its main function resides in breaking things down to ever-smaller parts. Where sound incorporates and unifies, sight dissects and isolates. Where sound pours into the hearer, sight makes distance between seer and seen. Where spoken words, heard as they pass, dying as they’re born, manifest flux, written words capture spoken words, then prepare them for scrutiny and division.

The written word transforms the ephemeral world of sound-as-things into one of space and matter, as inflexible as static, as moribund as mute. Truly, founded on sight, the written word is all about distance, all about entrapment, all about separation, silence, control, dissection, vivisection, isolation, stasis, and, ultimately, death.

Like imperialistic troops, writing swarms into uncharted territory, divides and isolates, sets and insists on limits, bounds, and rules, then chains our words to these limits, bounds, and rules with the fervor of a tyrant.

Speech, on the other hand, has always constituted a unifying activity that brings people together and promotes intimacy. Storytelling prior to writing, to name just one example, was always a group event, though even after writing, and certainly before print, reading was often still collective. Because more than one copy of a book was seldom available, and because most people before the advent of print couldn’t read, those who wanted to know the contents of a book needed someone who could read to read the book aloud. But since the word must be engaged individually if it isn’t read aloud, it was only a matter of time, once print emerged, before private reading became the rule. After that, the more books became available, the more literate people became. Reading as a solitary pursuit followed hard on.

Without writing, we existed in an economy of sound characterized by unity, by centralization and interiority, whose currency was always speech alone. We existed in what Ong calls a homoestatic present whose maintenance depended on sloughing off memories irrelevant to it, much the way we slough skin and cut hair and trim nails. Our lives were more or less of practical routine, and the lion’s share of our words consisted of memorized expressions. That was how things worked. Knowledge persisted or desisted at the whim of memory alone, expressed through the spoken word.

If oral man didn’t remember something, it wasn’t because he couldn’t remember it, but because it wasn’t worth remembering. Important knowledge was shaped into formulary expressions because formulary expressions were easiest to remember, and related expressions were aggregated into meaningfully relevant segments that could be recollected at will.

As people stayed together, so did the things we remembered and used.
When, as we read in the Book of Ezekiel, Yahweh commands Ezekiel to memorize the wisdom he’s about to receive, it doesn’t seem to be because Yahweh wants to set Ezekiel apart from his peers, but because he wants Ezekiel to bond with them moment by moment through the communion of a shared experience that will enhance the community’s awareness and appreciation of its part in the process that’s life in its endless flux. “Son of man,” says Yahweh to Ezekiel, “behold with thine eyes, and hear with thine ears, and set thine heart upon all that I shall shew thee; for to the intent that I might shew them unto thee art thou brought hither” (my emphasis). Certainly we could ask what the writers of Ezekiel stood to gain from their efforts, and how their interpretation of Ezekiel’s words was affected by their literacy, but from the writing itself it’s safe to consider that, regarding the latter, at least, Ezekiel’s transcribers were still close enough to the culture of orality that their relationship to memory, heart, and self mostly mirrored Ezekiel’s. Yahweh’s words passed to Ezekiel, Ezekiel’s to his peers, his peers to theirs, and so on down to the priests who transcribed Ezekiel, in the same succession of give and take that has always characterized the natural world.

Luke’s belief in the indivisibility of memory, heart, and self seven hundred years later isn’t simply concurrent to Ezekiel’s—it also tells us why:

Wherefore, as a belch bursts forth from the stomach according to the quality of the food, and the index of a fart is according to the sweetness or stench of its odor, so the cogitations of the inner man bring forth words, and from the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The just man, eating, fills his soul. And when he is replete with sacred doctrine, from the good treasury of his memory he brings forth those things which are good (my emphasis).

What to the modern ear sounds comically dubious is from Luke profoundly earnest. For him, quite literally, the knowledge and memories made in his heart are as elemental as the belches and farts made in his stomach and ass. Luke’s value plain is horizontal, and defined by parity. There’s no hierarchy, there are no precedents, everything has its place and role, each as meaningful and useful as the next. The absence of difference between his belches, farts, and knowledge is so absolute that for him they’re equal, if not identical, even to his soul. And just as belches, farts, and knowledge—all “good things”—were made and brought forth by Luke, so will they be consumed and absorbed by his fellows, who, in turn, will presumably make and bring forth more of the same.

Yet somewhere in the four centuries between Luke and St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into the Latin version known as the Vulgate and wrote a slew of exegeses, the relationship between memory, heart, and self underwent a transformation. For Jerome, as we see in his analysis of Ezekiel:

Nothing that you have seen or heard is useful... unless you deposit what you should see and hear in the treasury of your memory. When indeed [Ezekiel] says, “all that I shall shew thee,” he makes his listener attentive, and also makes matter prepared for the eyes of his heart, so that he may hold in memory those things shown to him (my emphasis).
Jerome’s assumptions might seem reasonable, but really they’re sneaky, radical, and thunderously absurd.

To say that “nothing that [we] have seen or heard is useful...unless [we] deposit it” within us amounts to saying that, of ourselves, we’re useless, and this because, of ourselves, in our natural state, we possess nothing useful. Of ourselves, we’re each the empty medium that John Locke would later describe as a tabula rasa.

Further, if we begin “empty,” and if emptiness is useless, and uselessness worthless, then, according to Jerome’s logic, at least, we can infer that the opposite is also true: knowledge being useful, the more of it we have, the more useful we are, and the more useful, the more valuable.

By the time of Jerome, in other words, our perceptions, and the senses with which we gather our perceptions—what we “see and hear,” and, of course, taste, touch, and smell—had become meaningless unless we had first transformed them into knowledge through the process by which the “self” collects and stores its perceptions in a specific, reliable, easily accessible place inside a given framework of experience.

Knowledge, however, can’t be merely the image of a thing remembered. If this were true, we could say that, since no creature can exist without memory, all creatures must have knowledge.

But by that criterion we don’t consider all creatures to possess “knowledge”—there must be something more than memory alone that enables us to possess it. This can be none other than a consciousness, aware of itself.

Knowledge, in other words, is a memory recognized as a memory, recognized again as valuable (the sole criterion for which value lies in how effectively we can integrate the memory into the practical, identifiable system of experiences or things out of which we spend our lives struggling to make sense).

Or, yet again, we can say knowledge is a memory given value by the self we believe we are.

At this point we could question the virtue by which we believe in this self.

What is this virtue’s source, and what is the criterion that empowers it?

Neither source nor criterion is mutually exclusive or even independent of or beyond us. Source and criterion both, in fact, have somehow managed to be our “self,” the consciousness of the mind, in other words, that declared the self to start. This, surely, is the ipsum dixit to end all ipsum dixits, the very ipsum dixit behind Descartes’ bizarre, “I think, ergo I am.” The mind conjures a thought which, with another thought—conjured by the mind that thought the first thought—it construes to be “real.”

This first thought is an idea of the uniquely discrete, mutually exclusive self, and this self, in turn, is pronounced substantial by another idea from the mind that thought the idea of the self.

The self has declared itself a self by dint of its power to declare.

“If I were not a self,” the self declares, “I couldn’t declare, and of course if I couldn’t declare, I couldn’t be a self.”

Put again, an abstraction has declared another abstraction concrete or “real,” which, by the authority of that declaration, has then declared the first abstraction also “real.”

Back to Jerome, scarier than his notion that what we’ve “seen and heard” remains useless until it’s been turned to knowledge are the implications lurking just inside it.
It isn’t merely Jerome’s contention that, of themselves, the processes by which we perceive our world are meaningless. Nor is it merely that for our perceptions to be useful we must first profit from them—attain, that is, something beyond the effort required for our senses to perceive.

What’s really and truly terrifying is that, for Jerome, and for the millions who’ve since believed as he did, until we profit from our perceptions, life itself is worthless.

And if this position isn’t a blatant disavowal of the meaning of our effort, which lies in nothing more or less than the exercising of it, it’s likely because Jerome’s forgotten that the basis of our life (and hence the only thing of true value to we who live) is the endless effort by which our senses perceive, the process we call “living.”

Either way, he’s objectified our senses, and consequently separated us from them, by making of them and the perceptions they enable a sort of toolkit with which to achieve ends whose value, ironically, are purely abstract. For Jerome, it seems, given the product of our effort is more valuable that the effort itself, life is less valuable than the things we encounter in it.

Six centuries later—seventeen hundred since Ezekiel, and a thousand after Galen—the words of Hugh of St. Victor echo Jerome’s even as they reveal that the shift’s been fully galvanized, from the holistic perspective of oral man to the analytic, categorizing perspective of literary man.

With Hugh, we’ve passed into the realm of Cartesian clarity and distinctness, the other side of which lies calcified modernity with its abstract hierarchies, dialectic absolutism, patriarchal elitism, cause-effect linearity, predetermined generalities, and, no doubt, fatal notions of permanence:

My child, knowledge is a treasury and your heart is its strongbox. As you study all of knowledge, you store up for yourselves good treasures, immortal treasures, incorruptible treasures, which never decay nor lose the beauty of their brightness. In the treasure-house of wisdom are various sorts of wealth, and many filing-places in the store-house of your heart.... Their orderly arrangement is clarity of knowledge (my emphasis).

The difference between the visions of Ezekiel and Luke, on the one hand, and of Jerome and Hugh on the other, is so great that the latter inclines more toward Twain centuries later than it harkens back to Luke, much less to Ezekiel.

Twain’s idea of memory is so like Jerome and Hugh’s that if the three hadn’t been separated by more than thirteen hundred years, Twain could pass for their long-lost student. And yet despite these similarities, there are also crucial differences.

For Jerome and Hugh, it’s still we who pick and choose the memories we hold, and where. Though our heart may be a part of us still, as for Ezekiel and Luke, and though it might even still be inside us, it’s no longer just the organ that makes memories and pumps blood the way our stomachs make belches and our asses farts. The heart, rather, is now a trope, a little treasure chest into which we must “deposit” memories with the same thought and care we’d deposit money in a bank.

Twain, too, saw memory from the vantage of a trope, though unlike Jerome and Hugh, it vexed him with such despair that to hear his thoughts about it we might think...
he felt it some pernicious, miserly spirit that “stores up a perfect record of the most useless facts and anecdotes and experiences” even as it casts aside “[all the things we’d profit by knowing] with the careless indifference of a girl refusing her true lover” (my emphasis).

Elsewhere, Twain speaks of memory as a “curious machine” that is “strangely capricious. It has no order,” he grumbled, “it has no system, it has no notion of values, it is always throwing away gold and hoarding rubbish.” Twain, that is, sees himself as inhabited by an entity that, beyond his control, gathers, hoards, and discards objects according to the whim of a value system that, unrelated to and utterly detached from money or wealth, Twain is helpless to comprehend.

His one consolation rests in the belief that all of humanity shares both his view of memory and his misfortune at its hands. “I am aware,” he says, “that everybody’s memory is like that, and that therefore I have no right to complain.” And whereas Twain in his pessimism sees we humans entirely as victims, Jerome and Hugh construe humanity as something closer to a collection of two types of individuals, foolish and wise: the first squanders the experiences of life through stupidity, laziness, neglect; the second profits from experience through equal parts discipline, categorization, analysis, prudence, and restraint.

Ultimately, though, Twain, Jerome, and Hugh are alike in the modernity of their vision, which interprets experience as something without and beyond humanity, something that happens to and around us.

Moreover, where Twain was a blasphemer, Jerome a sage whose piety got him made a saint, and Hugh a man of conviction envied by millions, each man’s idea of memory suggests that he’s alone in the world, separate from the world’s things and responsible for taking charge of or falling prey to them, all of which, without exception, are reckoned with and prioritized through the prism of dialectics whose sole criterion of value is usefulness.

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There are reasons we still use the trope of the heart for memory the way Hugh used his heart to remember.

Together with the philosophers, sages, and saints before him, Hugh’s influence outside his abbey in Paris, where he died in 1141 CE, has been enormous: his teachings appear in more than 2,500 books. Yet influence alone can’t account for the power of our impulse to conflate memory, heart, and the home of the self despite our certainty (via science) that never the twain shall meet. Our sense of oneness with things has been broken, but still we crave the continuity with which that oneness had filled us.

The sages and saints understood these truths at a profound level.

This, at least partly, is the reason we continue to speak of “learning by heart.” It’s also the reason that, in a sort of ceaseless, atavistic recrudescence, the words of the sages and saints continue to echo a truth that will always transcend science and go, as it were, straight to our heart.

Science can’t stifle intuition and instinct any more than it can morph the truth that we carry our pasts at our deepest core (itself from the Latin cor [gen. cordis], heart), that to possess a heart is to possess a past, and that, finally, for whatever reason life’s deemed fit, our ends without either are sure.

How else can it be that, for thousands of years, right up to the twentieth century, science, sages, and saints withal, a powerful memory has been judged not merely important
to the good life, but *vital*, in every sense of that word?

The greatest cultural icons of the “dark ages,” discounting its mighty orators, were the saints, apotheosized in large for the power of their minds.

At the canonization trial of St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, to support the man’s sainthood, advocates produced his dumbfounding mnemonics. Thomas rarely wrote anything himself, even in the era’s personal shorthand form known as *inintelligibilis*, but recited his works from memory to scribes, at times up to four at once. Evidence shows Thomas composed the whole of his towering *Summa theologica* in his head, then dictated it with the help of a few notes at most.

Nor was it for memory’s sake alone that saints became saints.

Their memories also reflected their superior morality. That’s why they and others like them trained their memory as a matter of ethics. “A person without a memory,” on the other hand, says Carruthers, “if such a thing could be, would be a person without moral character and, in a basic sense, without humanity.”

But we are not our fathers. While our memory remains, it has changed as radically as our interest in it, together with its value and ends.

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In the days of the saints no one cared much whether you had a bunch of books, or even that you could read. Unless you could demonstrate your knowledge in speech, you may as well not have known a thing.

If you gave Seneca the Elder 2,000 names, he would repeat them immediately, in the order received, a feat that, albeit wondrous, in his time would likely have been considered something of a parlor trick. Were that the extent of Seneca’s mnemonics, we would never have remembered him. He and the other rock stars of his time were the guys who could access and extensively manipulate what they knew, first, *usefully*, and second, *on demand*.

For instance, not only did Peter of Ravenna memorize every book he laid hands on—among them the medieval legal canon and volumes of Cicero and Ovid—but also he could “read” them at will. St. Anthony learned the Bible cover to cover just from hearing it read. St. Francis, by all reports, could remember huge quantities of information with total precision. And while St. Augustine had an elephant’s mind of his own, it was that of an ant’s, as he himself would have said, next to the mind of his old schoolmate, Simplicius. Simplicius, says Augustine, was:

an excellent man of remarkable memory, who, when he might be asked by us for all the next-to-last verses in each book of Virgil, responded quickly and from memory.... We believed he could recite Virgil backwards. If we wanted even prose passages from whatever of Cicero’s orations he had committed to memory, that also he could do; he followed in order however many divisions we wanted, backwards and forwards.

For Ezekiel, Luke, Thomas, Augustine, and the rest, however, creating external records in the form of paintings or books didn’t *prove* anything more than did orotund recitals. Such documents were merely conduits for the treasure they contained, the mania for which centered on *internalizing* as much of it as possible, on placing as much of it as possible, that is, *in the storehouse that was your heart*. 
The superior morality linked with this ideal didn't entail chance. God being All Knowledge and All Things, the more knowledge you carried by heart, the nearer you were to God. No greater motive was needed. If you had the best memory, you were the best of people: your heart was biggest and strongest, you were closest to God.

It can hardly be said that modern memory resides in our hearts, even as more and more it slips from our minds. Like most everything else, we've outsourced our memory to a massive conglomeration of techno-props—a flagrant expression of the metamorphosis our mania for knowledge has undergone. No longer do we yearn to internalize knowledge through memory, but to store it in our principally digital crutches, that we may access as much of it as possible, as often and as quickly as possible, principally online. Unlike the ancients, for whom quality of knowledge was paramount, we modern folk care almost exclusively about its quantity.

Very few denizens of the twenty-first century are called on to recite their knowledge in real speech, and those who are, even on the level of international baby-kissers like Barack Obama, renowned for their ostensible rule of oratory and rhetoric, depend on the guidance of gizmos.

Actually, in a world where few of us deign even to remember our phone numbers (stored in our gizmos with the rest), fewer still are unable to recite the little knowledge we have. What’s worse, and no doubt very sad, those of us who can say what we think we know often stand the chance of being objectified on one hand and scorned on the other. Knowing too much “by heart” today is a hair's breadth from freakish and three or four from quaint.

I have an elderly friend with a photographic memory. For better or worse, once he's read a thing, it's in his mind forever.

Having learned Spanish from a high school textbook, to name one of countless examples, my friend haunts warehouse districts and docks ripe with Latino stevedores and Teamsters and drives deep into the Spanish-speaking parts of town, all to use his second tongue. On more occasions than I can name, to give another, my friend has said something to the effect of, “Hey, D, remember that article I told you about, the one where Capstick said that the most frightening sound in the jungle isn’t the roar of a lion but the sound of ‘click’ when you want to hear the sound of ‘bang’?” And, knowing full well what will come of my reply, I’d nevertheless say, “That sounds familiar, but honestly I can’t remember. Which article was it?” “You know,” my friend would say, “the one from *Y Magazine*, February 1973, remember? Volume 27, issue 348? It was on page 96, I believe.” And I’d say, “Oh, that one.”

My friend quotes freely from books read once, fifty years back—Auden, Bierce, Cummings, Green, Kerouac, Coward, Elliot.

He knows jokes by the bagful, religious, racist, dirty, and clean, and points about publishers and facts about films, and the links between them or the lack thereof.

And my friend knows little known men from little known fields, and the places and dates they died and did, he knows *script* from *scriptoriums, statistics* from *charts, captions* from *posters*, and *content* from *ads*, the whole fat bunch, my friend knows it well, right on down to *telamon* from *Atlas* and *copy* from *cat*.

And all of this is just to start. At present my friend favors esoteric catalogs for rare German cars, construction
tools and parts, motorcycles (classic), Arts and Crafts (chairs), and modernist painters (Mexican, of course), plus glass blowing, flag making, scuba diving, and guns. My friend can reel off minutiae by the heap on any one of these concerns, to say nothing of others, and will do so often, despite your care.

He might not have been a saint a thousand years back, but my friend would’ve been a man of the cloth, a honcho even, of that I’m sure.

Today, though, outside of auto-parts stores and gun shows and yards for ships and junk and scraps, where he confuses and astounds his victims like a charmer his snakes, my friend’s memory is a virtual jinx.

Rather than serve as a launch pad for trips to greater ends, my friend’s “knowledge” has remained an oddly mulish hindrance that manifests as a sort of informational Tourette’s. Regardless of occasion or company, his compulsion to speak what he “knows” is often so great that silence for more than seconds pains him. For my friend, by hook or by crook, what goes in must come out.

Ironically, very little of my friend’s knowledge has much to do with his heart.

His relationship to what he knows is neither emotional nor situational, but mental, and more often still, I think, purely phobic. His inability to match his thoughts duly to assorted situations, or to serve a fluent or even faintly intuited end, betrays this disconnect.

Past exposing the seemingly impossible divide between him and the world, my friend’s urge to spew the contents of his archive reveals his deep fragility. When, like flotsam in a vacuum, the information doesn’t exist for its own sake, it’s typically invoked to justify my friend’s presence and, it seems, on some sad occasions, his very existence.

Since reading Cultural Amnesia, Clive James’ book on the function of memory in history and the arts (with an emphasis on seeing clearly now to remember rightly later), it’s hard when I think of my friend not to think as well of the men whose bloated memories James describes in his essay on Eugenio Montale.

Like my friend, these are men who know reams of poetry and gads of opera, for instance, and discharge their data often. James’ distaste for such boors is introduced by his epigraph. “True culture,” says Montale, “is what remains in a man when he has forgotten everything he has learned. This, however, presupposes an absorption, a profound penetration of his character.” For James, Montale has offered a sort of exhortation to rise through learning, which James declares the “essential event”—as if the quest for knowledge is its own reward, as if the seeker thus driven wouldn’t loop back to the mire of boors James so roundly condemns. For myself, Montale’s given us something else, closer to a window onto the relationship between memory, knowledge, and the ego.

The ancients, for instance, didn’t see the ego in contention with knowledge because they never saw knowledge as theirs. They’d received it from God and, as such, were but its earthly keepers.

This view helps to explain why books were as much a wonder to the ancients as the mastodons, Cyclopses, and cities of gold they encountered in the books themselves, especially prior to the invention of print.

Just as you might not glimpse such a marvel more than once in your life, if you were lucky, neither might you get more than hours or days with a book, of which there might be only three or seven.

The ancient book commanded VIP status, the standing, essentially, of a mythical beast or king. You looked on a book with awe and handled it fittingly. This
was definitely the case with the Bible, the word of God and so but a few steps from Him.

Had God not deemed you worthy of knowledge, you would never have received it. Therefore, as you wouldn’t speak God’s name in vain, neither did you spout your knowledge to flaunt your power or impress your fellows, but to enhance their lives as others had enhanced yours with theirs.

But once Galileo learned it wasn’t God who moved matter but precise laws of motion, God was relegated to the status of figurehead.

By the time Nietzsche stepped up and killed Him a few hundred years later, God was no more in the books than he was in a bolt of lighting.

Books, and the knowledge they contained, were the product of man himself, got by him through ingenuity, industry, perseverance, discipline, will. His hard work entitled him to stand above his fellows. He was better because he was smarter, and because he worked harder.

Nowadays, for my old friend, and for men like James’ snobby pals, knowledge is often a weapon to be wielded on behalf of the terrified ego.

Such folks are lost anyhow, runs the implicit logic, delivered into this life of hostility and hardship to fend for themselves, lone as the eagle up high. Why not let everyone else know you too can soar to great heights, and, while you’re at it, show them how much better you are than they?

I also see Montale’s concern with “true culture” as a concern for human connection, at whose heart lays knowledge that is sacred.

“True culture” is the best a society has to offer. Society being the individuals who constitute it, we are each of us the singular means by which culture’s best is offered, one to the other, in a daisy chain, I’d like to think, of cheer and good will.

For Montale, to “forget” everything we “know” would be to remember that we’re not our knowledge but, like the ancients, providential conduits through which to educate, enlighten, and, sometimes, when the days are good, entertain our peers—in short, to improve the quality of our lives and theirs.

The other question I can’t help asking is the ugly twin to Montale’s.

If true culture is what remains in a man after he’s forgotten all he’s learned, what remains in a man when he’s forgotten all the horrors he’s witnessed and suffered?

And what remains of a man who can’t forget?

And how do these matters affect our relationship to culture and art?

I sometimes think knowledge has become the wall we use to keep between our horrors and us, or, if possible, to confine those horrors like a spirit in a bottle, or, again, maybe, even to confine the horrors we think we ourselves have become.

In this sense, a compulsion to plague our fellows with an endless torrent of “knowledge” is just a variation on Twain’s need to remember what never occurred.

The “knowledge” we spout doesn’t constitute records in their own right but refers to the records from which the knowledge derives: the knowledge is no more a “thing” than the words we use to speak it. In effect, consequently—despite our effort—our words are “useless.”

As for my old friend, when all is said and done,
even the most fragile of emotional connections to his knowledge would fail. The man may contain multitudes, but a computer he is not.

Today, without the actual records, he too is useless and, useless, obsolete.
Paging Dr. Freud: Prince Cracked Something Open in Me

When I told philosopher Simon Critchley about the time I saw Prince perform “Pussy Control” on the VH1 Fashion Awards and how it changed my life forever, his response was perfect. Without skipping a beat, he said: “Paging Dr. Freud.”

I was interviewing Critchley because he’d just released his book on David Bowie. Prince came up in our conversation when Critchley wondered aloud who else had done something similar or equivalent to what Bowie had done: who else had been a constantly morphing identity, had deconstructed society’s strict binaries, had pushed some sort of Heideggerian deworlding upon his listeners, had allowed them to “become some other kind of self, something freer, something more queer, more honest, more open, and more exciting.”

In the beginning of his Bowie book, Critchley includes a chapter called “My First Sexual Experience.” It opens, “Let me begin with a rather embarrassing confession: no person has given me greater pleasure throughout my life than David Bowie.” He goes on to recount the time that he saw Bowie perform “Starman” on Top of the Pops in 1972. After his mother bought the “Starman” single later that week, Critchley found himself alone with the record player, and he flipped the single over to listen to its b-side: “The sheer bodily excitement of that noise was almost too much to bear. I guess it sounded like...sex. Not that I knew what sex was. I was a virgin. I’d never even kissed anyone and had never wanted to. As Mick Ronson’s guitar collided with my internal organs, I felt something strong and strange in my body that I’d never experienced before. Where was suffragette city? How did I get there? I was twelve years old. My life had begun.”

When I was twelve years old, I had my “first sexual experience” watching Prince perform at the VH1 Fashion Awards. I haven’t watched it since. When I was young, there weren’t endless clips of video on the internet where I could have easily found it and rewatched ad nauseam. And I hadn’t taped the VH1 Fashion Awards on VHS because I had no clue what I was about to witness. To be honest, I don’t even know why I was watching the VH1 Fashion Awards: I suppose I did love award shows and music television, and there just weren’t that many channels back then. Since the advent of YouTube, there has been a part of me that wants to go back and watch the video. But a louder voice in me worries that it won’t live up to my remembrances, that as a memory it has crystallized into something more than real, and that the truth of the performance wouldn’t, couldn’t, embody all it has become for me. If what I recall here is grossly misleading or completely wrong, I apologize, but my memory of the performance is as follows.

Prince comes out on stage in a classic Princely purple suit, with shoulder pads and high heels and a bright red scarf covering his face. At twelve, I don’t know Prince well, but I know enough to know that this is normal for Prince—that this is his “schtick.” He dances around and starts singing the first verse until, suddenly, the big reveal. The “Prince” on stage is actually his soon-to-be-wife, backup dancer Mayte. She starts stripping off her Prince attire...
he didn’t know the rules—or didn’t care—and let me purchase the album anyway. I ran home and played all three discs nonstop for a year. The first thing I figured out, rather quickly, was that while I’d thought I only knew five Prince songs (four of which were on this three-disc set), I actually knew about twenty of the fifty-six songs across these three discs: “Kiss,” “Uptown,” “When You Were Mine,” “Let’s Go Crazy,” “Purple Rain,” “Nothing Compares 2 U,” “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” “Raspberry Beret,” “Cream,” “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” etc. So many of these songs sounded familiar; so many had entered my life previously without my having noticed it. Within a year’s time, I owned most of Prince’s discography, which at that time was twenty albums, if you included The Hits / The B-Sides. I skipped meals at school to save up the lunch money my parents gave me to buy his CDs. “Welcome 2 the dawn,” as Prince would say.

A few years after that, I was on Napster downloading all of his bootleg songs. The AOL dial-up modem was never fast enough. It felt like it took months to download “Extralovable” and “Moonbeam Levels” and “Purple Music.”

I even wrote a college paper on transportation metaphors in Prince songs, focusing not just on the obvious (“Little Red Corverte” and “Delirious”), but on one of my (and Questlove’s) favorites: “Lady Cab Driver.” In that song, Prince sings, “Don’t know where I’m goin’ ‘cause I don’t know where I’ve been, so put your foot on the gas, let’s drive.”

I didn’t know where I was going, but I had soon turned all my friends onto Prince. I started a band called ManDrake and his ManJam—essentially just to emulate him. I joined the NPG Music Club and became an official “fam”—not “fan,” use the correct term. Being an official member meant I got access to the best seats at his shows.
Once I saw him in concert at Madison Square Garden in the second row. I looked back, and a few rows behind me was Puff Daddy. I can tell you now that few things are more satisfying than knowing you have better seats at a Prince concert than Puff Daddy.

The woman I was sitting next to turned to me at one point while we were waiting for Prince to appear and asked, “Are you here alone?”

“Yup.”

“That’s cool. What’s your favorite Prince song?”

She was testing me. But I knew my answer. It had been the same song since I purchased The Hits / The B-Sides all those many years ago. My second and third and fourth favorite Prince songs would shift and swap—sometimes I’d prefer “Strange Relationship,” sometimes “17 Days,” sometimes “The Ballad of Dorothy Parker,” sometimes “Anotherloverholenyohead”—but my favorite song remains the same to this day: a b-side called “She’s Always in My Hair.” I told her and she smiled. I passed the test. But before our conversation and newfound friendship could blossom, the concert began. Prince was playing in the round, and when he came to our side of the circular stage, the girls in the front row reached their hands up and he touched them. They screamed. The woman next to me reached over the girls in front of her and got a touch too. She looked at me and said, “Are you really not going to touch Prince when you have a chance?” I felt accused of some heinous crime. Without thinking, I thrust my arm into the sweaty mess of appendages and Prince grabbed my hand. She was shocked. I don’t think she expected her goading to work. Most of the men around the first two rows were acting tough, not trying to get in on the Prince touch. She whispered to me, “You are the coolest white dude I’ve ever met.” I thought I might never wash my hand again.

Five days before Prince died, I came out to my parents. Now I am thirty-two years old and my life has begun again. Prince cracked something open in me when I was twelve, and it took twenty years for me to fully understand it and accept it and live it. I’ve read lots of people in the last twenty-four hours saying Prince gave them permission to be who they are, and that’s true for me too. But what people are really saying when they claim this isn’t that he actually gave them permission, but that he made them realize that they didn’t need permission—that no one gets to tell you who you are. It’s hard enough to figure out who you are yourself. As Critchley wrote of Bowie, “Through the fakery and because of it, we feel a truth that leads us beyond ourselves, toward the imagination of some other way of being. Bowie’s genius allows us to break the superficial link that seems to connect authenticity to truth. There is truth to Bowie’s art, a moodful truth, a heard truth, a felt truth, an embodied truth. Something heard with and within the body.”

The same could and should be said of Prince’s art. His “controversial” mantra is distilled in that final chant from “Controversy”: “People call me rude. I wish we all were nude. I wish there was no black or white. I wish there were no rules.” Prince took numerous pseudonyms, changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol, claimed he had multiple personalities living within him, made music in just about every recognizable genre, went against every stereotype, broke every boundary, deconstructed every binary—he always seemed to be searching for some other way of being, which is perhaps the best way to live, to constantly be falling into the new you-performance. Never being authentic, but always being true. I’m excited at the prospect of these new, true horizons for myself and the navigation of this identity, but I am also terrified, of
course. For Prince there was always a terror in this too, a sadness, a confusion—as often as there was joy and excitement, if you listen beyond the hits. Coming out so late feels strange. I feel stupid for not figuring it out earlier. I was a Prince fam for twenty years, and I still couldn’t face this? And yet, there’s something that feels perfectly Princely in that confusion and that struggle and that disjointedness. I’m still not quite sure what I’m doing, not quite sure who I am or what I want exactly, but I am finally okay with that strong and strange thing in my body that I always knew but never acknowledged.

I’m thinking again of those lyrics from “Lady Cab Driver”: “Don’t know where I’m goin’ ‘cause I don’t know where I’ve been, so put your foot on the gas, let’s drive.” I’ve always been a driver, a roadtripper. I’ve driven cross-country twenty-eight times and been to all forty-eight continental United States, three times or more each. I’ve always put my foot on the gas because I was always searching for something. While the rest of my friends were getting married and having babies, I was on the road, still searching, still imagining some other way of being. I haven’t found that thing per se, but now I know that not knowing where you’re going is even more freeing than knowing. I’m so happy I came out while Prince was still alive, even if the overlap was only a few days. I wish I was able to have told people I was gay earlier—I wish I could have told myself I was gay earlier—but I also know, thanks to Prince, that we each have our own car and our own road and all we can do is drive it, always becoming some other kind of self, something freer, something more queer, more honest, more open, and more exciting.

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Great Thinkers on Identity

A famous line from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “To thine own self be true.”

“Who am I?” Questions André Breton in the opening of *Nadja.*

Jacques Derrida explored this question of identity, this question of self: “Who am I not in the sense of who am I but rather who is this I that can say who? What is the I and what becomes of responsibility once the identity of the I trembles in secret?”

According to Ezra Pound: “The real meditation is the meditation on one’s identity. Ah, voilà une chose! You try it. You try finding out why you’re you and not somebody else. And who in the blazes are you anyhow? Ah, voilà une chose!”

Lewis Carroll had his hookah-smoking caterpillar boil it down to this: “Who are you?”

In *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë had a character respond to the question with: “Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise.”

“Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which one’s nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one’s nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one’s robes.” Identified James Baldwin.

“Perhaps it’s impossible to wear an identity without becoming what you pretend to be.”
—Orson Scott Card.

“Dreams are manifestations of identities.” Wrote Kathy Acker.

“Because no man can ever feel his own identity aright except his eyes be closed; as if darkness were indeed the proper element of our essences, though light be more congenial to our clayey part.” Expressed Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*.

Salman Rushdie dealt with the caterpillar’s famous question as well, in *Midnight’s Children*: “Who what am I? My answer: I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each ‘I’, every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you’ll have to swallow the world.”

Another answer, this one by Virginia Satir: “I am Me. In all the world, there is no one else exactly like me. Everything that comes out of me is authentically mine, because I alone chose it—I own everything about me: my
body, my feelings, my mouth, my voice, all my actions, whether they be to others or myself. I own my fantasies, my dreams, my hopes, my fears. I own my triumphs and successes, all my failures and mistakes.”

“I think, therefore I am.” According to René Descartes.

“I am, therefore I think.” Rebutted Ayn Rand.

“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.” According to Erik Erikson.

Sergio Chejfec: “For a long time, we assume we know who we are, until the moment we fully realize who that is; in that moment, identity is no longer predictable, but rather takes the form of a truth that, like any other, can become a sentence with no more than a change of perspective.”

“I is merely one of the world’s instantaneous spasms.” Wrote Clarice Lispector.

“I contain multitudes.” Professed Walt Whitman.

Which Virginia Woolf seemed to second when she wrote: “I am not one and simple, but complex and many.”

“I am another.” A haunting confession from Arthur Rimbaud.

Oscar Wilde admitted: “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”

“When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.” Asserted Ralph Ellison.

Philip K. Dick opined: “It is the basic condition of life, to be required to violate your own identity. At some time, every creature which lives must do so. It is the ultimate shadow, the defeat of creation; this is the curse at work, the curse that feeds on all life. Everywhere in the universe.”

“The minute you or anybody else knows what you are you are not it, you are what you or anybody else knows you are and as everything in living is made up of finding out what you are it is extraordinarily difficult really not to know what you are and yet to be that thing.” Thought Gertrude Stein.

Samuel Beckett admitted: “And even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate.”

For as Alan Watts described the situation: “Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth.”

Remember Shakespeare’s Hamlet begins with “Who’s there?”
The Nose

I.

On the 25th March, 18—, a very strange occurrence took place in St Petersburg. On the Ascension Avenue there lived a barber of the name of Ivan Jakovlevitch. He had lost his family name, and on his sign-board, on which was depicted the head of a gentleman with one cheek soaped, the only inscription to be read was, “Blood-letting done here.”

On this particular morning he awoke pretty early. Becoming aware of the smell of fresh-baked bread, he sat up a little in bed, and saw his wife, who had a special partiality for coffee, in the act of taking some fresh-baked bread out of the oven.

“To-day, Prasskovna Ossipovna,” he said, “I do not want any coffee; I should like a fresh loaf with onions.”

“The blockhead may eat bread only as far as I am concerned,” said his wife to herself; “then I shall have a chance of getting some coffee.” And she threw a loaf on the table.

For the sake of propriety, Ivan Jakovlevitch drew a coat over his shirt, sat down at the table, shook out some salt for himself, prepared two onions, assumed a serious expression, and began to cut the bread. After he had cut the loaf in two halves, he looked, and to his great astonishment saw something whitish sticking in it. He carefully poked round it with his knife, and felt it with his finger.

“Quite firmly fixed!” he murmured in his beard.

“What can it be?”

He put in his finger, and drew out—a nose!
NIKOLAI GOGOL

was quite shiny, and instead of the three buttons, only the threads by which they had been fastened were to be seen.

Ivan Jakovlevitch was a great cynic, and when Kovaloff, the member of the Municipal Committee, said to him, as was his custom while being shaved, “Your hands always smell, Ivan Jakovlevitch!” the latter answered, “What do they smell of?” “I don’t know, my friend, but they smell very strong.” Ivan Jakovlevitch after taking a pinch of snuff would then, by way of reprisals, set to work to soap him on the cheek, the upper lip, behind the ears, on the chin, and everywhere.

This worthy man now stood on the Isaac Bridge. At first he looked round him, then he leant on the railings of the bridge, as though he wished to look down and see how many fish were swimming past, and secretly threw the nose, wrapped in a little piece of cloth, into the water. He felt as though a ton weight had been lifted off him, and laughed cheerfully. Instead, however, of going to shave any officials, he turned his steps to a building, the sign-board of which bore the legend “Teas served here,” in order to have a glass of punch, when suddenly he perceived at the other end of the bridge a police inspector of imposing exterior, with long whiskers, three-cornered hat, and sword hanging at his side. He nearly fainted; but the police inspector beckoned to him with his hand and said, “Come here, my dear sir.”

Ivan Jakovlevitch, knowing how a gentleman should behave, took his hat off quickly, went towards the police inspector and said, “I hope you are in the best of health.”

“Ivan Jakovlevitch, knowing how a gentleman should behave, took his hat off quickly, went towards the police inspector and said, “I hope you are in the best of health.”

A feeling of despair began to take possession of him; all the more as the streets became more thronged and the merchants began to open their shops. At last he resolved to go to the Isaac Bridge, where perhaps he might succeed in throwing it into the Neva.

But my conscience is a little uneasy that I have not yet given any detailed information about Ivan Jakovlevitch, an estimable man in many ways.

Like every honest Russian tradesman, Ivan Jakovlevitch was a terrible drunkard, and although he shaved other people’s faces every day, his own was always unshaved. His coat (he never wore an overcoat) was quite mottled, i.e. it had been black, but become brownish-yellow; the collar different. I don’t understand the matter at all.” And Ivan Jakovlevitch was silent. The thought that the police might find him in unlawful possession of a nose and arrest him, robbed him of all presence of mind. Already he began to have visions of a red collar with silver braid and of a sword—and he trembled all over.

At last he finished dressing himself, and to the accompaniment of the emphatic exhortations of his spouse, he wrapped up the nose in a cloth and issued into the street.

He intended to lose it somewhere—either at somebody’s door, or in a public square, or in a narrow alley; but just then, in order to complete his bad luck, he was met by an acquaintance, who showered inquiries upon him. “Hullo, Ivan Jakovlevitch! Whom are you going to shave so early in the morning?” etc., so that he could find no suitable opportunity to do what he wanted. Later on he did let the nose drop, but a sentry bore down upon him with his halberd, and said, “Look out! You have let something drop!” and Ivan Jakovlevitch was obliged to pick it up and put it in his pocket.

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Ivan Jakovlevitch, knowing how a gentleman should behave, took his hat off quickly, went towards the police inspector and said, “I hope you are in the best of health.”

“Never mind my health. Tell me, my friend, why you were standing on the bridge.”

“By heaven, gracious sir, I was on the way to my customers, and only looked down to see if the river was flowing quickly.”
learned committee-man—but Russia is such a wonderful country that when one committee-man is spoken of all the others from Riga to Kamschatka refer it to themselves. The same is also true of all other titled officials. Kovaloff had been a Caucasian committee-man two years previously, and could not forget that he had occupied that position; but in order to enhance his own importance, he never called himself “committee-man” but “Major.”

“Listen, my dear,” he used to say when he met an old woman in the street who sold shirt-fronts; “go to my house in Sadovaia Street and ask ‘Does Major Kovaloff live here?’ Any child can tell you where it is.” Accordingly we will call him for the future Major Kovaloff. It was his custom to take a daily walk on the Neffsky Avenue. The collar of his shirt was always remarkably clean and stiff. He wore the same style of whiskers as those that are worn by governors of districts, architects, and regimental doctors; in short, all those who have full red cheeks and play a good game of whist. These whiskers grow straight across the cheek towards the nose.

Major Kovaloff wore a number of seals, on some of which were engraved armorial bearings, and others the names of the days of the week. He had come to St Petersburg with the view of obtaining some position corresponding to his rank, if possible that of vice-governor of a province; but he was prepared to be content with that of a bailiff in some department or other. He was, moreover, not disinclined to marry, but only such a lady who could bring with her a dowry of two hundred thousand roubles. Accordingly, the reader can judge for himself what his sensations were when he found in his face, instead of a fairly symmetrical nose, a broad, flat vacancy.

To increase his misfortune, not a single droshky was to be seen in the street, and so he was obliged to proceed
on foot. He wrapped himself up in his cloak, and held his handkerchief to his face as though his nose bled. “But perhaps it is all only my imagination; it is impossible that a nose should drop off in such a silly way,” he thought, and stepped into a confectioner’s shop in order to look into the mirror.

Fortunately no customer was in the shop; only small shop-boys were cleaning it out, and putting chairs and tables straight. Others with sleepy faces were carrying fresh cakes on trays, and yesterday’s newspapers stained with coffee were still lying about. “Thank God no one is here!” he said to himself. “Now I can look at myself leisurely.”

He stepped gingerly up to a mirror and looked. “What an infernal face!” he exclaimed, and spat with disgust. “If there were only something there instead of the nose, but there is absolutely nothing.”

He bit his lips with vexation, left the confectioner’s, and resolved, quite contrary to his habit, neither to look nor smile at anyone on the street. Suddenly he halted as if rooted to the spot before a door, where something extraordinary happened. A carriage drew up at the entrance; the carriage door was opened, and a gentleman in uniform came out and hurried up the steps. How great was Kovaloff’s terror and astonishment when he saw that it was his own nose!

At this extraordinary sight, everything seemed to turn round with him. He felt as though he could hardly keep upright on his legs; but, though trembling all over as though with fever, he resolved to wait till the nose should return to the carriage. After about two minutes the nose actually came out again. It wore a gold-embroidered uniform with a stiff, high collar, trousers of chamois leather, and a sword hung at its side. The hat, adorned with a plume, showed that it held the rank of a state-councillor. It was obvious that it was paying “duty-calls.” It looked round on both sides, called to the coachman “Drive on,” and got into the carriage, which drove away.

Poor Kovaloff nearly lost his reason. He did not know what to think of this extraordinary procedure. And indeed how was it possible that the nose, which only yesterday he had on his face, and which could neither walk nor drive, should wear a uniform. He ran after the carriage, which fortunately had stopped a short way off before the Grand Bazar of Moscow. He hurried towards it and pressed through a crowd of beggar-women with their faces bound up, leaving only two openings for the eyes, over whom he had formerly so often made merry.

There were only a few people in front of the Bazar. Kovaloff was so agitated that he could decide on nothing, and looked for the nose everywhere. At last he saw it standing before a shop. It seemed half buried in its stiff collar, and was attentively inspecting the wares displayed.

“How can I get at it?” thought Kovaloff. “Everything—the uniform, the hat, and so on—show that it is a state-councillor. How the deuce has that happened?” He began to cough discreetly near it, but the nose paid him not the least attention.

“Honourable sir,” said Kovaloff at last, plucking up courage, “honourable sir.”

“What do you want?” asked the nose, and turned round.

“It seems to me strange, most respected sir—you should know where you belong—and I find you all of a sudden—where? Judge yourself.”

“Pardon me, I do not understand what you are talking about. Explain yourself more distinctly.”

“How shall I make my meaning plainer to him?” Then plucking up fresh courage, he continued, “Naturally—besides I am a Major. You must admit it is not befitting...
that I should go about without a nose. An old apple-
woman on the Ascension Bridge may carry on her business
without one, but since I am on the look out for a post;
besides in many houses I am acquainted with ladies of high
position—Madame Tchektyriev, wife of a state-councillor,
and many others. So you see—I do not know, honourable
sir, what you—” (here the Major shrugged his shoulders).
“Pardon me; if one regards the matter from the point of
view of duty and honour—you will yourself understand—”
“I understand nothing,” answered the nose. “I repeat,
please explain yourself more distinctly.”
“Honourable sir,” said Kovaloff with dignity, “I do not
know how I am to understand your words. It seems to me
the matter is as clear as possible. Or do you wish—but you
are after all my own nose!”

The nose looked at the Major and wrinkled its
forehead. “There you are wrong, respected sir; I am myself.
Besides, there can be no close relations between us. To
judge by the buttons of your uniform, you must be in
quite a different department to mine.” So saying, the nose
turned away.

Kovaloff was completely puzzled; he did not know
what to do, and still less what to think. At this moment
he heard the pleasant rustling of a lady’s dress, and there
approached an elderly lady wearing a quantity of lace, and
by her side her graceful daughter in a white dress which
set off her slender figure to advantage, and wearing a light
straw hat. Behind the ladies marched a tall lackey with
long whiskers.

Kovaloff advanced a few steps, adjusted his cambric
collar, arranged his seals which hung by a little gold chain,
and with smiling face fixed his eyes on the graceful lady,
who bowed lightly like a spring flower, and raised to her
brow her little white hand with transparent fingers. He
smiled still more when he spied under the brim of her hat
her little round chin, and part of her cheek faintly tinted
with rose-colour. But suddenly he sprang back as though
he had been scorched. He remembered that he had nothing
but an absolute blank in place of a nose, and tears started to
his eyes. He turned round in order to tell the gentleman in
uniform that he was only a state-councillor in appearance,
but really a scoundrel and a rascal, and nothing else but his
own nose; but the nose was no longer there. He had had
time to go, doubtless in order to continue his visits.

His disappearance plunged Kovaloff into despair. He
went back and stood for a moment under a colonnade,
looking round him on all sides in hope of perceiving the
nose somewhere. He remembered very well that it wore a
hat with a plume in it and a gold-embroidered uniform; but
he had not noticed the shape of the cloak, nor the colour
of the carriages and the horses, nor even whether a lackey
stood behind it, and, if so, what sort of livery he wore.
Moreover, so many carriages were passing that it would
have been difficult to recognise one, and even if he had
done so, there would have been no means of stopping it.

The day was fine and sunny. An immense crowd was
passing to and fro in the Neffsky Avenue; a variegated
stream of ladies flowed along the pavement. There was
his acquaintance, the Privy Councillor, whom he was
accustomed to style “General,” especially when strangers
were present. There was Larygin, his intimate friend who
always lost in the evenings at whist; and there another
Major, who had obtained the rank of committee-man in
the Caucasus, beckoned to him.

“Go to the deuce!” said Kovaloff sotto voce. “Hi!
coachman, drive me straight to the superintendent
of police.” So saying, he got into a drosky and continued to
shout all the time to the coachman “Drive hard!”
“Is the police superintendent at home?” he asked on entering the front hall.
“No, sir,” answered the porter, “he has just gone out.”
“Ah, just as I thought!”
“Yes,” continued the porter, “he has only just gone out; if you had been a moment earlier you would perhaps have caught him.”

Kovaloff, still holding his handkerchief to his face, re-entered the droshky and cried in a despairing voice “Drive on!”

“Where?” asked the coachman.
“Straight on!”
“But how? There are cross-roads here. Shall I go to the right or the left?”

This question made Kovaloff reflect. In his situation it was necessary to have recourse to the police; not because the affair had anything to do with them directly but because they acted more promptly than other authorities. As for demanding any explanation from the department to which the nose claimed to belong, it would, he felt, be useless, for the answers of that gentleman showed that he regarded nothing as sacred, and he might just as likely have lied in this matter as in saying that he had never seen Kovaloff.

But just as he was about to order the coachman to drive to the police-station, the idea occurred to him that this rascally scoundrel who, at their first meeting, had behaved so disloyally towards him, might, profiting by the delay, quit the city secretly; and then all his searching would be in vain, or might last over a whole month. Finally, as though visited with a heavenly inspiration, he resolved to go directly to an advertisement office, and to advertise the loss of his nose, giving all its distinctive characteristics in detail, so that anyone who found it might bring it at once to him, or at any rate inform him where it lived. Having decided on this course, he ordered the coachman to drive to the advertisement office, and all the way he continued to punch him in the back—“Quick, scoundrel! quick!”

“Yes, sir!” answered the coachman, lashing his shaggy horse with the reins.

At last they arrived, and Kovaloff, out of breath, rushed into a little room where a grey-haired official, in an old coat and with spectacles on his nose, sat at a table holding his pen between his teeth, counting a heap of copper coins.

“Who takes in the advertisements here?” exclaimed Kovaloff.

“At your service, sir,” answered the grey-haired functionary, looking up and then fastening his eyes again on the heap of coins before him.

“I wish to place an advertisement in your paper—”

“Have the kindness to wait a minute,” answered the official, putting down figures on paper with one hand, and with the other moving two balls on his calculating-frame.

A lackey, whose silver-laced coat showed that he served in one of the houses of the nobility, was standing by the table with a note in his hand, and speaking in a lively tone, by way of showing himself sociable. “Would you believe it, sir, this little dog is really not worth twenty-four kopecks, and for my own part I would not give a farthing for it; but the countess is quite gone upon it, and offers a hundred roubles’ reward to anyone who finds it. To tell you the truth, the tastes of these people are very different from ours; they don’t mind giving five hundred or a thousand roubles for a poodle or a pointer, provided it be a good one.”

The official listened with a serious air while counting the number of letters contained in the note. At either side of the table stood a number of housekeepers, clerks and porters, carrying notes. The writer of one wished to sell
“How has it disappeared? I don’t understand.”

“I can’t tell you how, but the important point is that now it walks about the city itself a state-councillor. That is why I want you to advertise that whoever gets hold of it should bring it as soon as possible to me. Consider; how can I live without such a prominent part of my body? It is not as if it were merely a little toe; I would only have to put my foot in my boot and no one would notice its absence. Every Thursday I call on the wife of M. Tchektyriev, the state-councillor; Madame Podtotchina, a Colonel’s wife who has a very pretty daughter, is one of my acquaintances; and what am I to do now? I cannot appear before them like this.”

The official compressed his lips and reflected. “No, I cannot insert an advertisement like that,” he said after a long pause.

“What! Why not?”

“Because it might compromise the paper. Suppose everyone could advertise that his nose was lost. People already say that all sorts of nonsense and lies are inserted.”

“But this is not nonsense! There is nothing of that sort in my case.”

“You think so? Listen a minute. Last week there was a case very like it. An official came, just as you have done, bringing an advertisement for the insertion of which he paid two roubles, sixty-three kopecks; and this advertisement simply announced the loss of a black-haired poodle. There did not seem to be anything out of the way in it, but it was really a satire; by the poodle was meant the cashier of some establishment or other.”

“No, I cannot insert your advertisement.”

“But my nose really has disappeared!”
“That is a matter for a doctor. There are said to be people who can provide you with any kind of nose you like. But I see that you are a witty man, and like to have your little joke.”

“But I swear to you on my word of honour. Look at my face yourself.”

“Why put yourself out?” continued the official, taking a pinch of snuff. “All the same, if you don’t mind,” he added with a touch of curiosity, “I should like to have a look at it.”

The committee-man removed the handkerchief from before his face.

“It certainly does look odd,” said the official. “It is perfectly flat like a freshly fried pancake. It is hardly credible.”

“Very well. Are you going to hesitate any more? You see it is impossible to refuse to advertise my loss. I shall be particularly obliged to you, and I shall be glad that this incident has procured me the pleasure of making your acquaintance.” The Major, we see, did not even shrink from a slight humiliation.

“It certainly is not difficult to advertise it,” replied the official; “but I don’t see what good it would do you. However, if you lay so much stress on it, you should apply to someone who has a skilful pen, so that he may describe it as a curious, natural freak, and publish the article in the Northern Bee” (here he took another pinch) “for the benefit of youthful readers” (he wiped his nose), “or simply as a matter worthy of arousing public curiosity.”

The committee-man felt completely discouraged. He let his eyes fall absent-mindedly on a daily paper in which theatrical performances were advertised. Reading there the name of an actress whom he knew to be pretty, he involuntarily smiled, and his hand sought his pocket to see if he had a blue ticket—for in Kovaloff’s opinion superior officers like himself should not take a lesser-priced seat; but the thought of his lost nose suddenly spoilt everything.

The official himself seemed touched at his difficult position. Desiring to console him, he tried to express his sympathy by a few polite words. “I much regret,” he said, “your extraordinary mishap. Will you not try a pinch of snuff? It clears the head, banishes depression, and is a good preventive against hæmorrhoids.”

So saying, he reached his snuff-box out to Kovaloff, skilfully concealing at the same time the cover, which was adorned with the portrait of some lady or other.

This act, quite innocent in itself, exasperated Kovaloff. “I don’t understand what you find to joke about in the matter,” he exclaimed angrily. “Don’t you see that I lack precisely the essential feature for taking snuff? The devil take your snuff-box. I don’t want to look at snuff now, not even the best, certainly not your vile stuff!”

So saying, he left the advertisement office in a state of profound irritation, and went to the commissary of police. He arrived just as this dignitary was reclining on his couch, and saying to himself with a sigh of satisfaction, “Yes, I shall make a nice little sum out of that.” It might be expected, therefore, that the committee-man’s visit would be quite inopportune.

This police commissary was a great patron of all the arts and industries; but what he liked above everything else was a cheque. “I don’t understand what you find to joke about in the matter,” he exclaimed angrily. “Don’t you see that I lack precisely the essential feature for taking snuff? The devil take your snuff-box. I don’t want to look at snuff now, not even the best, certainly not your vile stuff?”

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This police commissary was a great patron of all the arts and industries; but what he liked above everything else was a cheque. “It is a thing,” he used to say, “to which it is not easy to find an equivalent; it requires no food, it does not take up much room, it stays in one’s pocket, and if it falls, it is not broken.”

The commissary accorded Kovaloff a fairly frigid reception, saying that the afternoon was not the best time to come with a case, that nature required one to rest a
little after eating (this showed the committee-man that
the commissary was acquainted with the aphorisms of the
ancient sages), and that respectable people did not have
their noses stolen.

The last allusion was too direct. We must remember
that Kovaloff was a very sensitive man. He did not mind
anything said against him as an individual, but he could
not endure any reflection on his rank or social position. He
even believed that in comedies one might allow attacks on
junior officers, but never on their seniors.

The commissary’s reception of him hurt his feelings
so much that he raised his head proudly, and said with
dignity, “After such insulting expressions on your part, I
have nothing more to say.” And he left the place.

He reached his house quite wearied out. It was already
growing dark. After all his fruitless search, his room
seemed to him melancholy and even ugly. In the vestibule
he saw his valet Ivan stretched on the leather couch and
amusing himself by spitting at the ceiling, which he
did very cleverly, hitting every time the same spot. His
servant’s equanimity enraged him; he struck him on the
forehead with his hat, and said, “You good-for-nothing,
you are always playing the fool!”

Ivan rose quickly and hastened to take off his master’s
cloak.

Once in his room, the Major, tired and depressed,
threw himself in an armchair and, after sighing a while,
began to soliloquise:

“In heaven’s name, why should such a misfortune
befall me? If I had lost an arm or a leg, it would be less
insupportable; but a man without a nose! Devil take it!—
what is he good for? He is only fit to be thrown out of the
window. If it had been taken from me in war or in a duel,
or if I had lost it by my own fault! But it has disappeared

inexplicably. But no! it is impossible,” he continued after
reflecting a few moments, “it is incredible that a nose can
disappear like that—quite incredible. I must be dreaming,
or suffering from some hallucination; perhaps I swallowed,
by mistake instead of water, the brandy with which I rub
my chin after being shaved. That fool of an Ivan must have
forgotten to take it away, and I must have swallowed it.”

In order to find out whether he were really drunk,
the Major pinched himself so hard that he unvoluntarily
uttered a cry. The pain convinced him that he was quite
wide awake. He walked slowly to the looking-glass and
at first closed his eyes, hoping to see his nose suddenly in
its proper place; but on opening them, he started back.
“What a hideous sight!” he exclaimed.

It was really incomprehensible. One might easily lose a
button, a silver spoon, a watch, or something similar; but a
loss like this, and in one’s own dwelling!

After considering all the circumstances, Major Kovaloff
felt inclined to suppose that the cause of all his trouble
should be laid at the door of Madame Podtotchina, the
Colonel’s wife, who wished him to marry her daughter. He
himself paid her court readily, but always avoided coming to
the point. And when the lady one day told him point-blank
that she wished him to marry her daughter, he gently drew
back, declaring that he was still too young, and that he had
to serve five years more before he would be forty-two. This
must be the reason why the lady, in revenge, had resolved
to bring him into disgrace, and had hired two sorceresses
for that object. One thing was certain—his nose had not
been cut off; no one had entered his room, and as for Ivan
Jakovlevitch—he had been shaved by him on Wednesday,
and during that day and the whole of Thursday his nose had
been there, as he knew and well remembered. Moreover, if
his nose had been cut off he would naturally have felt pain,
and doubtless the wound would not have healed so quickly, nor would the surface have been as flat as a pancake.

All kinds of plans passed through his head: should he bring a legal action against the wife of a superior officer, or should he go to her and charge her openly with her treachery?

His reflections were interrupted by a sudden light, which shone through all the chinks of the door, showing that Ivan had lit the wax-candles in the vestibule. Soon Ivan himself came in with the lights. Kovaloff quickly seized a handkerchief and covered the place where his nose had been the evening before, so that his blockhead of a servant might not gape with his mouth wide open when he saw his master's extraordinary appearance.

Scarcely had Ivan returned to the vestibule than a stranger's voice was heard there.

"Does Major Kovaloff live here?" it asked.

"Come in!" said the Major, rising rapidly and opening the door.

He saw a police official of pleasant appearance, with grey whiskers and fairly full cheeks—the same who at the commencement of this story was standing at the end of the Isaac Bridge. "You have lost your nose?" he asked.

"Exactly so."

"It has just been found."

"What—do you say?" stammered Major Kovaloff.

Joy had suddenly paralysed his tongue. He stared at the police commissary on whose cheeks and full lips fell the flickering light of the candle.

"How was it?" he asked at last.

"By a very singular chance. It has been arrested just as it was getting into a carriage for Riga. Its passport had been made out some time ago in the name of an official; and what is still more strange, I myself took it at first for a gentleman. Fortunately I had my glasses with me, and then I saw at once that it was a nose. I am shortsighted, you know, and as you stand before me I cannot distinguish your nose, your beard, or anything else. My mother-in-law can hardly see at all."

Kovaloff was beside himself with excitement. "Where is it? Where? I will hasten there at once."

"Don't put yourself out. Knowing that you need it, I have brought it with me. Another singular thing is that the principal culprit in the matter is a scoundrel of a barber living in the Ascension Avenue, who is now safely locked up. I had long suspected him of drunkenness and theft; only the day before yesterday he stole some buttons in a shop. Your nose is quite uninjured." So saying, the police commissary put his hand in his pocket and brought out the nose wrapped up in paper.

"Yes, yes, that is it!" exclaimed Kovaloff. "Will you not stay and drink a cup of tea with me?"

"I should like to very much, but I cannot. I must go at once to the House of Correction. The cost of living is very high nowadays. My mother-in-law lives with me, and there are several children; the eldest is very hopeful and intelligent, but I have no means for their education."

After the commissary's departure, Kovaloff remained for some time plunged in a kind of vague reverie, and did not recover full consciousness for several moments, so great was the effect of this unexpected good news. He placed the recovered nose carefully in the palm of his hand, and examined it again with the greatest attention.

"Yes, this is it!" he said to himself. "Here is the heat-boil on the left side, which came out yesterday." And he nearly laughed aloud with delight.

But nothing is permanent in this world. Joy in the second moment of its arrival is already less keen than in
said that did not matter; then, making him turn his face to the right, he felt the vacant place and said “H’m!” then he made him turn it to the left and did the same; finally he again gave him a fillip with his finger, so that the Major started like a horse whose teeth are being examined. After this experiment, the doctor shook his head and said, “No, it cannot be done. Rather remain as you are, lest something worse happen. Certainly one could replace it at once, but I assure you the remedy would be worse than the disease.”

“All very fine, but how am I to go on without a nose?” answered Kovaloff. “There is nothing worse than that. How can I show myself with such a villainous appearance? I go into good society, and this evening I am invited to two parties. I know several ladies, Madame Tchektyriev, the wife of a state-councillor, Madame Podtotchina—although after what she has done, I don’t want to have anything to do with her except through the agency of the police. I beg you,” continued Kovaloff in a supplicating tone, “find some way or other of replacing it; even if it is not quite firm, as long as it holds at all; I can keep it in place sometimes with my hand, whenever there is any risk. Besides, I do not even dance, so that it is not likely to be injured by any sudden movement. As to your fee, be in no anxiety about that; I can well afford it.”

“Believe me,” answered the doctor in a voice which was neither too high nor too low, but soft and almost magnetic, “I do not treat patients from love of gain. That would be contrary to my principles and to my art. It is true that I accept fees, but that is only not to hurt my patients’ feelings by refusing them. I could certainly replace your nose, but I assure you on my word of honour, it would only make matters worse. Rather let Nature do her own work. Wash the place often with cold water, and I assure you that even without a nose, you will be just as well as
**NIKOLAI GOGOL**

if you had one. As to the nose itself, I advise you to have it preserved in a bottle of spirits, or, still better, of warm vinegar mixed with two spoonfuls of brandy, and then you can sell it at a good price. I would be willing to take it myself, provided you do not ask too much.”

“No, no, I shall not sell it at any price. I would rather it were lost again.”

“Excuse me,” said the doctor, taking his leave. “I hoped to be useful to you, but I can do nothing more; you are at any rate convinced of my goodwill.” So saying, the doctor left the room with a dignified air.

Kovaloff did not even notice his departure. Absorbed in a profound reverie, he only saw the edge of his snow-white cuffs emerging from the sleeves of his black coat.

The next day he resolved, before bringing a formal action, to write to the Colonel’s wife and see whether she would not return to him, without further dispute, that of which she had deprived him.

The letter ran as follows:

“To Madame Alexandra Podtotchina,

“I hardly understand your method of action. Be sure that by adopting such a course you will gain nothing, and will certainly not succeed in making me marry your daughter. Believe me, the story of my nose has become well known; it is you and no one else who have taken the principal part in it. Its unexpected separation from the place which it occupied, its flight and its appearances sometimes in the disguise of an official, sometimes in proper person, are nothing but the consequence of unholy spells employed by you or by persons who, like you, are addicted to such honourable pursuits. On my part, I wish to inform you, that if the above-mentioned nose is not restored to-day to its proper place, I shall be obliged to have recourse to legal procedure.

“For the rest, with all respect, I have the honour to be your humble servant,

“Platon Kovaloff.”

The reply was not long in coming, and was as follows:

“Major Platon Kovaloff,—

“Your letter has profoundly astonished me. I must confess that I had not expected such unjust reproaches on your part. I assure you that the official of whom you speak has not been at my house, either disguised or in his proper person. It is true that Philippe Ivanovitch Potantchikoff has paid visits at my house, and though he has actually asked for my daughter’s hand, and was a man of good breeding, respectable and intelligent, I never gave him any hope.

“Again, you say something about a nose. If you intend to imply by that that I wished to snub you, i.e. to meet you with a refusal, I am very astonished because, as you well know, I was quite of the opposite mind. If after this you wish to ask for my daughter’s hand, I should be glad to gratify you, for such has also been the object of my most fervent desire, in the hope of the accomplishment of which, I remain, yours most sincerely,

“Alexandra Podtotchina.”

“No,” said Kovaloff, after having reperused the letter, “she is certainly not guilty. It is impossible. Such a letter could not be written by a criminal.” The committee-man was experienced in such matters, for he had been often officially deputed to conduct criminal investigations while in the Caucasus. “But then how and by what trick of fate has the thing happened?” he said to himself with a gesture of discouragement. “The devil must be at the bottom of it.”

Meanwhile the rumour of this extraordinary event had spread all over the city, and, as is generally the case, not without numerous additions. At that period there was a
general disposition to believe in the miraculous; the public had recently been impressed by experiments in magnetism. The story of the floating chairs in Koniouchennaia Street was still quite recent, and there was nothing astonishing in hearing soon afterwards that Major Kovaloff’s nose was to be seen walking every day at three o’clock on the Neffsky Avenue. The crowd of curious spectators which gathered there daily was enormous. On one occasion someone spread a report that the nose was in Junker’s stores and immediately the place was besieged by such a crowd that the police had to interfere and establish order. A certain speculator with a grave, whiskered face, who sold cakes at a theatre door, had some strong wooden benches made which he placed before the window of the stores, and obligingly invited the public to stand on them and look in, at the modest charge of twenty-four kopecks. A veteran colonel, leaving his house earlier than usual expressly for the purpose, had the greatest difficulty in elbowing his way through the crowd, but to his great indignation he saw nothing in the store window but an ordinary flannel waistcoat and a coloured lithograph representing a young girl darning a stocking, while an elegant youth in a waistcoat with large lappels watched her from behind a tree. The picture had hung in the same place for more than ten years. The colonel went off, growling savagely to himself, “How can the fools let themselves be excited by such idiotic stories?”

Then another rumour got abroad, to the effect that the nose of Major Kovaloff was in the habit of walking not on the Neffsky Avenue but in the Tauris Gardens. Some students of the Academy of Surgery went there on purpose to see it. A high-born lady wrote to the keeper of the gardens asking him to show her children this rare phenomenon, and to give them some suitable instruction on the occasion.

All these incidents were eagerly collected by the town wits, who just then were very short of anecdotes adapted to amuse ladies. On the other hand, the minority of solid, sober people were very much displeased. One gentleman asserted with great indignation that he could not understand how in our enlightened age such absurdities could spread abroad, and he was astonished that the Government did not direct their attention to the matter. This gentleman evidently belonged to the category of those people who wish the Government to interfere in everything, even in their daily quarrels with their wives.

But here the course of events is again obscured by a veil.

III.

Strange events happen in this world, events which are sometimes entirely improbable. The same nose which had masqueraded as a state-councillor, and caused so much sensation in the town, was found one morning in its proper place, i.e. between the cheeks of Major Kovaloff, as if nothing had happened.

This occurred on 7th April. On awaking, the Major looked by chance into a mirror and perceived a nose. He quickly put his hand to it; it was there beyond a doubt!

“Oh!” exclaimed Kovaloff. For sheer joy he was on the point of performing a dance barefooted across his room, but the entrance of Ivan prevented him. He told him to bring water, and after washing himself, he looked again in the glass. The nose was there! Then he dried his face with a towel and looked again. Yes, there was no mistake about it!

“Look here, Ivan, it seems to me that I have a heat-boil on my nose,” he said to his valet.
And he thought to himself at the same time, “That will be a nice business if Ivan says to me ‘No, sir, not only is there no boil, but your nose itself is not there!’”

But Ivan answered, “There is nothing, sir; I can see no boil on your nose.”

“Good! Good!” exclaimed the Major, and snapped his fingers with delight.

At this moment the barber, Ivan Jakovlevitch, put his head in at the door, but as timidly as a cat which has just been beaten for stealing lard.

“Tell me first, are your hands clean?” asked Kovaloff when he saw him.

“Yes, sir.”

“You lie.”

“I swear they are perfectly clean, sir.”

“Very well; then come here.”

Kovaloff seated himself. Jakovlevitch tied a napkin under his chin, and in the twinkling of an eye covered his beard and part of his cheeks with a copious creamy lather.

“There it is!” said the barber to himself, as he glanced at the nose. Then he bent his head a little and examined it from one side. “Yes, it actually is the nose—really, when one thinks—” he continued, pursuing his mental soliloquy and still looking at it. Then quite gently, with infinite precaution, he raised two fingers in the air in order to take hold of it by the extremity, as he was accustomed to do.

“Now then, take care!” Kovaloff exclaimed.

Ivan Jakovlevitch let his arm fall and felt more embarrassed than he had ever done in his life. At last he began to pass the razor very lightly over the Major’s chin, and although it was very difficult to shave him without using the olfactory organ as a point of support, he succeeded, however, by placing his wrinkled thumb against the Major’s lower jaw and cheek, thus overcoming all obstacles and bringing his task to a safe conclusion.

When the barber had finished, Kovaloff hastened to dress himself, took a droushky, and drove straight to the confectioner’s. As he entered it, he ordered a cup of chocolate. He then stepped straight to the mirror; the nose was there!

He returned joyfully, and regarded with a satirical expression two officers who were in the shop, one of whom possessed a nose not much larger than a waistcoat button.

After that he went to the office of the department where he had applied for the post of vice-governor of a province or Government bailiff. As he passed through the hall of reception, he cast a glance at the mirror; the nose was there! Then he went to pay a visit to another committee-man, a very sarcastic personage, to whom he was accustomed to say in answer to his raillery, “Yes, I know, you are the funniest fellow in St Petersburg.”

On the way he said to himself, “If the Major does not burst into laughter at the sight of me, that is a most certain sign that everything is in its accustomed place.”

But the Major said nothing. “Very good!” thought Kovaloff.

As he returned, he met Madame Podtotchina with her daughter. He accosted them, and they responded very graciously. The conversation lasted a long time, during which he took more than one pinch of snuff, saying to himself, “No, you haven’t caught me yet, coquettes that you are! And as to the daughter, I shan’t marry her at all.”

After that, the Major resumed his walks on the Neffsky Avenue and his visits to the theatre as if nothing had happened. His nose also remained in its place as if it had never quitted it. From that time he was always to be seen smiling, in a good humour, and paying attentions to pretty girls.
IV.

Such was the occurrence which took place in the northern capital of our vast empire. On considering the account carefully we see that there is a good deal which looks improbable about it. Not to speak of the strange disappearance of the nose, and its appearance in different places under the disguise of a councillor of state, how was it that Kovaloff did not understand that one cannot decently advertise for a lost nose? I do not mean to say that he would have had to pay too much for the advertisement—that is a mere trifle, and I am not one of those who attach too much importance to money; but to advertise in such a case is not proper nor befitting.

Another difficulty is—how was the nose found in the baked loaf, and how did Ivan Jakovlevitch himself—no, I don’t understand it at all!

But the most incomprehensible thing of all is, how authors can choose such subjects for their stories. That really surpasses my understanding. In the first place, no advantage results from it for the country; and in the second place, no harm results either.

All the same, when one reflects well, there really is something in the matter. Whatever may be said to the contrary, such cases do occur—rarely, it is true, but now and then actually.

Translated by Claud Field.

Strange Garden
If you’ve read Max Frisch, and you’re looking for books by other authors who write in a similar style to Frisch, here are some recommendations for you from readers of Frisch and the Frischesque.

Matthew Specktor on *Pitch Dark* by Renata Adler

In a sense it’s difficult to quantify any other writer as Frischan, insofar as Frisch’s defining quality may be—how odd for a writer as preoccupied with identity—a kind of self-effacement, a reticence, almost. Hence to be like him is to share a certain bleachedness, a self-conscious feeling of absence. That said, Renata Adler’s *Pitch Dark* does possess these things. A strange, cycling account of the narrator’s—or the author’s?—flight to Ireland in the wake of a love affair, and then her flight from that country in the wake of a roadside mishap. Adler’s novel nearly resembles *Montauk*, insofar as the minor sequence of events it details (“minor” in the context of an entire life) nevertheless presents a vast, nearly panoramic, view. Phrases, sentences and micro-scenes recur, until the writer’s worrying of her own experience becomes not a snapshot of small occurrences but a portrait of moral imagination. Admirers of *Montauk*, or of *I’m Not Stiller*, should investigate.

Shane Boyle on *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Bertolt Brecht

Few writers influenced Max Frisch as profoundly as Bertolt Brecht. And few writers have had as much influence on Brecht’s legacy as Frisch. But given their divergent political views and experiences, this convergence of influence is strange. Brecht was a communist exiled by the Nazis, tried by Joseph McCarthy, and ultimately bankrolled by East Germany’s Soviet satellite state. Frisch, after an early flirtation with Nazism, went on to be an outspoken liberal and pacifist. Whereas Brecht believed that political commitment should be tied to aesthetic form, Frisch insisted politics and art be strictly separated. Even so, Brechtian techniques including epic modes of storytelling and distanciation effects abound in Frisch’s oeuvre. The methods Brecht devised to foment anti-capitalist struggle become in the novels and plays of Frisch a means of humanist introspection and existential self-expression. One could even say that Frisch’s depoliticization of Brechtian aesthetics paved the way for the likes of Woody Allen and Lars von Trier. Despite his desire to divorce art from politics, Frisch’s work was by no means detached from the society in which he wrote. The hopes Frisch pinned on literature is marked by the very sort of equivocation that is only available to a life lived in basic material comfort. Like so many West European writers in the postwar period, Frisch had the privilege to revel in literary ambiguity. Brecht, who died in East Germany in 1956, did not. To get a sense of how Frisch and Brecht compare, simply read one of the latter’s late works alongside a play like Frisch’s classic *Andorra*. I would recommend without hesitation *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. This play, which was written at the close of World War II, displays much of what Brecht
embraced aesthetically as well politically. Like Andorra, Brecht’s play is a parable, though he frames it explicitly as a Lehrstück about communist planning. With The Caucasian Chalk Circle Brecht unabashedly hoped to offer a lesson in solidarity to a continent decimated by fascist brutality and capitalist immiseration. It is easy to see what Frisch would have drawn from Brecht’s fable-like tale; it is equally clear what he would have dismissed.

John Cotter on The Assignment by Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Friedrich Dürrenmatt was a fellow Swiss novelist and playwright and, for a time, a friend and admirer of Frisch’s. Like the Frisch of I’m Not Stiller and Homo Faber, Dürrenmatt is concerned with the both the mixed blessing of self-knowledge and the plasticity of identity. Do our souls exist in our own bodies or as something on paper? What obligations do we have to our former selves? As befits a pair of writers from the home of John Calvin, both were consistently preoccupied with temptation and with guilt. Dürrenmatt’s late novella The Assignment, is—among other things—a meditation on the ways we are complicit in our own destruction: we are egotists, voyeurs, and sensationalists, and we often cross these wires for dangerous kicks. We live vicariously through the lives of others, even as they do the same to us. We are one another’s lab rats. In The Assignment, a filmmaker named F is hired by a famous psychiatrist named Lambert to make a film re-enacting the murder of Lambert’s wife Tina. But as F films events surrounding the crime in an unnamed North African country, she herself is being filmed. By whom? And who murdered Tina? And why have the local police executed the wrong man? Is Tina even dead? The whole makes for a sort of absurdist spy fable, not as funny or as moving as Frisch at his best, but equally as inventive and, in an age of ubiquitous screens and surveillance, entirely on point.

Dorian Stuber on In Matto’s Realm by Friedrich Glauser

Friedrich Glauser (1896–1938) is the great Swiss writer you’ve never heard of. It didn’t help his literary reputation that he wrote crime fiction, nor that he was certainly an addict and possibly mad. Glauser’s life was full of extraordinary incident: after being thrown out of school, he served in the French Foreign Legion and later in a coalmine in Belgium. He was addicted at various periods in his life to morphine, and he died from a stroke the night before his wedding. He met his fiancé in 1932 at the asylum in Münsingen, near the capital of Bern, where she was a nurse and he was an inmate. Glauser drew on his experience in the asylum in his 1936 novel In Matto’s Realm. The book isn’t entirely autobiographical—its central character isn’t an inmate, for example, or even a doctor, but rather a sergeant in the Bernese Cantonal Police, one Jakob Studer, who is at the heart of the five wonderful crime novels that made Glauser’s reputation. (Today, the prize for best German-language crime novel is called the Glauser.) On the book’s first page, Studer is called to the Randlingen Clinic, clearly modeled on Münsingen, to investigate the death of the director and the disappearance of an inmate. The institution is designed to uphold Switzerland’s sense of itself as humane and orderly, yet Studer finds it filled with hypocrisy and unhappiness. The distinction between order and oppression becomes increasingly unclear; policemen and psychiatrists prove as much nefarious as helpful. In fact, Studer starts to go a little mad in the asylum, forced to question his
identity just as Max Frisch’s Stiller would some twenty years later. The Swiss writer Peter Bichsel—if you can, find his wonderful though misleadingly titled collection Children’s Stories—once described an unacknowledged line from Glauser to Frisch. Glauser, Bichsel wrote, came too soon. He wasn’t recognized as either the master of language or the social critic he really was. And so the task of finding a way of expressing what it meant to be Swiss fell to someone like Frisch. In Matto’s Realm is available in a good English translation by Mike Mitchell. I like that he leaves some characteristically Bernese expressions untranslated, most notably Studer’s repeated outburst “chabis” (literally, cabbage, but idiomatically, nonsense or bullshit). If you read German, though, by all means find the edition informatively edited by Bernhard Echte.

Andrew Mason on The Face of Another by Kōbō Abe

If we’re going to take identity as Max Frisch’s main theme, especially identity in that sort of Kafkaesque “existential horror” mode, then Kōbō Abe is an author that I think could aptly be described as Frischesque. The Face of Another is perhaps the Abe novel which most foregrounds Abe’s Frischesque interest in and obsession with the problematic nature of identity. In Abe’s novel, a man’s face is severely burned in an accident, but a lifelike mask allows him to enter society anew: “I had made the mask for the purpose of recovering myself.” But is the self something that can ever be recovered or discovered? What does having the face of another allow us? How does outward appearance affect inner identity? All these questions underpin this unnerving and unparalleled existential horror story. If you’ve never read Kōbō Abe—or if you’ve only read the more famous Woman in the Dunes—check this novel out. It won’t disappoint.
A Month of Max Frisch: Notes from a Reader’s Diary

There are writers I read just once and those whose books I read reverently once a year. Reading Sartre’s *Nausea* transports me to the salt marshes on the Brittany coast where I lay in the grassy dunes and vowed to read this novel every year. This annual tradition unites Sartre’s nauseating stone with the sucking stones which Beckett’s *Molloy* collects from the shore, another novel I read annually without fail.

There are other writers in whose words, sentences and paragraphs I must immerse myself the way some people soak for hours in hot baths. I devote myself to a single writer’s work and, if I read carefully, get some sense of the contours of their thought, its darkness and yearnings. Over the last year I conversed in this way with Pascal Quignard, Brigid Brophy, Denton Welch and, this February, with Max Frisch.

**Saturday**

Beckett, who showed scant interest in contemporary writers, read several of Frisch’s books including *Sketchbook 1966–1971* and *Homo Faber* (which Beckett read twice, letter to Barbara Bray, 2 February 1960).

It was *Man in the Holocene* that I first read last summer, a story, on a surface reading of the text, of an old man losing his memory. In his *Paris Review* interview, Frisch says it was his favourite of his books. The image of haunted narrator Herr Geiser covering his walls in clippings from cut-up books and encyclopaedias stays with me, despite some disappointment with its apparently cheery ending. I suspect that I misread the serenity of its closing pages and maybe I will reread *Man in the Holocene*. Perhaps knowing its plot, without the suspense, its ethical construct will be more apparent, but I discover that I’ve lost my copy of the book I read last summer, and instead find a handsome edition of Frisch’s *An Answer from the Silence*. It has waited patiently on my shelves for several months, and this evening was fine accompaniment to a young Barbera d’Alba.

**Monday**

I read for an hour before going to bed and this morning finish *An Answer from the Silence*. I’ve decided not only to find another copy of *Man in the Holocene* but to read whatever other of Frisch’s books I can lay my hands on. I am rather in awe of the acuity of Frisch’s dissection of the rise and descent of the relationship between the narrator and Irene.

The question of maturity is central to *An Answer from the Silence*. How should man find his way to a higher ideal of selfhood? Frisch’s narrator would rather not have been born but is ambivalent in his pessimism: “Why don’t we live when we know we’re here just this one time, just one single, unrepeateable time in this unutterably magnificent world.”
Friday

In time for the weekend, I turn to Drafts for a Third Sketchbook, which presents itself as an undated series of fragmentary notes. As Peter von Matt, president of the Max Frisch Foundation, points out in the Afterword, this is a strict composition of interrelated pieces. Throughout his writing life, Frisch turned life into literature and his Sketchbooks (Tagebücher) are just another literary form alongside the novels and plays.

Forming the spine of Drafts for a Third Sketchbook is Frisch’s recounting of his friend Peter Noll’s bladder cancer and subsequent death. Noll refused treatment: “He doesn’t want to die as an object in the medical machinery, incapable of making his own decisions.” Frisch then raises a question that also appears a recurrent motif in his work, “How does one die, then?”

At a party this evening I talk too much about Frisch’s work. An over affable Frenchman drifted away when I talked about the idea that life would be less rich without death. My time is better spent with reading and contemplation than socialising at parties. I went home to read the Sketchbook with a glass of Bordeaux and some Chopin.

Sunday

Reading the Sketchbook, I wonder how much is fictional, but like any autobiographical work the narrator is by definition always unreliable. It is a literary construction and one that leaves me anticipating reading the completed Sketchbooks from 1946–1949 and 1966–1971.

This Sketchbook was written near the end of the twentieth century and covers also his conflicted feelings about his adopted sometimes home country of America.

“What our American friends expect: a miracle!—they want to be feared and loved at the same time. If we don’t manage that, they see it as anti-Americanism.”

Tuesday

Begun Homo Faber today, one of those novels about which I’ve heard much, so there is always a risk of heightened expectations leading to anti-climax. I needn’t have worried as I am soon absorbed by the narrator Walter Faber’s perception of a world mediated through technology, especially cybernetics. It seems odd to read today of a fictional character who finds the idea of progressive humankind conceivable. I recall my flirtation with Ray Kurzweil’s ideas of human life being utterly transformed by technological progress. I dig out The Age of Spiritual Machines, which reads today as either naïveté or showmanship.

I returned to the Auerbach exhibition but after a brief stay in the gallery settled down in the member’s room to finish Homo Faber.

Wednesday

It is once again Frisch’s instinct for human shortcomings that enables a reader to maintain a degree of sympathy with a narrator we cannot love even after his abhorrent nature is subtly brought to the surface. It is bold and devilishly clever. In the end, Faber comes to realise the value in the web of meanings in which we participate with others.

This evening I finished Homo Faber and reread also Drafts for a Third Sketchbook and was delighted that I’m Not Stiller was awaiting my return home.
Thursday

On the train this morning I started *I'm Not Stiller*. As the train rolled into Waterloo station I resisted the temptation to remain traveling back and forth in order to continue reading. This isn’t a story in any conventional sense, almost a work of contemplative philosophy, but with a tension I’m familiar with in Frisch’s writing. Despite being transported by *I’m Not Stiller*, on my way home I have little interest in reading on. There is a flippancy that grates.

Saturday

I’m curious about *I’m Not Stiller* not least because I am alternately entranced and repelled by the work. I get up with the thrill of knowing I’ve got a long succession of reading hours ahead of me and hardly go out all day. This novel is of another order to *Homo Faber* with a narrator that burns with anguish and anger, couched in almost overwhelming vanity. Its thematic matter and its setting is marriage as the place where our social, private and unknown selves come together. Frisch precisely articulates the question of how aware can we be of our social self. I suspect that much of the novel’s tension reveals that Frisch never figured out the answer.

Monday

Last night I stayed up far too late with an intense need to finish *I’m Not Stiller*. I might dislike Frisch’s atmospheric and heavily lyrical story but it feels alive, despite the fact that little happens during the course of its almost four hundred pages. Against all my instincts I know that I have to tackle the story again, without the encumbrance of plot and the suspense of not knowing its deeply affecting ending.

Friday

I’ve spent all week with *I’m Not Stiller*, transcribing whole sections in my notebook. Frisch seems to imply that we bring identity to our lives through marriage or long-term friendship. His Stiller suggests otherwise. Though it is simple to appear collected, it is much more complicated for an individual to know a deeper identity beyond this superficial, outward self. Perhaps identity matters less to the self than we assume.

In its way *I’m Not Stiller* returns to the same question Frisch asks in *An Answer from the Silence*, namely how to reconcile, if it is even possible, our self-identity and the way we are perceived by others. Losing sight of ourself, perhaps the greatest danger of all, can occur simply and quietly, which is where Frisch ends this extraordinary story.
A Likeness

I.

You’ve heard it said that there are moments, times in one’s life—a moment of unadulterated trauma or of recognition—a moment when you’ll be unable to look at yourself the same again. You are shocked by what you see in your reflection. How you appear—all that you are and all that came before—startles you.

Allow your screen to fall asleep, to fade to black. You encounter your own reflection in the moments when your computer, your tablet, your phone, closes its portal to another realm. For the first time in human history you are reading on a surface that, rather than metaphorically revealing yourself through text, actually transmits your own appearance to your eyes.

Claudia Rankine’s award-winning *Citizen* begins with such a moment. “When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows,” her opening sentence reads. Rankine cauterizes the entry into the otherworld accessible through your device. You have only your reflection in the pool of liquid crystal blackness, your own spectral presence at the silent frontier of our modern condition. Spent, prayerful, Rankine has you now, ushering you beyond the threshold, incorporating you bodily into the text.

*Citizen* is work of immersion. Through the use of the second-person voice (“Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we’re kin.”), Rankine holds us—as we try not to drown—through an assault of racial and undeniably racist experiences. We are followed, pulled over, the cops are called on us, we are unseen one moment, hypervisible the next. Some of us know these realities. We smell its death, know its crushing intimacies. And then there are those Rankine must baptize. “Where do you stand in relation to the information being communicated?” Rankine once demanded in a conversation when asked about her near-exclusive use of the second-person present in *Citizen*. “The ‘I,’” she continued, “either puts you in that voice or allows you to reject that voice immediately: ‘That’s not me.’ And I was trying to destabilize the immediate ability to say, ‘That’s not my experience. That’s not me.’”

Through the second-person present, we are transformed into a new being, a new body.

What is it to live in this new body, in this new skin?

II.

When he was in prison, reading the Bible in the Norfolk Prison Colony library, Malcolm X recalled “reading over and over, how Paul on the road to Damascus, upon hearing the voice of Christ, was so smitten that he was knocked off his horse, in a daze. I do not now, and I did not then, liken myself to Paul. But I understand his experience.”

How is it that we come to understand another’s experience?

I remember first reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, first seeing his photograph on the cover of the book. I was in the 4th grade and, though I think I knew I was black at that point, I knew I didn’t look like him. He had an angular face, determined eyes, his cheeks seemed to be sucked in. So, after much practice before the mirror, I walked around school sucking my own cheeks in between
my teeth—no doubt chewing my gums to a ragged pulp—and fashioned myself an even lighter-skinned version of the meriny Malcolm X.

I was raised into passing as white, though I couldn’t possibly know what that meant then. The oldest generation, my grandmother and her sisters, were light-skinned Negro women from Virginia, though I didn’t understand the color-coded caste confusion until I was much older. They must have a different father, I remember thinking. They’re all different colors! Chalk white, light gold, ginger brown. I finally developed a language to fit my experience after I read Nella Larsen’s Passing my first semester of college. In our youth, there are things we learn from books our elders cannot tell us, things we learn that no one can ever teach us. In Larsen’s novel, I understood for the first time the fear pregnant mothers passing for white kept within themselves as they waited to see what shade their child would turn out to be. I learned, also, why some families have precious few photographs.

We didn’t have any photos growing up, none that I can remember besides the ones we had of ourselves. My father, an Irishman, had another family; I was his outside kid. And Mom and I had a two-story house with a red door and two dogs to ourselves.

We’d visit Granny and Poppy on Sundays. I’d play with my toys in the shower until I became pruny and, I realize now, dehydrated by the humidity. I’d run naked to my grandfather who’d never have the towel ready in time. I’d soak him before he could bundle me up. My grandmother would have her headscarf on. She looked so different the next morning with her hair on. Then we’d watch 60 Minutes together.

When I was 7 and he was 67, my grandfather learned he was dying. Without informing anyone of his condition, and considering the distance between his daughter and his wife and the inevitability of his absence, he moved us all in together into a three-story home in rural Connecticut.

I had my own floor.

Suddenly, the home was full of my grandparents’ fine furniture, their china, their photographs. We had one of those rooms, a parlor through a double set of French doors, where no one would ever go into. I’d never seen anything like that house and that wooded land we owned.

The home was a kind of museum, beautifully decorated by my grandmother. I learned the provenance of each item of furniture and the correct way to reference them: what I thought was a sofa was a Biedermeier, the large vases were jardinieres, the carved wooden screens were “Indian screens”, the green couch I loved to nap on was a Harden couch, the desk was a centuries old Dutch kabinet. We had paintings, enormous French posters, large mirrors, model ships that looked more like ships than models. Almost all of it had been acquired after my great-grandmother, passing for white and shaving ten years off her age, eloped with a New York maritime engineer who’d not known she was still married to a Negro in Harlem. When the maritime engineer died he left everything, a country home in New Jersey and an apartment in Gramercy with a key to the park, to his not-quite-white mistress.

I created stories for the portraits encased in glass. If I held them at the right angle, my shadow and my ancestors would be reunited. The oldest representation of my family was a daguerreotype of a long-necked woman in three-quarter profile. She embodied dignity, wealth even. It was my great-great grandmother, a woman whose belongings were still in my Connecticut home. I’d later learn that she’d been born a slave. She’d disapprove of any of her six
children marrying darker-skinned spouses. The lighter her descendants, the better off they’d be.

There’s a moment in Margo Jefferson’s *Negroland* where the author describes her parents looking down on her great-uncle who’d passed for white for decades before re-integrating himself into the Negro community. It’s not that Uncle Lucious passed for white. They chastised him because he’d never gotten any higher than being a traveling salesman: “If you were going to take the trouble to be white, you were supposed to do better than you could have done as a Negro.” As a child, with her Uncle Lucious sitting in her parents’ home, Jefferson wondered how it was possible for this relative of hers, a white-looking black man, to be so utterly unknowable?

I recall Freud’s 1919 essay “The ‘Uncanny,” the eponym of which is an English translation of *unheimlich* which, he writes, “is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimsich*, meaning ‘familiar,’ ‘native,’ ‘belonging to the home.’” What interests us most in Freud’s theory of the uncanny is that among its different shades of meaning the word *heimlich* exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, *unheimlich*... Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.

Freud refers to the phenomenon of the familiar becoming strange, the strange becoming familiar. In my own life, I recognize that the moments of my registering conceptions of racial passing were instances of *unheimlich*. When Rankine address us as “you,” this is another moment of *unheimlich* that will eventually become so familiar through the course of the narrative that we take the personal address for granted. We have been ushered into becoming something different from ourselves, something more alike each other.

I began, at a very young age, to see the world entirely differently. “I knew something none of my white school friends knew,” Jefferson writes in *Negroland*. “It wasn’t just that some of us were as good as them, even when they didn’t know it. Some of us *were* them.”

III.

*You.*

*Us.*

*Them.*

These are a few of the pronouns in which we ground ourselves. This is how bodies become words.

We have seen how Rankine’s “you” is transformative. Jefferson’s “us” and “them” intermingle until the distinction is nullified, demonstrating the slight genetic differences that allow some of us to be *them*—the white folks, of course. But William Melvin Kelley, the great Harlem writer, insists it is “dem,” not “them”. Kelley *knows* white folks and, to prove it, titled his great 1967 comic novel *dem* after who else but the ofay? Scholar John S. Wright notes that “dem” dates as far back to the beginning of the sixteenth century. It’s a *deliberate* corruption of “them” and occurs throughout the New World to refer to white people. Wright suggests “dem” is also “a vernacular variation on the all purpose profanity, ‘damn’ or ‘dern,’ so that, in the end it fuses otherness with damnation in an willfully comic deformation of the King’s English.”

Kelley has presented English in an *unheimlich* fashion. Kelley’s main character, Mitchell Pierce, is an upper-middle class white American who discovers his wife has
had an affair with Calvin Johnson, an African-American. Each man, in separate, recent copulations, has fertilized one, individual ovum of Mrs. Pierce. She’ll give birth to twins of different races.

For her part, Mrs. Pierce can’t help being exasperated with Mitchell. And who could blame her? He’s an ignoramus. And so she engages in an affair with an African-American. At the hospital after the twins’ birth, the attending doctor confronts Mitchell in a scene worth quoting at some length.

“You say Mrs. Pierce didn’t tell you [she was pregnant with twins]... Mr. Pierce, I think I owe it to you, not as a doctor to a patient’s husband, but as one man to another, to give you a little course in elementary genetics. Would you like another cup of coffee?” He stopped. “By the way, just where are you from?”

“Me? New York.”

“Would you mind me asking how long your... people have been here?” The doctor squinted again, pained.

Mitchell was embarrassed; he did not like talking about his family. “Since 1664. My whatever-you-say was one of the three hundred men with Colonel Nicholls when he took New Amsterdam from the Dutch. But—”

“And your wiffffite?”

Mitchell did not like the way the doctor held onto the “F” in the word. “Washington, the city. What is all this?”

“That must be it. Mr. Pierce, I have to explain something to you, about your babies. But first I feel compelled to say that with conditions as they are today, this is a very understandable situation. It’s a pity, I suppose, you must discover it under these circumstances.”

The doctor, of course, is alluding to the mistaken notion that Mrs. Pierce is a black woman passing for white (“with conditions as they are today, this is a very understandable situation”). However, Kelley’s Mrs. Pierce isn’t passing for white. She matter-of-factly informs Mitchell that she’s been having an affair with Calvin up until as recently as six weeks before the birth (“the doctor cut us off,” she said).

Mrs. Pierce and Calvin “Cooley” Johnson met through Opal, the Pierce’s housekeeper. Opal is a faithful employee, but she has the utter misfortune of, first, working for Mitchell Pierce and, second, of dating “trouble-causing” men like Calvin. Calvin cheats on Opal with Mrs. Pierce, and soon thereafter Opal will be fired from her job, unjustly accused of a crime she did not commit. Opal will once again become important to Mitchell after his Washingtonian mother-in-law, who understands how it would “look” for a white family to raise a black baby, charges him with finding Calvin so that he might take rightful custodial care of his child. So, Mitchell heads north to the Bronx to see Opal; it’s his very first visit to an African-American home.

The living room was small, strangely familiar. The sofa was green, plastic-covered. A light brown coffee table squatted in front of it. On the wall was one picture, a reproduction of a painting by a famous modern Spanish artist. Opal asked him to sit down. He did, under the reproduction; she sat across from him, in a red chair, also plastic-covered, also familiar.
Somewhere in what passes for Mitchell’s brain he’s subliminally recognized that Opal, like himself, has the same domestic trappings found in his home, or anyone’s home for that matter. Without truly realizing it, Mitchell has encountered another living, breathing human. He has a similar flicker of recognition when Opal asks why she was fired; he informs her that she’d stolen from his family. But Opal challenges Mitchell: “What did I steal, Mr. Pierce?” He hesitated. ‘Well, Opal, I don’t really know.’ That too seemed strange; they had never really missed anything.”

In a novel notable for a host of transgressions, this incivil act, accusing someone of a crime in her own home, stands out. Hospitality is one of the oldest themes in literature and, surely, being a naughty guest is just as ancient a theme. Rankine, Jefferson and Kelley have all given their readers a window into the African-American home so that we might benefit from their transparency. We imagine ourselves as guests, friends and, in critic Jonathan Lear’s words, “the narrator becomes one of our ancestors.” And yet even today, to emphasize the extent to which our literary themes are inextricable from our lived life, we notice that AirBnB, a company that prefers to refer to itself as a “community,” faces accusations from African-American guests who report widespread discrimination by their hosts. Here, in dem, Opal can’t even escape from discrimination within her own residence, a violation akin to when a white classmate of my great-aunt Mim, my grandmother’s eldest sister, visited their Gramercy home in the 1940s. My great-aunt appeared virtually white, so when my darker-skinned grandmother greeted them at the door the classmate remarked, “How cute the maid’s daughter is!”

Are we not safe from harm even when we’re home? I remember being a boy of twelve listening outside my grandmother’s room while she cried into the phone to Aunt Mim. My grandmother attended her 50th high school reunion earlier that day where she reintroduced herself to her now aged teacher, a nun named Mother Thomas. “You’re not Alice Robinson,” Mother Thomas said. “Alice Robinson was a nigger.” It was within our own home when I first heard that word. Seeking shelter after his classmates mocked him for being colored, the adolescent narrator of James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man rushes to the sanctuary of the home he shares with his mother. He stops to see his reflection in a looking-glass:

I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long, black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. How long I stood there gazing at my image I do not know. When I came out and reached the head of the stairs, I heard the lady who had been with my mother going out. I ran downstairs and rushed to where my mother was sitting, with a piece of work in her hands. I buried my head in her lap and blurted out: “Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?”

Such moments of personal recognition are emblematic of W.E.B. Du Bois’s now legendary summation of the African-American psyche as a “double consciousness,” a wondrous, troubled mentality that Mitchell will be introduced to, though he’ll never recognize it as such,
once Opal enlists her nephew Carlyle to guide Mitchell through Harlem and the Bronx. They’ll eventually stop at a houseparty where, in order for Mitchell to enter, Carlyle must vouch for him: “This my cousin, Mitchell, from Canada,” Carlyle says to the partygoers: “From a small, snowy-ass town where the underground railway left his granddaddy’s butt. Had to integrate to keep the blood moving.” Mitchell’s bumbling hunt through New York’s black neighborhoods to find Calvin in hopes that he’ll accept custody of the Negro twin, resembles, tonally, Voltaire’s *Candide*.

Not only has Mitchell received a rather quick baptismal dunking into two black homes in quick succession, he’s now twice—once at the hospital, now at the party—been figured, albeit momentarily, as an African-American. Still, he’s too dumb to recognize the irony. Mitchell’s not even playing in the dark; he’s getting played: eventually, Calvin “Cooley” Johnson, the father of one of Mrs. Pierce’s twins, will enact further humiliations upon Mitchell that continue to strike him unawares. Opal’s nephew introduces Mitchell to Calvin who says he knows “Cooley.” Calvin plays the trickster here, intentionally doubling himself so that he can dupe and dis Mitchell while pocketing the honky’s money. Scholar Darryl Dickson-Carr provides the following commentary in his book *African American Satire*:

Mitchell pays Calvin a considerable amount of money to persuade Cooley to take the child, but Calvin eventually hands Mitchell a report that Cooley will not agree to Mitchell’s terms because “he wasn’t making it with your wife for no baby... He saw her and wanted to find out how someone that messed up in the head would be in bed. It was so bad, so weak, he had to go back a couple times to make sure it was really bad as thought it was the first time...[Cooley’s] got old scores to settle.” Those “old scores” are with the slave system and its amalgamation and subsequent splitting of black families that occurred regularly on slave plantations. According to Cooley, it is Mitchell’s turn to experience the sort of destruction visited upon black families. When Mitchell asks “My turn? But why me?” Calvin responds, “That’s funny, because he said you’d ask that. And he told me that when you did, I was to ask you why his great-great granddaddy?”

“My turn? But why me?” Mitchell asks. Role reversal is a hallmark of satire: the prince becomes a frog; the horses are the ones doing the talking and men, instead of beasts, are slaves. Now it’s the white Manhattanite getting fooled (and cuckolded) by the streetwise black guy who’s “got old scores to settle.” At the novel’s conclusion, Mitchell’s unhealthy white child will have died and the Pierce family will raise a healthy biracial child as their own.

IV.

I wrote Kelley the day I finished reading *dem*. A few days after, he wrote back and said, “Brother, I guess you better just come up and see me in Harlem, the Center of the World.” We prepared the way for ourselves to meet: he told me to expect a man with one leg and I told him to expect a white-looking one.

I took the long train ride to visit Kelley in Harlem. Outside his apartment, scrimshawed into a municipal postal box was the phrase “Kill the KKKops.” I rang his doorbell
and was invited in. We talked for hours. He wanted to know about my people in Harlem, the two black men I’m named for, and where I was raised up. I wanted to know why he hadn’t published another book—despite comparisons to Ellison, Joyce and Barth—since 1970.

We each shared stories about our family members who’d passed for white in the Bronx. Over cranberry juice (which he asked that I bring), and between petting sessions of his overweight chihuahua Gordita, we talked the world over.

In exile from Harlem in the wake of Malcolm X’s assassination, Kelley returned from Jamaica nine years later and moved his family into an apartment overlooking 125th Street. He began alternately filming his family’s life and the experiences of the passersby below.

Kelley took up his tablet and showed me the trailer for The Beauty That I Saw, the resultant film of hundreds of hours of recordings shot over a decade with his home and neighborhood streets as his setting. Towards the end of our conversation, he paused to show me a photograph of his Uncle Six taken by the world famous James VanDerZee in the first quarter of the 20th century.

In 1968, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art began to plan its “Harlem on My Mind” exhibition, soon to become the most hotly debated art show in American history, the president of the institution asked his assistant curator, an aficionado of Dutch art, for his opinion. The latter, intrigued, remarked, “I’ve got some wonderful paintings. Which Harlem did you mean?”

Dozens of VanDerZee photographs were featured in the exhibition which brought him acclaim throughout the art world. People began referring to VanDerZee as the Rembrandt of Harlem. But only days after “Harlem on My Mind” closed, his family was evicted from their brownstone. VanDerZee, then 83, packed as many of his photo negatives as he could into shopping bags before checking into a hotel in the South Bronx while Gaynella, his wife of fifty years, having attacked the attending City Marshal with the nearest can of bug spray, spent the night heavily sedated within the confines of a hospital. I learned while writing this that Gaynella VanDerZee was a white woman passing for black.

It was a hot Harlem Sunday the next time I saw William Melvin Kelley. The Beauty That I Saw was premiering at the Harlem International Film Festival, just steps from the former studio of VanDerZee on 124th Street. Kelley handed me a pen I’d left at his apartment, all chewed up by Gordita. Then he sat in the front row with me, a seat open between us, his family across the aisle. The show began. We all witnessed a family see themselves twenty-five years younger, when he first began videotaping them and their apartment overlooking 125th Street, when he still had his right leg, his wife looking a bit more like the Ebony cover model she once was, when the baby with beaded braids hadn’t yet had her own baby who just now was watching his mother learn to walk and talk. Their past selves spun and sang and cried before us.

I began thinking of Kelley not only as the author of dem and an inheritor of Joyce, but of VanDerZee, of all the great artists who’d come before them not only in this neighborhood named for another city thousands of miles away, but of all cities. Sitting there as the credits rolled, I realized we were just blocks away from VanDerZee’s former gallery, blocks away from where Romare Bearden shared studio space with VanDerZee’s rival photographers Morgan and Marvin Smith.

There’s a story I’ve heard about the Smith twins that seems of acute interest these days when we consider the
racial injustice Rankine charges us with experiencing in *Citizen*, Kelley’s skewering of ignorance in *dem*; the pride found in Margo Jefferson’s *Negroland*. When they first moved to New York from Kentucky, the Smith brothers met a pair of sisters, also twins, whom they married on the same day in a double wedding ceremony. Three years later, also on the same day, they filed for a double divorce. The Smiths worked so closely that they always signed their work with each of their names. There’s another story I’ve heard about them. The Smith twins never used the pronoun “I.” They always said “we.”

Is It Because I’m Black?

Why do men smile when I speak,  
And call my speech  
The whimperings of a babe  
That cries but knows not what it wants?  
Is it because I am black?

Why do men sneer when I arise  
And stand in their councils,  
And look them eye to eye,  
And speak their tongue?  
Is it because I am black?
We Were All Lesbians
Once

The picnic isn’t going great, but at least it’s not a total disaster.

“Are you gonna change your name?” Alex asks.
Jensen shrugs. “Not much point.”
We all nod, acknowledging how perfect his unusual name finally is.

After twenty years we are all together again, sharing a blanket in Golden Gate Park one Sunday in October. Alex’s husband Will and their son Oscar are flying a kite while the rest of us look on. I miss my own family, but it’s a new school year and Mark and I agreed that the book tour, if you can call it that, shouldn’t disrupt the kids’ routine.

I’m heading home tonight and dressed for the flight to Chicago and the drive tomorrow morning to Rockford. Yoga pants, sneakers, and a hoodie. It’s my maximum comfort look, and now I’m regretting it. I usually think of it as neutral, nothing, but here with Alex and Jensen it takes on the air of a costume. Active momwear.

I’m back for my college reunion, bruised from having read my new novel to the near-empty campus bookstore. Weeks ago it seemed like a good idea to do a reading smack in the middle of reunion weekend, but the store only sold one copy and even twenty copies—or fifty, or a hundred—wouldn’t have been enough to make up for the way I still feel and apparently always will whenever I’m among my fellow graduates. Off on a tangent, terrible at networking, and totally at a loss as far as startups and accelerators are concerned. So I called Alex and Jensen, who couldn’t care less about that shit. They came west for the city, not for school. I didn’t tell either one that I’d invited the other to the picnic, since they more or less stopped speaking a few years ago.

“You’re basically passing at this point, right?” Jensen asks.

Alex lets the question pass too, and picks at the olives and cheese and croissants I loaded up on at the class brunch this morning. He, too, has a name that can go either way, though it sounds fairly butch compared to Marcy, the one he was given at birth and still used when I met him.

We all met by that kind of blind chance that happens in your early twenties, when a moment’s impulse brings you friends for life. Alex and I both responded to Jensen’s room-for-rent ads the year I graduated. I’d found the one posted in the kitchen of the women’s center, Alex the one by the checkout in the bakery where Jensen worked. As roommates, we subsisted on burritos and the baked goods Jensen brought home, the refrigerator in our Mission kitchen serving as the final destination for the neighborhood’s leftovers. It was the year of grown women wearing overalls and I did so, tragically, even in June. I was still dating my college girlfriend, Silvia, but she was about to break my heart, which I think I sensed. Alex—then with long hair and even longer skirts—was hung up on his best friend and hooking up with girls he met in dyke clubs. Jensen was a little older than us, divorced already. He might as well have been forty, the way he could drop the words “my ex-wife’” into conversation. He had a way of putting words to the precarious, words that could make me blanche. Barter. Sliding scale. Rope play. Service bottoms, he would say, tugging on his wallet chain, and I would try
Jensen was imperturbable. He understood the social strata. He knew which clubs to go to, and on which nights. He knew how to spot an alcoholic, what flagging was and how and when to do it. When he cocked his eyebrow, baby dykes came hither. He knew people who bound their breasts, who’d had breast reductions, who were taking T. He knew how to make fast cash and where to go for support when he was short. He lived and died by scouring the cork message boards, finding free services and trading for others.

So of course Jensen would be the one to ask all the difficult questions now, the ones I’m too afraid to ask myself.

“Does Oscar know?” he asks Alex.

“Yeah. I showed him old photos. First day of kindergarten. My high school yearbook.” Alex shudders dramatically.

“He’s cool with it?”

“Seems to be. I mean, if he can be Superman, why can’t his dad be a little girl?”

“Kids are so adaptable. I wish everyone was.”

Alex stops chewing and stares.

“What?” Jensen says. Alex continues to levy a charge with his gaze. “I wasn’t talking about us.”

Alex spits out an olive pit and shakes his head, and we all go back to watching the kite.

The kite makes slow figure eights in the sky.

For as much as I loved San Francisco—and I did; it was gritty and romantic, the antidote to my well-manicured campus—I’ve rarely visited. I don’t miss the cloud of confusion that hung over me when I lived there, when I didn’t know who I would become or how. Back then I had a college degree I felt sure I would never use and a desire to write that I had no clue how to realize. I saw no consolation around me, no success stories, only other black-clad, steel toe–booted women with a surplus of education and swagger and never enough money. Alex and Jensen seemed to want nothing more than to be able to afford to stay, but privately I longed to live in a San Mateo condo with wall-to-wall carpet and cable. I wanted to be comfortable.

But six months after Silvia dumped me I fell in love with Julia, which made things briefly okay again, and we moved to Chicago together. If you’d told me then not only that we wouldn’t last, but that after spending years in a kind of celibacy I would fall for a man, and that he and I would marry and buy a house in the country and start a family, I would say it sounded awfully heteronormative for a fairy tale and not suitable for children (not that I planned on having any).

Sometimes it feels like a betrayal. Not marrying a man but the having money part. I’m ashamed to say that I conflated being gay with being broke. The two ideas traveled together in my head and in my life. It’s not that I didn’t know, rationally, that there were rich lesbians, as well as poor. It’s just that I never actually saw any.

The kite gets caught in an eddy, tail flapping, and nosedives. Alex gets up to help relaunch it.

“I really wasn’t talking about him and me,” Jensen says. “Seriously.”

“I know,” I say.

What happened was this: Several years ago, back
when Alex and Jensen were still living together and a rotating cast of people claimed the futon in the living room, Alex entered the city’s affordable housing lottery. One day his number was called, and he signed a lease for a one-bedroom in SOMA. Jensen figured they’d live there together, but Alex said he was ready to live alone. Which he did for all of two weeks, until the guy he’d recently started dating—that would be Will—moved in. Now they live there as a family, with a Chinese screen chopping up the one bedroom into two.

That wasn’t the end of things for Alex and Jensen, more like the final lens through which everything since has been viewed. Jensen lost the apartment in the Mission in a rent hike and moved on to a series of shares in the Lower Haight and the Tenderloin, the Inner and Outer Sunset, finally leaving the city altogether for yet more shares in the East Bay. Meanwhile, from the safety of his rent-stabilized apartment located at the headquarters of the Internet, Alex began his transition.

There was an accusation going around in our circle of friends—whether initiated or endorsed by Jensen, I never knew—that Alex had stolen from Jensen. That the implication extended beyond money or real estate was obvious. An advantage, real or fictive, had been seized.

Eventually Alex got tired of the drama. He kept some friends but mostly made new ones. Only I, the departed, have managed to remain neutral. All these years later, I continue to marvel at the conflict, all of it over the right to rent, not even to own.

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Alex runs the kite across the grass. For a moment I’m reminded of a summer day in Dolores Park, his auburn ponytail and broomskirt swishing in his wake, but now it’s Oscar who’s his tail, running along after him. He releases the kite and Will lets out the string, and soon the butterfly is aloft on a gust of air.

“So, girl in black,” Jensen says. “Looks like you’re a hit.”

Like that, my stomach drops. I’d rather talk about anything else, but I’ve only got myself to blame. Girl in Black is what they politely call semi-autobiographical. I’ve been self-promoting a lot on Facebook. No scant piece of praise is too small to share. The book took five years to write, what with the kids and my tax business, such as it is, swooping in every January like an ice storm. I won’t earn out my advance—this is already a mathematical certainty, as well as mortifying—but posting the reviews on social media makes all that hidden work more visible, more valuable, or at least that’s how the tic works. It’s what I do now instead of writing the next book.

“It’s been fun,” I say.

For as much as I’ve been talking it up since it sold last year, I wrote the book in secret. I never thought anyone would read it. Sure, I hoped it would be good and that it might have a life outside of my head one day, but Rockford is not a place that encourages fantastical thinking. I’m not sure what possessed me to send it off to agents. The women in my running group were nice enough to come to the launch party at the bookstore in the mall. “I’m gonna have to check this out!” they said as they lined up at the register, and I crumpled inside, knowing they wouldn’t.

“I’m sorry I haven’t read it yet,” Jensen says. “How was the reading?”

“All right.”

I’m sorry to say that I’d hoped for more yesterday: rows of eager, young faces; an engaging Q&A about sexual
identity politics; Silvia lurking in the back, wondering how she let me get away. I was all set to read the scene where Emily and Zana fight over whether to see Sleater-Kinney or L7 over spring break, but I took one look at the room—a handful of people old enough to be my parents, a couple of employees, no Silvia—and decided to stick with chapter one, Emily at freshman orientation. I’d read the same passage in Rockford, too. Jonah and Lily had been there. Lately I’ve been wondering when and how to talk to them about the life I had before. The instinct to curate everything for my kids, even their mother, can be overwhelming. I’ve made hints to Mark, that soon they’ll be old enough for me to open up more, but I don’t think he sees any great need. For the first six months or so of dating, the fact that I’d been with women was a turn-on for him, but the longer we’re together, the less we talk about it.

“There’s a waitlist at the library,” Jensen says. “That must be good, right?”

I feel like a bad Democrat, murderous these last three months at the very notion of libraries, where books can be had for free. Jensen teaches community art classes. I know he can’t afford a $25 hardback.

“I’ll mail you one. Hey, how’s your mom?”

According to Facebook, he’s been going home to St. Louis a lot.

He shakes his head. “It’s pretty bad.”

“What is?” Alex asks, rejoining us. He drops down onto the blanket. Criss-cross applesauce, our kids would call it.

“His mom,” I explain. “She’s sick.”

“Damn. Sorry. We’re going through the same thing with Will’s dad.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say. I saw the courtroom photos of Oscar’s adoption, noted when Alex and Will took each other’s names. There were candles on a cake when Alex got his teaching credential, but there was no status update on an ailing in-law.

“Cancer?” Jensen asks.

“Alzheimer’s,” Alex says. “What about you?”

“Multiple myeloma.”

“When was she diagnosed?”

“We’ve known for eight years. She was stable until a year ago, but then her protein levels went crazy.”

And then a silence falls over us, because all that’s left to talk about is death.

Oscar, now holding the spool, pulls in the string, drawing the kite closer, and I see that it’s not a butterfly but a space shuttle.

Our long friendship means bearing witness to growing pains. I’m thinking about that moment, right before Julia and I left town, when Jensen and Alex were in joint step, boldly sailing out past the LGB alphabet I knew and into TQIA, BDSM, islands of invented pronouns and polyamory. It felt like a kind of failure on my part, like I’d fallen behind.

Alex transitioned, but Jensen is still becoming. At a certain point he changed his pronoun, but not much else seems to have shifted. He looks much like he always did, only without the shine, and his supply of confidence—which come to think of it was probably only resilience that I mistook for confidence—is overdrawn. I wince in recognition.

“Do you think that’s what’s holding you back?” I ask Jensen. “Your mom?”

He glances up at me and then hides behind his hand, which is stroking the outer corner of his eyebrow.

What right do I have to presume a kind of adolescence
crawled into my arms and asked what I was doing. I told her that I was a writer, and she asked me why. I said that writers like a good story as much as kids do. But lately I’ve been thinking that it’s more than that. It’s: See me like this. Now like this. And this. See me when I don’t see myself anymore. We put the eyeballs in our pocket. We knock them together on the way home.

In the bookstore in SFO, waiting for the red-eye, I scan the piles of books, mine not among them, and I’m sick with disappointment. In the mall back home, Girl in Black is still in the window. I check on it every time I’m there. The card reading “Local Author” is still propped in front of it. But this, here, is what’s really happening to me in the marketplace. The narcissism of the debut author, checked like a bag.

I wrote the book as a memoir, but my agent said we’d get more eyeballs on it if we sent it out as fiction, so we did. One early morning, back when I was writing it, the whole house dark except for the light over the kitchen table and the sun just beginning to break over the fields, Lily
Ragged Voices: Reading and Writing through the Nightmare of Self

“I observe myself observing what I observe. It startles me. Then I am not that which observes. I am lack. Alack!”

— John Gardner, *Grendel*

If Gardner allows his titular protagonist to retreat into a parody of Sartrean self-consciousness here, he also effectively articulates one of the more unsavory dimensions of personhood, of identity: the garrulous multiplicity of the mind. A simple illustrative exercise will perhaps suffice. Picture, if you will, a ripe, red apple in a wooden bowl. How might we unspool the shifting, cacophonous, eminently ghostly phenomenon that is taking place in the mind’s mist? Where are we in this process exactly? Let us dive into the murk: We are the vision of the fruit, the dark grain of the wood. We are the abstract acknowledgment of that vision, the observation of the observation that so startled Grendel. We are the tenuous connections to the apples that echo in culture, popular or otherwise: Snow White, Eve’s fateful pulling from the bough. We are our memories of apples, of the sweet red or sour green flesh, the seeds that taste of poison, the wedges mother cut for us. These tessellations of mind could be enumerated infinitely, the Russian nesting dolls of consciousness. They fold within themselves, or rush to overrun one another, each fragment as eager to speak, as eager to rule as the next.

And we are, of course, speaking only of apples! Consider the weight of, say, sex or love or death or one’s own self, that swirling opacity from which we posture toward something cohesive, something whole. Even if we acknowledge the beautiful bum rush of consciousness, its glistening waves, its squawking, its flash and bang, as something wild and wonderful (a fair assessment, I think), the other side of the coin is less frequently acknowledged; that is, the terror of being a collection of ragged voices; a floating, liminal awareness; a thing of exquisite division.

I am no stranger to such scatter. Anxiety *about* anxiety, the fear of the fear, has left me nostalgic for the days of palm sweats and a hammering heart: a more palatable panic. Indeed, over the years “panic attack” has come to seem a misnomer to me. This implies a siege, an offensive, which, for me, it manifestly is not. Call it, rather, a dissolution, the melt of meanings. Or the gleam of mind-mirrors, the wormhole of reflected reflection. It is merely an intensification of a natural element, a gradation, the darkened curl of a wave on which I rise or sink with the queasy knowledge that there will be no escape from these waters.

Identity, then, is a battle, a contest, a kind of corralling. I find myself thinking often of necessity, how best to marshal the appropriate responses, to train psychic sheepdogs both diligent and loyal. What continues to seem most valuable to me is an aspiration toward quietude, ideally of the aesthetic variety. For me, for so many of us, reading and writing have become a means of stitching silence, of imposing a brief respite from the shattered self. The interior voices are lulled, drugged, or charmed like snakes. They are put under a kind of spell while we linger over the words of another, or build a world whose vividness
overwhelms the paltry defenses of consciousness. I am perhaps never more singular, more coherent as a self than when reading Virginia Woolf, or when writing my own novel. How gratefully I sink into either, as a thing on fire cast into the sea. When the slick sickened shapes appear at psychological low tide, when I am reduced to white noise, or an animal chatter, these forms return me, center the drift. My experiences with literature, of inestimable value to me, are perhaps the borders of my own selfhood, the brokered terms of my own identity. If I am nothing else, I am a being who has read, a being who has written. These statements, it seems to me, overlap mere facticity. If one believes in them enough, as I do, they become necessarily metaphysical: an existential bedrock of one’s own choosing.

“Spinning a web of words, pale walls of dreams, between myself and all I see”: so says Grendel, in despair, over the paucity of relief offered by language. I cannot agree with him. Those “pale walls” have built a structure within me: call it a hovel, call it a home. Is it any surprise, then, the consuming adoration we feel for books? Is it any wonder that reading has, for so many of us, become synonymous with living? In a storm, one comes to love the boards over one’s head.
Two Poems

Birth of the Doppelgänger
A wolf’s entrails opened and I stepped into them. I stepped into the jowls of the dead, into the stench. Flies scoured the decayed innards like priests washing temple walls.

It was ecstatic, the flipped-over car, wolf teeth shining from gum swell above tongue, behind cheek, after blood spill and my car spilled until all hell spilled and you want to know what the taste was like? I tell you at the crash’s wake was a new life. My new self bled out from the old self. I left behind a husk pricked by daggers of wood and lungs drunk off exhaust.

Saw the one eye left in the split skull watch my skin roll up like panty hose over the bones, over pristine muscle blood hot and fresh. I walked away from car and corpse and made room for nothing but this body’s first words. See my mouth move, like this—

Epithalamium
A kiss. Train ride home from a late dinner, City Hall and document signing. Wasn’t cold but we cuddled in an empty car, legal. Last month a couple of guys left a gay bar and were beaten with poles on the way to their car. No one called them faggot so no hate crime’s documented. A beat down is what some pray for, a pulse left to count. We knew we weren’t protected. We knew our rings were party favors, gold to steal the shine from. We couldn’t protect us, knew the law wouldn’t know how. Still, his beard across my brow, the burn of his cologne. When the train stopped, the people came on.

Against Aboutness: The Corpse that Almost Got Away

As Stanley Kunitz convincingly insists, one of poetry’s roles is to remind us of our aliveness. Max Frisch’s late modernist prose works and plays conduct soundings of the degree to which our perceptive aliveness is capable of resisting attempts at labelling ourselves and others. With laconic precision, Frisch sparsely populates the written page and the stage with human lives as consciously arbitrary ensembles of partial parallel or superimposed drafts of an unachievable singular identity. Taking Novalis’ and Nietzsche’s aphoristic suggestions to consider one’s life a series of inventive, experimental performances as a point of creative departure, Frisch’s prose works and plays present the course of a human life as a patchwork of friable, exchangeable fragments that never constituted anything coming close to a coherent manuscript in the first place.

In the last of a series of stories within a story told by the protagonist-narrator at the end of Mein Name sei Gantenbein (1964, literally “Assume my name is Gantenbein,” translated as A Wilderness of Mirrors), Frisch’s aesthetically most radical novel, a corpse is discovered in the Limmat, the river that runs through Zurich. The disintegrating body almost remains undetected, but assiduous citizens report it to local police whose clumsy pursuit of the corpse and protracted attempts at pushing the remains into a coffin, which is almost floating away, is narrated with satirical gusto. This slapstick episode points to the heart of Frisch’s project, to expose our existential hermeneutic helplessness and to subvert a corresponding eagerness to overcompensate for it by defining and confining everything that disturbs complacent conformism. Rather than attempting to encircle Frisch’s work with further concepts, as breathable they might announce themselves to be, in what follows I will outline a few questions in order to explore the porous boundaries between ethics and aesthetics that Frisch’s voices endure and co-create. A grateful nod to Frisch’s textual universe of existential ambivalence, the following questions are inspired by the Swiss (and global) writer’s creative method of resignation as a form of resistance to becoming ossified by the mechanistic application of images and labels to others and ourselves.

Can we outgrow our habitual range of dichotomies (the individual vs. its relationships, the personal vs. the political, social engagement vs. aesthetic playfulness, success vs. failure, etc.) that we have allowed to delineate the ways in which we think about (or worse, measure) who we are and who, and how (and whether) we want to be? Is it possible to conceive of one another without encapsulating ourselves and others in fixated images? Does love begin where any attempts at mutual definition and therefore appropriation through words are courageously abandoned?

Frisch’s works offer variations of an infinitely expandable, open-ended questionnaire of playfully existential invitations to experience the lure and the threat of becoming subject to dramatic change. According to Humboldt, what we can articulate harbors the potential to point at, shape, and set in motion that which we
cannot yet verbalize. Observers of their intrinsic passivity, Frisch’s protagonists share a constitutive desire to break out of the monotonous interchangeable roles that they have perfected. Listening to these narrative and dramatic voices continues to inspire us to become attentive to the yearning for change that might always have been lodged inside us. This urge, while impossible to be levelled off diagnostically, or contained in a steady slogan, might be translatable into different kinds of what it could mean to be alive as a human being in the early twenty-first century. Refusing to nudge us in any particular direction, Frisch prepares for us, and prepares us for, a sustainably non-violent revolutionary appetite, an active curiosity about being alive. Especially with his Tagebuch 1946–1949 and in Mein Name sei Gantenbein, Frisch left us continuously potent antidotes against prescriptive ideological salesmanship of self-commodification. Frisch’s protagonists’ inability to step out of superimposed cycles of their recurring failures reminds us that we as an imaginary community of solitary readers are, in the words of Hilary Putnam, “self-surprising creatures.”
The Soul Shedding Itself: Antoine Volodine’s *Bardo or Not Bardo*

When reading the work of Antoine Volodine, it is wise to remember that Volodine doesn’t exist. The name “Antoine Volodine” is the primary heteronym of a French writer and schoolteacher. Using this title, and others—including Lutz Bassman and Manuela Draeger—he has published over forty books that, together, form the genre of “post-exotic” literature, a term that Volodine coined to distinguish the elaborate universe of his books from the work of his French contemporaries. Described by the author as a “foreign language written in French,” post-exotism comprises the writings of dissidents, spies, and revolutionaries, not to mention an array of writers insane, imprisoned, or dead. Volodine occupies a liminal space between the post-exotic world and ours. He described his role in detail in “The Fringe of Reality,” published in the *White Review*:

You should perceive and conceive of Antoine Volodine as a collective author, a name that includes the writings, voices, and poems of many other authors. ... You should accept my presence here as a spokesperson...post-exoticism, which is to say an imaginary literature from elsewhere and headed elsewhere, a literature that insists upon its status as strange and estranged.

The inextricability of Volodine from the post-exotic universe makes reading his work—and that of Bassman, Draeger, and others—a surreal and alien experience. The books are physical objects produced by nonexistent people who live in a fictional setting. Before even opening a book, one is forced to question the nature of authorial identity.

In Volodine’s latest novel, *Bardo or Not Bardo*, translated by J. T. Mahoney, the content challenges our notion of identity. Its subject, broadly speaking, is the cessation of selfhood. The book is made up of seven vignettes that follow characters crossing the Bardo, the floating world between death and rebirth (or enlightenment, if one is so lucky). The Bardo provides an ideal setting for Volodine. As he told the *Paris Review*, “It’s extremely exciting to build a fiction on this, particularly when there is also no longer I or you, male or female, narrator or character, or even reader or author.” The Bardo lets him forgo the clutter of flesh and explores selfhood in its purest form, to ask, What is personhood stripped of its body? But the book is not as wistful as that question makes it appear. Overall, it reads a bit like Dante’s *Inferno* meets *The Naked Gun*, because though fixated on death, the novel tends to highlight the comedic tenuousness of existence, seeking, through both humor and despair, to show how hapless humans can be, during life and after.

*Bardo or Not Bardo* opens with a prologue to the Bardo: the act of dying. This first vignette focuses on a radical egalitarian spy, Schlumm, who is bleeding out from a gunshot wound behind a Buddhist temple, where he had lived in hiding for more than a decade. In his final minutes, a monk reads to him from the *Bardo Thödol*, *The Soul Shedding Itself*: Antoine Volodine’s *Bardo or Not Bardo*.
reintroduce yourself to the world of prisons, asylums, rich people, and spiders.” The idea that rebirth only leads to more pain and, eventually, death once again, subtly permeates the book, and, in the process, complicates our understanding of the characters.

By writing about persons in the Bardo, Volodine is able to gives us immediate access to his characters’ memories, fears, thoughts, and emotions; however, one cannot read Bardo or Not Bardo without sensing the forthcoming dissolution of those very memories, fears, thoughts, and emotions, so much so that what we read about are not people, but shadows and fragments of people, the ephemera of existence rendered meaningless as the soul sheds itself and entertains a new body. In Bardo or Not Bardo, identity is not merely unstable, as the Moderns taught us, it is a fossil crumbled to dust. As one character, Puffky, explains the progression through the Bardo, “Even your childhood disappears. Memory shuts down. To fill this void, you can still listen to the voices phonocopied here and there, from outside. But that doesn’t do much. You don’t even know if it’s from the past.” The phonocopied voices play from a Bardic jukebox spewing cryptic phrases culled from scrambled memories. The jukebox provides the most potent image in the novel, reifying its themes on the nature of identity formation.

Yes, it suggests, each person has a complex, unique past, but that past remains fundamentally unintelligible, even to the person who lived it.

The question of how to live with this knowledge—or, more precisely, how to die with this knowledge—plagues the novel. Unsurprisingly, in a book named after the Bardo, Buddhism suggests how to cope with the inevitable conclusion of selfhood. Speaking about the prospect of death, one character gazes out a train window and says,
“If there is anything that clears away my anxiety, it’s these modest elements, and the picturesque tread that doesn’t fade between lulls.” If everything will be lost, is it not best to be mindful of the beauty of existence? At times garishly abstruse and zany, with its revolutionary monks and sentimental clowns, the novel repeatedly pauses to catalog the small pleasures of life. In its final passage, a bartender turns on a radio for company. What plays is not the incomprehensible memory scat of the Bardo jukebox, but a pure (even when unintelligible) expression of beauty: “For those in the know, it is now a traditional dance, accompanied by a popular oboist, the hyangpiri, an hourglass-shaped drum, the changoo, a cylindrical drum, the pluk, and flutes. For others, it’s just lovely music that can be listened to for hours, because it’s rhythmic, because it’s beautiful, and because they are extremely lonely.”
Episodic Blips, Incomplete Things: A Conversation with Simon Critchley

When David Bowie died in January of this year, Simon Critchley was the first person I emailed in response to the news. We had spoken about Bowie at length in 2014 when Critchley published his philosophical paean to the metamorphosing musician he called “the most important artist of the last forty years...in any medium.” At the time of Bowie’s death, we were already scheduled to have another conversation about two of the books he released in 2015: one that wrestles with what Camus called the “only one really serious philosophical problem,” aptly titled Notes on Suicide, and another consisting of fragmentary thoughts on a variety of topics, The ABC of Impossibility.

For the past five years, my conversations with Simon Critchley have been these episodic blips that punctuate my literary life. Episodic blips, as Critchley explains, “make something like the links or chains in a life.” Critchley finds the concept of a grand narrative of identity absurd; in his estimation, “insofar as one is going to weave things together in a certain way, it’s in terms of these remembered ‘blips’ which don’t form a coherent whole.”

Our conversations for print—this one, and the three that have preceded it—don’t form a coherent whole either. They are incomplete things, fragmentary discourses, which even in consort only seem like a series of shards of a looking-glass reflecting back distorted pieces of our previous selves, grotesque echoes of a possible us.

Crichtley is, as he confesses here, “happy with unfinished, incomplete things.” I am as well.

TM: In your hilarious study of philosophy, The Book of Dead Philosophers, you view the philosophies of major thinkers throughout history through the lens of their death. David Bowie, the artist who you’ve claimed is “the most important artist of the last forty years,” died earlier this year. I wonder how Bowie’s death might similarly offer a lens through which to view his art and philosophy. I’m curious what you think of Bowie’s death and how that might link to certain throughlines in his work.

SC: I think it’s a question of two facets of Bowie’s death which kind of add up. One facet is what Bowie’s death means in relationship to his art. There is, of course, a kind of continuity here because Bowie’s work was always about death, from “Space Oddity” onwards. Major Tom drifts off into space, he disappears. It’s there from Bowie’s cover of Jacque Brel’s “My Death,” “Rock ‘n Roll Suicide,” “We Are the Dead,” right through tracks on Next Day like “You Feel So Lonely You Could Die.” Since death is a continuity in Bowie’s work, on the one level, Blackstar is a Bowie album like other Bowie albums. We could talk about how it switches, how it shifts things perfectly. My first reaction when I heard it was that this is a Bowie album and it’s in continuity with so much of what he’s done and it twists these things in the slightest way. So Blackstar is, in a way, no exception.

Then there’s the other side of it which is that he is dead and that the music sounds different after his death. In
particular, listening to *Blackstar* the day after his death was announced, to my ears, it sounded different as a work. Let me give you a concrete example: there’s a line from “Dollar Days,” which is the penultimate track on the album, that goes “I’m dying to.” In the context of the lyrics, it’s “I’m dying to push their backs against the wall,” but when I listened to it on January 11th, it was “I’m dying too.” “T” double “o.” You get that sense that he was dying too and he was sending us a message that he was dying too. So in a sense, the two sides of the answer is that there is a continuity of Bowie’s aesthetic, but that also now the work does sound different after his death.

**TM:** Yet at one point in the book you talk about the danger of reading too much of the man into the work and looking for autobiographical clues. You say we have to learn to avoid the overly autobiographical reading in order to misunderstand Bowie a little less. Do you think that there is now a problem with *Blackstar* in that it is almost impossible not to read it non-autobiographically?

**SC:** Precisely. He’s always worked obliquely. He’s always worked indirectly, through personas. To that extent, *Blackstar* is again in continuity with the previous albums, but I have to give a contradictory answer here because we cannot not see *Blackstar*, the show *Lazarus* that opened here in December, and what he did in the last years, allegorically, as some kind of insight into who this person was, while at the same time being told about this not being the place to look.

I think that this contradictory tension is most acute in what is now his final public appearance, which is the video of “Lazarus,” which, again, I saw before his death, and then watched with different eyes after his death. The thing that really struck me—and I’ve been thinking about this before and I was talking to a friend about this in December—is “Why Lazarus?”

**TM:** Yes, it’s certainly an interesting final persona given what we know now.

**SC:** Lazarus is, of course, the person from John’s gospel in the Bible who is resurrected from the dead. He was dead and then is brought back to life. When I was looking at the Bible, John’s gospel, you’ve got the interesting detail of Lazarus, as he comes out of the tomb, being presented with cloth covering his eyes. That’s how Bowie appears in both the “Blackstar” video and the “Lazarus” video. So he is sending us a message about an identification with Lazarus, and here we have another kind of riddle, another kind of complexity—I don’t know what you would even want to call it—but he’s dead and gone and his final communication is about his adopting a figure that does not die: Lazarus. Now that can be interpreted in various ways, but it’s kind of incredibly striking that he uses that figure.

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have been quite happy being dead, but he doesn’t get that choice. Also, an interesting detail: in the Bible, he doesn’t speak. Lazarus doesn’t say anything. So the question of what did Lazarus want we can never know the answer to. Did he want to be back with his sisters? Was he quite happy being dead? And what kind of life is life after you’ve been dead? The point about all those musings is that I think Bowie’s work has always occupied a space between here and somewhere else. This is the whole fascination with the stellar and astral imagery that punctuated his work. He occupies the space between life and death, and kind of always has.

TM: The book is obviously all about Bowie, but it’s also very much about how we construct and deconstruct identity. You talk about identity being at best a sequence of episodic blips rather than some grand narrative unity. I’m curious why do you think we tend to gravitate toward grand narratives of identity when they don’t accurately reflect our lived experience?

SC: Yeah, when they’re not true. We like them, the big stories—the idea that one’s life makes sense, it coheres in relationship to some time before you were born. Your parents and the decision that was made and, you know, there you are. That can also be tied to some story of being a victim or being abused in some way and then recovering from that and everything being suddenly so much better. The whole of your life forms a whole narrative structure—it’s a very appealing idea—it’s just, I don’t think it’s the way it is.

The idea that there is a continuity to identity is a bewildering idea. It’s very popular—or at least it was very popular. It’s still kind of popular in relationship to how memoirs are constructed and how people talk about their lives, their “life stories.” But I think the idea of “episodic blips” is adapted from an article I read years ago by an English philosopher called Galen Strawson. He basically savages the idea of narrative identity and says that identity is much more episodic. I added the “blips” to it, and these “episodic blips” make something like the links or chains in a life. For different people it can be different things. But for me, they happen to be to a larger extent songs by David Bowie, so that insofar as one is going to weave things together in a certain way, it’s in terms of these remembered “blips” which don’t form a coherent whole. They’re just things which happen to someone like you at various points in the past, which you recall and which have significance for you.

And then the question is are those “blips” a kind of epiphenomena of some deeper continuous identity or are they evidence of different kinds of identity, different phases of identity? I think it’s the latter. Of course, there’s a continuity in the sense in which there’s a body that we have, we give it a name, and it exists for a certain period of time and in space, and that body has organs and a brain and all of that, and there’s that continuity. But the rest of it is much more occasional. It seems to me that if you think back to the moments in relation to popular music which were most important to you, and then you think of your identification with them—who you were, what you were back then—it doesn’t really add up to a continuity, but instead it adds up to a series of phases or episodes. I find that much more interesting because it then permits the idea that identity isn’t a fate—it isn’t something you’re stuck with. Identity, therefore, is something you can at least partially invent and reinvent. That’s what people found in Bowie: an identification with him that at some level would be an identification with the actual image
that he had: the lightning bolt, or the Ziggy image, or whatever. But more importantly, I think what Bowie enabled was the idea that people could take on and remake and remodel different kinds of identity. Bowie permitted that, he permitted this idea of phases of identity to take shape. He didn’t seek imitation of his identity in his fans. He wanted his fans to be allowed to invent themselves in the way that he imagined himself. I find that not only is that a much more appealing but also a much truer idea of identity than the one we normally have.

**TM:** Yes, and it seems that whereas many find horror in the idea of there not being a stable identity or a unifying narrative of self, Bowie found freedom in that lack of continuity.

**SC:** We emerge in a context as children where we have—if we’re lucky—parents or people that love us and a home and we’re told that’s who we are. In other words, these are our names, this is the way things are, this is where you are located, and that’s fine. But at a certain point, on another level, it’s incredibly suffocating. What Bowie allowed was that you could become something other than that. There was another location for you that was somewhere else where you could be viewed in some different way. He revealed the fakery of the location where you’re from and the fakery of the identity that you’ve been given. It revealed the way in which new forms of fiction could be crafted which wouldn’t be condemned to that location. They could take place elsewhere, even if only in the imagination, even if only in your bedroom listening to music. You can imagine that you’re somewhere else or with someone else and that is incredibly important. Many artists do that in many ways, but David Bowie just did it so much more eloquently, powerfully, theatrically....

**TM:** And continually.
spheres which is basically that: what we are hearing in
the music of the spheres is the primal harmony of the
universe. That’s appealing, certainly, but it just strikes
me as wrong. For me, music is what pulls me out of the
world—it creates this kind of discord, breaking down
harmony, and it does that through offering different forms
of identity. You can become sort of “deworlded” and
become something else.

TM: In the book you mention Orson Welles’
groundbreaking documentary F for Fake. In it Welles
says that “what we professional liars hope to serve is
truth,” and I think that does sort of get at your central
premise in analyzing Bowie that maybe authenticity
and truth are not the same thing. Is that an accurate
distillation?

SC: Yeah. People conflate authenticity with truth and
they do that in relation to music because they think that
if a musician is being authentic then it’s true—it’s flowing
somehow from their soul or deep within their being. On
the contrary, in the case of Bowie, it’s all about lying and
deception and illusion. It’s about inauthenticity in every
conceivable level, yet his inauthenticity is not the flat,
empty, knowing irony of a hipster or of a Warhol. It’s
something which Bowie was able to mobilize in music
in order to create a profoundly felt truth—a truth that
resonated not semantically as it were. It’s not as if you
could identify the meaning of the words, that wasn’t
the point. But somehow the tonality of the song was
resounded within you, was able to find something that
was simply true. That’s the basic idea: the idea that once
we’re free of the ideology of authenticity, we can explore
different kinds of inauthenticity—not in the name of
empty irony, but in the name of a deeper felt existential
truth.

TM: Other forms of truth, beyond what we might
normally think of in a more scientific or logical sense.

SC: More propositional truth. Not empirical truth,
but some kind of lived truth, felt truth, emotional truth,
affective truth which again is not really had in relation to
the world; it’s had when we are able to put the world at a
certain distance. That’s what art can accomplish.

TM: Moving to one of your books released last
year, Notes on Suicide, I love how you start by saying,
“This book is not a suicide note,” and then, of course,
later on you sort of admit that perhaps the first line
is not to be trusted. I guess my question is: Aren’t all
books suicide notes on some level?

SC: Yes, you’re right. All books are suicide notes, and
then there’s a real paradox to that because a suicide note
is a note written by someone who has decided to end their
life with a view to posterity, with a view to futurity. So, in
a sense, what a suicidal person does is decide to have no
future, to stop, but in writing a note they announce that
stopping in relation to the future.

I’ve been thinking recently about bereavement. My
mother died in early December, and then Bowie died in
January. It was a weird couple of months. The one death
has helped the other in the sense in which talking about
Bowie’s death has helped me articulate things that I was
thinking about my mother that I was unable to say. The
only thing that I found which helped, the only thing I read
that felt right, was a text by the English poet Denise Riley:
Time Lived, Without Its Flow. She is meditating on the
death of her son, and she says that the basic phenomena
that she experienced in relationship with the death of her
son wasn’t so much sadness or pain or grief, but it was
an overwhelming sense of time just having come time
to a stop, time not budging, time not flowing anymore.
This led to some very fascinating insights about the nature of time. But I realized that when you are so deep within bereavement, certainly for me, there was no interest in writing. What would you write for? It felt that everything had stopped. So the point is that I think to write by definition is to write for some future. So the central paradox of the suicide note is the paradox of writing in general: writing for a future which one inevitably won’t be participating in. We are imagining some kind of posterity for ourselves. It’s so strange.

TM: In the beginning of the book you say it’s “an attempt to simply try to understand suicide.” I found that the “try” there is so crucial because obviously understanding suicide is an impossibility. So that by the end, it doesn’t seem like you as writer—or we as readers—necessarily have an understanding of suicide, but perhaps we could say that we misunderstand it less.

SC: The question became “How can one work through...”—well, “work through” is the wrong verb, but it is an attempt to misunderstand suicide less by assembling a number of perspectives on the question of suicide. For me, there’s a kind of rage about the way in which suicide is always talked about in relationship to the question of rights and duties, how impoverished our language is in relation to suicide. Suicide notes are such a strange literary genre that I think we should try to understand. If your supposition is right that all texts are suicide notes, then obviously we have to understand what’s going on with suicide notes. The main structure I find is a kind of melancholy introversion mixed with an exhibitionism. And that, I think you’re right, is constitutive of all writing. To say that it’s all narcissism is to not understand the logic of narcissism.

With most of my books, I don’t feel I’m in control, not in some dramatic way, but I’m just not sure about how the whole thing looks. There is some component of the book that is very analytical, where I’m just picking arguments. There’s also some of what I’ve just said about suicide notes. But then there is the last part of the book which is really an attempt to try to understand more literary approaches to suicide. In a way, the whole book was structured by the desire to get to that Virginia Woolf quotation from To the Lighthouse at the end. I’ve done that before where I’ve had a quote or there are certain words I want to get to, so I’ll build this whole thing just to get to that line.

TM: That’s actually something I wanted to ask you about. It’s my favorite thing about your writing. You do a really good job of weaving in literature and the arts into your philosophical texts. I’m curious what art gives you? What does weaving that in give to your texts?

SC: I think it gives you particularity; it gives you the texture of a life or the texture of the story of a life. Suicide is a very kind of abstract topic: To be or not to be? Do you have a right to kill yourself? Do you have a duty to not kill yourself? These are very abstract concerns. But it’s when you look at, for example, the kind of affirmation that you find in Virginia Woolf in that passage at the end of the book where she is looking at the light of the lighthouse and the way in which the light of the lighthouse at that particular time is lighting up all the particulars of her life. There’s a reverie in that moment. And yet we know Virginia Woolf killed herself. Those two facts collide. That’s one of the many contradictions of the book. The message I go out on is a somewhat affirmative one from Virginia Woolf, and yet she is hardly the best example in terms of leading us into not killing ourselves.
She submitted in the end, perfectly rightly, but she left us the work and the work is what stands.

This is where I’m a kind of follower of William James. James says somewhere that the cultivation of a variety of particulars is superior to general concepts however true. So what literature gives me is that variety of particulars. The tendency—not just in philosophy, but in ideology, in the media, in the way things are usually articulated—is to always move towards forms of abstraction. That tendency is what literature can arrest.

TM: The tension in the book—and I think Woolf is the perfect example of this because there’s obviously the tension between those words in To the Lighthouse and her walk into the Ouse—is that there’s a romance for you (and for many of us) in suicide—the “lointingling instant,” as you say in your book The ABC of Impossibility. But in addition to the seductive siren’s call to the edge, you then use Emil Cioran to approach this really moving call to life: “calm down and enjoy the world’s melancholy spectacle.” In a way, it’s sort of the worst and least convincing argument to talk someone off the edge, but in another way it’s the only argument that could ever actually talk someone off the edge.

SC: Yeah, it’s what I call the pessimist’s refutation of suicide: Calm down. Who do you think you are? Stay a while and keep your eyes and ears open.

Part of the takeaway of the book is that I think that there’s something just too optimistic and heroic about suicide. I suppose my view of things is that we shouldn’t submit to that illusion. It’s a question of trying to make do with less and to conceive of it less heroically, more pessimistically, and more realistically as a possible basis for an affirmation of kind. That can be very, very hard to do because we dramatize ourselves so much and we want to heroize ourselves and collapse into self-pity and all the rest.

So again why literature is important is that these kinds of stories like Woolf or Cioran are exemplary. They give you examples which can help. Of course, it’s not going to help in all cases. One sort of unpalatable truth is that in many suicides, once a decision is made, then it’s just a matter of time. It might take a while before that decision is acted upon, but at that point it seems there’s little that can be done. It’s as if with certain people who kill themselves that they’ve reached a certain limit—a threshold is passed, psychically, and then it’s a matter of time. The question then is to provide something else this side of the threshold, a different kind of set of vocabularies. The book, in its humble way, is an attempt to assign some kind of vocabulary or to open up alternative ways of looking at suicide, to get rid of the idea of suicide as a black or white issue, a yes or no, a right or a duty. I think what we need to do is to have a language which allows us to take time with it, to understand it, and I think or hope to forestall people acting on that wish should it appear.

TM: I’ve noticed in your recent writing, including this book, that there’s more of a strain of—dare I say?—the fiction writer in you. This book is bookended with some descriptions of the coast you’re on while writing it, and the descriptions feel rich in a way that philosophy rarely does.

SC: I mean the most full-blown version of that is Memory Theatre, and I’m not sure what I think about that. It’s a kind of fiction or a semi-fiction or whatever it is. For me, it’s always been about me trying to have a voice that says things that are true and trying to invest and amplify the grain of that voice or the world of that voice. To write in the most personal and direct ways, to go back to Bowie,
is only possible through borrowing other voices that we
ventriloquize and somehow find what it is we want to say.
So I would say that all my work, from the very beginning,
has a fictive impulse. But, on another level, I think you’re
right, the voice is different now. I’m a bit more relaxed and
a bit less inhibited about saying what I want to say how I
want to say it.

TM: Your other recent book, *The ABC of
Impossibility*, is a book of fragments that you’ve
“shored against your ruins”—and the use of fragments
or of very short chapters (as in *Stay Illusion!* and *Bowie*)
has now become a staple of much of your writing. So
what is it about fragments that you find intriguing or
that gives you an adequate mode of expression?

SC: For me it’s a bit like a pop song, or like side one
of Bowie’s *Low*, where the songs are really very short, or
Brian Eno’s *Another Green World*, which has maybe twenty
odd songs on it, but they’re all very short. It’s the idea that
because they are miniature, I think I am drawn to them.
I sketch here a series of miniatures and then allow the
miniatures to have this staccato quality where they pile up
and bump up against each other. It’s obviously a deliberate
act as an idea—though I can’t really say where it began—but I’ve noticed the trend in my writing too.

*The ABC of Impossibility* was actually written
something like ten years ago, before *The Book of Dead
Philosophers* probably. It was an early attempt at this kind
of thing. I’m happy with these more recent experiments.
In the Hamlet book, *Stay Illusion!*, we used the jump cut
affect with the fragments. I like that in writing. You could
say it’s linked to limited attention spans and all that. We
could talk about short-form internet-style writing. That’s
all in play, but for me it’s more like trying to create in
words the affect of an album of short songs.

TM: It speaks much more to the episodic blips idea
of your Bowie book, in opposition to the more grand
narrative idea.

SC: At the moment I’m reading Baudelaire’s *Flowers
of Evil*. I just got an edition of it and your question speaks
to my attraction with poetry, which is that you get this
incredibly formally precise, but fragmentary vision of
things and for me that’s enough. I never really needed
the kind of architectural structure of levels to do that for me.
I’m also very happy with unfinished, incomplete things.
This goes back to the ideology of authenticity, which is the
ideology of publishing—you’ve got to make something
coherent and enduring. That is a profoundly held view, but
it’s never been my concern.

TM: *The ABC of Impossibility* is this incomplete
thing. You have the list at the end of the book of
potential other sections that aren’t mentioned but
could have been or should have been or would have
been. One of those missing sections is “Love.” You
say you wrote this book a decade ago, and that makes
sense, because to me is seems like so much of what
you’ve written since is an attempt to write that “Love”
section. There’s a love thread through much of your
recent work.

SC: Yes, love is there throughout. Going back to
Bowie, there’s a song called “Love is Lost” on *The Next
Day*. It’s this kind of quintessential Bowie statement in
that it’s a song about love, but it’s from the perspective of
the loss of love. It seems to me what Bowie was able to
do was to articulate a kind of yearning for love from the
perspective of its absence or its loss. I guess the question
about love is how it’s sustained, how one binds oneself
to it. That’s a really difficult question because the best
articulations of love are written from the perspective of
its absence or from the perspective of hatred and revenge and then you begin to understand negatively what love is. When someone tries to positively explain what love is, like an evolutionary biologist, it doesn’t feel like love. It’s sly, it’s dirty, it’s mechanical, it’s calculable. Love has to be that infinite demand, that infinite thing which mobilizes you in relationship to loss, absence, regret, and melancholy. It’s a question of how one then can sustain the act of love. That’s the most difficult thing to do in a life.
“Who Can I Be Now?:
The David Bowie Identity Mixtape

After speaking with Simon Critchley about Bowie, “Bowie,” and the infinite Bowies, I found myself compiling a mixtape of some identity-themed David Bowie tracks, some of which Critchley wrote about in his book, some of which we spoke about, and others which I independently find fascinating. Of course, nearly all of Bowie’s songs relate to identity in some way, but here I’ve put together a small sampling of some of his best identity-themed tunes, punctuated with brief engagements with the songs.

Track One: “Red Sails” from Lodger (1979)

“Do you remember we another person.”

We start with “Red Sails,” the final song on Lodger’s A side, and the last of that album’s songs to deal explicitly with the travel theme, an odd voyage to the hinterland. Inspired by—one might even be so bold to say plagiarized from—Neu! and Harmonia, the song is, therefore, in some way obviously Bowie “being” another person, morphing into another sound, another persona, this one with discordant melodies and unspooling identities: “we another person.” But what Bowie song isn’t him being another person? When is he not unspooling another identity? Is there a real Bowie or just a series of Bowie masks? Bowie claimed the song is about an English mercenary cum swashbuckling Errol-Flynn-type adrift in the China Sea, but the lyrics are a series of shifting signifiers that slowly, as the song progresses, devolve into a word salad of nonsense vocalizations. The journey, as is often the case with Bowie, isn’t a journey to find one’s self, but to “unfind” one’s self, and it’s fa fa fa da da da da.

Track Two: “I’m Afraid of Americans” from Earthling (1997)

“No one needs anyone. They don’t even just pretend.”

In Bowie’s own journey to “unfind” himself, he settled into a life in New York City for the remainder of his years. Bowie always seemed both foreign to Americans and yet also somehow quintessentially American in his alieness and un-Americaness. In the mid-90s, after his somewhat forgettable Tin Machine phase, Bowie dove into drum and bass, electronic sounds that felt as alien as his presence. It’s the perfect robotic funk through which he can express the paranoia that seeps out of the pores of “I’m Afraid of Americans,” a vision of a New York, an America, a world, where violence is everywhere, where even God seems to pick sides, where the only appropriate response seems to be anxiety. (This is pre-9/11, mind you, though it only seems more relevant two decades on.) Bowie said of the song: “It’s merely sardonic. I was traveling in Java when the first McDonald’s went up: it was like, ‘for fuck’s sake.’ The invasion by any homogenized culture is so depressing, the erection of another Disney World in, say, Umbria, Italy, more so. It strangles the indigenous culture and narrows expression of life.” Bowie has always been interested in
a broadening of the expression of life—interested in the hinterland, the heathen, the alien, the rebel, in turning to face the strange ch-ch-ch-ch-changes rather than the unstrange homogenizing tendencies of the powerful. The fear is that America, with God on its side, may be wiping out that which isn’t McDonalds, that which doesn’t want to suck on a Coke, that which won’t conform, that which can’t express identity in the rote ways it is expected to. We can’t all be named Johnny.

Track Three: “Rebel Rebel” from Diamond Dogs (1974)

“You’ve got your mother in a whirl.
She’s not sure if you’re a boy or a girl.”

Bowie, in his interest in broadening the expression of life, found himself drawn to liminal states, to in-betweenness. Take “Rebel Rebel,” for example, where the ideal person seems to be some rebellious and androgynous middle, someone whose mother can’t even tell if they’re a boy or a girl. We think of liminal states as the moments of transition between the stable points. When we look at the world through these grand narratives, we fictionalize it. We pretend that A leads to B leads to C, etc. and create some nice story arc. A more appropriate description of life, in my opinion, can be found in what Critchley calls “episodic blips.” All moments can be seen as in-between states, but not in-between anything except other in-between states. We’re in an eternal state of becoming. If it’s in the episodic blips that we can get close to some sort of truth about life or identity, it has nothing to do with these moments being more stable or more authentic. But in these episodic blips perhaps we approach the somethingness. Perhaps?

Track Four: “Changes” from Hunky Dory (1971)

“So I turned myself to face me,
But I’ve never caught a glimpse
Of how the others must see the faker.
I’m much too fast to take that test.”

“Changes” has become sort of the ultimate anthemic Bowie song because it is lyrically dealing with precisely the thematic ideas that the entire “Bowie project” seems to be about—a never ending series of ch-ch-ch-ch-changes. But the metaphorphoses of Bowie are not merely the banal “reinventions” of the many pop stars who over the years have followed his lead, for there is something simultaneously more true and more false about the Bowie personas—true in their falsity and false in their truth. The confrontation with one’s own identity, here in “Changes,” the turning to face one’s self, always ends with an uncaught glimpse, a nothingness. The infinite Bowies are Schrodinger’s live-dead cats, and the moment you try to accurately measure them, the moment you turn to face them, you see there’s nothing to glimpse. Caliban’s cracked lookingglass can’t reflect or not reflect his own face if the reflected is changing faster than the reflection. “I’m much too fast to take that test,” Bowie croons, with a knowing smile. “Time may change me,” he sings, and of course it does. Time changes everything; all is in transmutation; identity, most of all, is the constant metempsychosis or “met him pike hoses” of which Molly Bloom speaks in Ulysses.

“Who can I be now? You found me. Who can I be? Fell apart, you found me. Now can I be now? You found me. Now can I be real? Can I be real? Somebody real.”

But if we can’t all be named Johnny, and if we don’t want to merely be David Jones or Ziggy Stardust, then who can we be now? The aching David Sanborn sax that starts out “Who Can I Be Now?” calls out from the void, and then Bowie himself calls out, “Everybody’s raised in blindness.” (Blindness and sight seem important, and we’ll come back to that binary in later tracks.) Bowie goes on in this outtake from Young Americans to get at the central question of his oeuvre, the question of the title. He sings about everything being “a vast creation” and describes “putting on a face that’s new.” Most people look to the aforementioned “Changes” for the central statement in the Bowie canon, but in a way it’s this little unknown gem (“Who Can I Be Now?”) that feels more philosophically essential. There’s a sorrow here that the pompous smirk of “Changes” doesn’t let on to. There’s an understanding that not only is maskness the only way to truth, but that there’s a sadness, a loneliness, that comes from the fact that even in love, even in connection, there can be no authentic identity to share with someone. When a person you love finds you and unmasks you, they don’t actually find you, they find the lack of a glimpse from “Changes,” the emptiness at the core, beneath the mask, a nothingness. With Bowie, the question of identity isn’t the mundane and unanswerable “Who am I?” but the ever-changing and ever-searching question of nextness: “Who can I be now?” If there is no somethingness beneath the mask then the truest self, for the fleeting moment at least, is the self you’re currently changing into.

Track Six: “Rock ‘n Roll Suicide” from The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars (1972)

“Oh no love! You’re not alone. No matter what or who you’ve been, No matter when or where you’ve seen, All the knives seem to lacerate your brain. I’ve had my share, I’ll help you with the pain. You’re not alone.”

But if Bowie ended with the sad realization that there is no authentic self for you to see when you turn and face yourself or for you to share with a lover who unmasks you, then I’m not sure there’d be much else to say. I suppose the next question would be Hamlet’s question, “To be or not to be?” If even our selves and our lovers cannot see us clearly, then would it be better to suffer the slings and arrows of that fate or to take arms against that sea of troubles and end them? But, no, Bowie finds a better question, also cribbed from Hamlet, the opening line of the play, “Who’s there?” In “Rock ‘n Roll Suicide,” we see that the tragedy of an instable identity shouldn’t end in Hamlet-esque suicidal thoughts, but in the realization that in our mutual instability, “no matter what or who you’ve been,” “you’re not alone.” We may never see, we may be raised in blindness, but we can connect in the darkness. “Who’s there?” we ask. And hopefully someone responds
in Bowie’s voice, “Gimme your hands cause you’re wonderful.”

**Track Seven: “Heroes” from “Heroes” (1977)**

“We can be heroes, just for one day.”

There is always a hope in Bowie’s music, a hope that in spite of our fragile, inauthentic identities, we might be able to become whomever or whatever we want to be. “We can be heroes,” as Bowie sings in “Heroes.” In fact, Bowie allows us to see that, as Critchley explains, “we can reinvent ourselves because our identities are so fragile and inauthentic.” Of course, “nothing, nothing will keep us together,” everything is in flux. Yet even though it might only be for one day or one second, for a short episodic blip, we can be heroes, kings and queens, whatever we want to be. Because “we’re nothing, and nothing will help us.” There’s a freedom in nothingness.

**Track Eight: “Sunday” from Heathen (2002)**

“And I tell myself, I don’t know who I am. And I tell myself, I don’t know who I am.”

In his song “Sunday,” Bowie sings of nothing again: “Nothing remains” are the opening words. Bowie, like Shakespeare, makes much ado about nothing throughout his career. It’s the nothingness at our core that is interesting, and yet we can only get at said nothingness through the tangential fakery of a somethingness. But what sort of somethingness should we seek in the absence of identity? As if to respond to his earlier paranoia in “I’m Afraid of Americans,” a haunted voice in “Sunday” asks of us, “In your fear, seek only peace. In your fear, seek only love.” And while one Bowie voice sings that plea, another Bowie voice tells us that “we must burn all that we are” and “rise together.” There’s always been in Bowie’s work a seeking of love, of connection. There’s always been that extension of the hand from “Rock ’n Roll Suicide.” Our fragile, instable, fluctuating identity can be burned away—must be burned away, in fact—in the seeking of something more.

**Track Nine: “Heat” from The Next Day (2013)**

“And I tell myself, I don’t know who I am. And I tell myself, I don’t know who I am.”

Yukio Mishima’s *Spring Snow* is referenced in the opening lines of Bowie’s song “Heat”: “Then we saw Mishima’s dog trapped between the rocks, blocking the waterfall.” In the novel, Satoko asks Kiyoaki right after they see a dead black dog at the top of a waterfall, “Kiyo, what would you do if all of a sudden I weren’t here any more?” The startling image erupts a more startling question. After lending a hand in “Rock ’n Roll Suicide” because we’re wonderful, what if the hand suddenly disappears? And then another startling image appears in the lyrics of the song: “the peacock in the snow” (borrowed from the final scene of Fellini’s *Amarcord*). Film critic Roger Ebert said of this stunning cinematic moment, “Such an image is so inexplicable and irreproducible that all the heart can do is ache with gratitude, and all the young man can know is that he will live forever, love all the women, drink all the wine, make all the movies and become Fellini.” In other words, in these startling moments of pure beauty, we find who we truly are, as young Fellini does in
Amarcord in front of that peacock in the snow. And yet, with Bowie things can never be so simple. You don’t just “find yourself” after viewing a dead dog on a waterfall or a peacock in the snow. The lyric immediately following the Amarcord reference is “And I tell myself, I don’t know who I am.” We find ourselves in our identities and we unfind ourselves in them as well. We see ourselves but only in the lie, only in the nothingness. Fellini only sees his identity in the potentiality of identity, in the becomingness that emerges from the peacock. Kiyoaki’s identity is discomfited in the potentiality of loss, in the question that emerges from the dead dog. As Critchley notes, “The song ends with the line, ‘I am a seer, I am a liar.’ To which we might add, Bowie is a seer because he is a liar. The truth content of Bowie’s art is not compromised by its fakery. It is enabled by it.”

Track Ten: “Quicksand” from Hunky Dory (1971)

“I’m sinking in the quicksand of my thought, And I ain’t got the power anymore. Don’t believe in yourself, don’t deceive with belief. Knowledge comes with death’s release.”

Critchley explains that Bowie’s art is “a radically contrived and reflexively aware confection of illusion whose fakery is not false, but at the service of a felt corporeal truth.” One of the best examples of this is in the song “Quicksand,” where Critchley points to the lyrics “Don’t believe in yourself, don’t deceive with belief.” He pushes this further, suggesting that “perhaps music at its most theatrical, extravagant, and absurd is also the truest music. It is what can save us from ourselves, from the banal fact of being in the world.” In other words, true music “permits a kind of deworkling of the world.” The song “Quicksand” is engaged with the underlying premise of Critchley’s book: that authenticity and truth are not the same, and that while Bowie is entirely inauthentic, his art speaks truth through a kind of Heideggerian deworkling. It’s a truth not interested in “knowledge,” which only comes “with death’s release.” It’s the felt truth of being in the flux of “dream reality,” the corporeal truth of instable identity, the lived truth that even the quicksand of thought can’t sink—a truth that doesn’t believe itself and, therefore, can’t deceive itself.


“I’ve been right and I’ve been wrong, Now I’m back where I started from. Never looked over reality’s shoulder.”

The title song from the album Reality for the most part is a straightforward rock track. The guitars are on overload. The lyrics begin with, “Tragic youth was looking young and sexy.” Halfway through the song, in the second verse, the “da da da da da da da da” reminds us of the discomfiting word salad of “Red Sails.” It’s as though Bowie gets distracted and forgets the lyrics and reverts back to something more primal. Later on in the song, as Critchley rightly points out, there’s a moment where, for the briefest blip, the noise slips away and leaves just an acoustic guitar strumming, a sound which can’t help but remind the listener of the opening of “Space Oddity.” Now Bowie’s back where he started from, though the return to some primal Bowie isn’t a return to an authentic Bowie, but the inauthentic regurgitations of previous inauthentic incarnations. Bowie sings in the lyrics, “I’ve been right and
I’ve been wrong, now I’m back where I started from. Never looked over reality’s shoulder.” For Critchley, “Bowie’s position with regard to reality might not be so much post-philosophical as post-scientific, or that which comes after the failure of a positivistic conception of science. It is too quick to identify philosophy with the quest for knowledge. It is better understood as the love of wisdom. Philosophy is that love of wisdom that comes before and after science.”


“Who knows? Not me!”

The idea of philosophy as something other than a quest for knowledge is a point that shouldn’t go unnoticed. As Bowie sings in “The Man Who Sold the World,” “Who knows? Not me!” Can we know anything? If we can’t even see ourselves when we turn and face ourselves, as so many of Bowie’s songs illustrate, then how might we go about knowing anything? Bowie said he wrote this song because “there was a part of myself that I was looking for.” It’s a song of searching: “I searched for form and land.” Of course, there is a “face to face” in this song, and a seeing of “the man who sold the world.” So in a way, when he turns and faces, he does see something or someone, but they seem dead, a ghost. At the end of the song, the “I never lost control” morphs into “We never lost control.” We return to the “Do you remember we another person” from “Red Sails.” The “we,” the other persons that we are, “must have died alone, a long long time ago.”

Track Thirteen: “We Are the Dead” from *Diamond Dogs* (1974)

“Because of all we’ve seen,
Because of all we’ve said,
We are the dead.”

Of course, if the various “we”s that we were died a long long time ago, isn’t the “we” that we are currently also dying or dead as we transform into the next iteration of our supposed identity? In “We Are the Dead,” Winston and Julia of George Orwell’s *1984*, through a series of lyrics created using Burroughs-style cut-up technique, are “fighting with the eyes of the blind.” The title line, “We are the dead,” directly taken from Orwell’s text, highlights the fact that in our thinking and doing, in our ch-ch-ch-changes, “because of all we’ve seen, because of all we’ve said,” we are always dead.

Track Fourteen: “Blackstar” from *Blackstar* (2016)

“I’m the great I am. (I’m a blackstar.)”

And then Bowie actually died in January of this year. If he had always been in a process of dying, of killing off his various selves, then this death seemed somewhat more final, for obvious reasons. So now we approach the button-eyed Lazarus of the final Bowie album released during his lifetime. There are both comedic and tragic aspects, of course, to the fact that Bowie’s final persona, created as he was actually dying, takes on the identity of a man who is brought back from the dead: Lazarus. This Lazarus figure in both the “Blackstar” and “Lazarus” videos has his eyes covered and replaced by little black buttons. “At the
center of it all,” he sings in haunting chorus with himself, “your eyes.” As we’ve seen through constant references to sight in Bowie’s lyrics, eyes are at the center of it all. Is he a seer or a liar? Is he a seer because he is a liar? Is he a liar because he is a seer? We see, after all the identities, and especially in this final identity of Lazarus, there is something revealed in the tautology: “I’m the great I am.” Our identity, in the end, may be some sort of aggregation of our accumulated nothingnesses. Yet this isn’t a romantic finding of one’s self, nor is it some deathbed conversion to stability or understanding. He sings, “I can’t answer why, but I can tell you how.” Perhaps that’s the secret to unraveling Bowie. He was never going to tell us the “why,” but his songs give us a “how.” If “to philosophize is to learn how to die,” then perhaps Bowie’s discography is the ultimate philosophical text, a “how to” manual that avoids self-help clichés. The songs open portals to ways beyond knowledge, beyond identity, beyond stability, beyond authenticity, because they offer some form of deworlding. It is perhaps only through an admitted falsity, through endlessly alternating fabrications, that we can come close to some sort of truth, that we can feel, through the nothingness, who we are or, more importantly, who we might become. “Come forth Lazarus!” we read in Ulysses, “And he came fifth and lost the job.” We laugh and we cry and we ch-ch-ch-ch-change into whomever we think we can be now. Met him pike hoses. “Who can I be now?”
To Begin Again: A Conversation with Max Frisch

On December 22, 1967, writer Dieter E. Zimmer published the following conversation with Max Frisch in Die Zeit.

DEZ: In your 1965 Schiller Prize speech, you outlined a new dramaturgy, a “dramaturgy of permutation,” which you distinguished from the conventional “dramaturgy of fate.” The latter, you say, insists stubbornly that things must be so and could not have been otherwise.” The new dramaturgy, by contrast, brings to light the possibility that “an entirely different tale could have taken place even with the same characters.” Is your new play Biography a practical experiment with this new dramaturgy?

MF: I am not proclaiming a new dramaturgy. It is natural to reflect on one’s own work, but my reflection is not meant to be a directive for others...for a long time I simply had problems with the theater. Narrative and its arbitrariness was not something I could solve—and that led me towards depiction. For me depicting means exploring. But since this does not fit with the dramaturgy I had learned, I turned to the novel. But playing with variations like I do in my novel A Wilderness of Mirrors is actually similar to theater. It is, in principal, anti-epic. It is no coincidence that rehearsals fascinate me more than finished performances: variations on a process are more revealing than the process in its single definitive form. This is the key question: how do work with variations dramaturgically? Theater started to bore me. Why? Because, just by taking place, any route you follow excludes all other possible routes and leads to the assumption of a meaning that does not correspond to it. The performed has a tendency toward meaning that the lived does not. From this I really came to understand experiments with Happenings, which avoid any dramaturgy of fate and abandon the stage entirely. These experiments go further than mine in that they do away with the theatre, while I continue to experiment with it but without the dramaturgy of fate. But as I said, do not take these theoretical notes as directives, they are just reflections on my own work.

DEZ: But isn’t your play proof of how difficult it is to get rid of a particular narrative? You gave your scientist Kürmann the chance to redo his life after the fact. But he is only able to make two modest revisions to his biography, and only after great effort: he avoids a marital dispute and joins the communist party. The latter he does not out of conviction but simply because he wants to make a change. In this experiment with the dramaturgy of permutation, have you come to the conclusion that one’s life story is bounded by a stubborn inevitability?

MF: I did not have anything planned that I wanted to prove. Instead I wanted to carry out a game to discover how I myself experience life. This is writing as self-discovery. A person has a system of belief or non-belief that can be confirmed or refuted by depicting it. That is what I understand by exploration. Writing is an adventure through which a person can expose oneself to one’s own experience.
DEZ: Did the discovery surprise you?

MF: At times I was completely stunned. I had thought that a person with the chance to begin again and make new choices would create an entirely different narrative, which would be so astonishing that he would be unable to recognize himself in it. That’s what anyone would expect who says, “if I could just begin again...”! The objection to a dramaturgy that offers the inevitable course as the only plausible course is that it assumes a narrative (be it a personal biography or a world history) could only unfold in one and no other way. The theater’s fascination with rehearsals, by contrast, offers a taste for how variations on a process are more revelatory than the process in its definitive form. This led me to search for possibly working with variations dramaturgically. And from this emerged the idea that a person who can begin again and make new choices would like to seem consistent. When faced with such an idea, the writer himself does not experience things like this. And this is the subject of the play: to what extent do we make choices? And if we do intend to make choices, to what extent are we actually controlled but hide this from ourselves so that it seems plausible in retrospect why we “chose” this and that? The more we suspect we are controlled, the more we will feel the need that Kürmann feels to begin again and do anything at all differently just to be able to prove that we are able to choose. But this does not happen in reality; the chance to begin again is only available in the theater.

DEZ: Why does it rarely occur to Kürmann to make variations to his life, and why do even the small ones he makes fail?

MF: That’s no doubt because of me. When writing a play and seeing through a game-like situation, it might seem that one can pursue every whim, as if anything that works is allowed in. But actually the only thing that works is what I myself can understand as being believable. Everything else falls short because it simply cannot work. What I find believable is what I can depict. Out of this constraint comes self-discovery.

DEZ: This is the subject we find in works like Don Juan or the Love of Geometry and Prince Öderland: the futile attempt to escape one’s lot in life. It is fun for readers to find such parallels in the works of an author, but in doing this, do they not obscure what new insights an author has to offer?

MF: That does not worry me. Newness? It would be enough for me if newness amounted to purer successes. But you are correct: there are people, very clever people, who immediately find parallels with their previous insights. Writers do get annoyed by readers who don’t let themselves see anything new because of their loyalty to their previous insights.

DEZ: Biography was supposed to have already premiered in Zurich at the start of October, but it did not because of the much-publicised quarrel between you and the director. You chose him to direct the play and he himself wanted to direct it. What exactly did he demand of you? And what led you to end the collaboration?

MF: Rudolf Noelte, who is well-known as an outstanding director, chose the wrong play. Our mutual esteem for one another caused us both to realise this too late.

DEZ: Why does it rarely occur to Kürmann to make variations to his life, and why do even the small ones he makes fail?
MF: I have called writing a means of exploring, and in the case of a play, part of exploring naturally involves performance. The stage is a testing ground. When rehearsals go well, they are the final phases of the undertaking. I have much to thank directors for so I cannot complain. And this is the first time that a director sued me. As is well known, plays are only finished on the stage. An actor’s performance can lead one to conclude that the text I wrote is not needed to express what the play wants to say. That is how a play is tested, which is meant in turn to be a means of existential discovery. When I write a play and it gets performed, I want to explore something. I do not want it performed just so that I can take my bow in the spotlight. I am too vain for that. If I am going to expose myself publicly, I do it to discover something and so that others perhaps can discover something from it as well. At least that is the hope. All I would learn from what you call a director’s theatre is whether a director is a genius or not. I do not need to write for that.

DEZ: You have said that Biography is meant to be a comedy. By the end of the play, you let Kürmann die of cancer after what seems to him to have been a failed life. Does the play for you transcend comedy?

MF: The fact that someone dies does not mean a play transcends comedy. Otherwise there would not be comedies with people. You are right: Kürmann’s desire to redo his life is all about death. Living with the certainty of death without a hereafter seems a comedy to me. Maybe comedy is not always about laughter.

DEZ: In an earlier interview, you once said that theatre is literally a political institution. Many people expected that you would continue taking up political and public issues, as you did in plays like Firebugs and Andorra. But as with your novel A Wilderness of Mirrors, Biography offers a so-called reprivatisation. I mean this in an entirely positive way, though I know that runs counter to the current trend. Does this mean you have grown more skeptical about literature with political ambitions?

MF: Firebugs and Andorra are parables. The parable is a proven method for escaping a theatre of imitation, which is a hopeless type of theatre that mistakes imitated reality for reality. The method of the parable does not try to imitate reality on the stage, but makes us aware of reality via the “meaning” that it playfully confers to it. The scenes come across as obviously unhistorical, as artificial examples or synthetic models. This works well, but with one drawback: the parable exhausts meaning since its game tends toward quod erat demonstrandum. And even if the subtitle I give to a play warns audiences that it is a “Lehrstück without lesson,” this does not help. The parable form implies a lesson, even if for me it does not have one. It has never been about this for me. That is why the parable makes me uneasy. And that is why I’m looking for another method of making theatre.

DEZ: You have not said much about tribunal theatre, even in your Schiller prize speech I referenced earlier. What do you think about The Investigation? Did it change your views on documentary theatre?

MF: The Investigation by Peter Weiss—you’ll forgive me for being so blunt—has not made much of an impression on my intellectual development.

DEZ: You have not said much about tribunal theatre, even in your Schiller prize speech I referenced earlier. What do you think about The Investigation? Did it change your views on documentary theatre?

MF: The Investigation by Peter Weiss—you’ll forgive me for being so blunt—has not made much of an impression on my intellectual development.

DEZ: In 1964 you said a dictator would be delighted by audiences for theatre of the absurd, because they prefer to take pleasure in what frightens them rather than learn about causes and origins. A year later you called the premiere of The Bald Soprano a blessing. Have you revised your opinion about the
theatre of the absurd—or of Ionesco if we want to avoid this misleading buzzword?

MF: That was just an aperçu. If we had to revise all of our aperçus, Herr Zimmer, we would be taking ourselves much too seriously.

DEZ: But Ionesco’s theater obviously does not delight dictators, and recent performances of his plays under dictatorships have given them political meaning. Does that not contradict the argument that his plays can be used as a tool of oppression?

MF: You are asking about two different things. We have recently learned that the dictators in Athens remain in power thanks to weapons provided by NATO. It makes no difference that they are not delighted by Sophocles. With that said, I find a play like Ionesco’s The Chairs to be really wonderful theatre. By any chance, do you happen to know how things are going for Wolf Biermann?

DEZ: The boycott of his work in East Germany is still in full effect. The public has only a vague idea of what he is up to. Nevertheless he remains a communist. But let’s get back to the topic. You have repeatedly rewritten some of your plays but none of your novels to my knowledge, aside from some cuts for foreign editions. How do you explain that?

MF: It’s simple. As texts, plays are projects, they are blueprints for performances. If you could recreate a house you built ten years ago, you would not build it exactly the same after you have lived in it. The novel is not a project. As a text, it is a finished painting, errors and all.

DEZ: I can imagine that, like many of your characters, you rebel against the picture that others have of you. Currently there is quite a lot being written about you. In particular, your work seems to provoke commentary that tries to repeat what you have written, only more unintelligibly. How do you deal with that?

MF: If there was no commentary at all after having published for twenty years I would be irritated. I am fine with the reviews out there that say—according to the East—I am a late-bourgeois humanist, or—according to the West—an heir to Brecht. I know my literary trademark is the problem of identity, even though I do not identify with this trademark myself. But both my trademark and I are fine with this.

DEZ: It seems today that writers have been gripped by a certain weariness with literature. Some argue about literature as if it were a science, and other writers, finding literature to be unfit for political affairs, are turning to direct action. What do you think the domain of literature is?

MF: I will admit that when I listen to a biologist, for instance, it can seem to me that literature is superfluous—not its musicality, but much of the rest of it. Music has never pretended to have a function that would put it into competition with biology, sociology, physics, etc. Painters and sculptors rarely pretend to be heralds who claim to offer more than art. What is the remit of literature? Well we do not have literature to thank for the advances in thought that are moving our century. Anyone who expects literature to determine our view of the world will succumb to a certain feeling of inferiority. Even though any literature worthy of the name reflects how our consciousness changes, it only ever reflects it. The spark that changes our view of the world comes from elsewhere. But can we do without literature? Sometimes I get the impression that it is this feeling of inferiority that leads to so-called commitment in literature. None of us can say that we live in ivory tower. The question whether we can do without literature leads even those people, who...
in principle lack a political temperament, to insist that literature must have a social function. The thought that we are needed is how we justify what we do, even if society is by no means convinced that it needs our commitment. By contrast, biologists don’t need this: their self-justification comes with the discoveries they make. As you say, some writers think literature is unfit for political affairs and turn to direct action instead—and rightly so. This is for the benefit of both politics and literature. The literary success that has a far-reaching impact even in circles one would not expect gives rise to a false authority. No writer who can sell paperbacks can escape public scrutiny of how they feel about Vietnam, reunification, or the emergency laws. With microphones everywhere, it is easy to be misunderstood. And this can be humorous. A literary work has authority in a territory where it is not recognised. A writer might be more clever than this or that government minister, but that hardly makes him a politician. I am not talking about Günter Grass. It is possible to be a political writer, but we should not confuse the political writer for the politicised writer, whose literary fame misleads him to mistake himself for a political authority. Not everyone who can write is Jean-Paul Sartre. What is the domain of literature? I dare say that it is the private domain. This is what sociologists and biologists do not grasp: the individual, the ego, not my ego, but an ego, the person who experiences the world as me, who dies as me, the person in all their biological and social specificities. The domain of literature is the depiction of the person who is counted in statistics, but who does not come up in conversation, and who in the larger scheme of things is irrelevant and lives knowing they are irrelevant. This is what interests me at least, what seems to me worthy of depiction. It is also something that one must talk at length about in order to dispel misunderstandings. The domain of literature is everything that makes up human experience, but which cannot be experienced scientifically—this includes even experiences of gender, technology, political reality and utopia. When you speak of “reprivatization,” Herr Zimmer, I am not frightened.

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This Unwelcome Conversation: A Dialogue in Story Form on Max Frisch’s *Homo Faber* & Volker Schlöndorff’s *Voyager*

We were held up at LaGuardia because of a hurricane in the Keys. I had planned on flying in the dark and catching up on sleep. Instead it looked like this plane, a four-propeller Lockheed Super Constellation, was about to be held in a five hour multi-timezone dawn. I needed sleep. Those first splinters of morning. Someone opened the acrylic window lids. Each of us looked like he was just prodded awake by a policeman’s nightstick or a custodian’s broom.

The only exception was my seatmate, a chipper young German upon whom the only discernible effect of sleeplessness was an agitation for small talk. I feigned sleep, and he read a slim volume titled *Homo Faber*.

The air hostesses debated something softly towards the cabin’s aft. Some accord was reached, and one of them hesitatingly rolled out the 16 millimeter projector.

The in-flight entertainment was to be a film by the name of *Voyager*, she announced. Half of the travelers groaned, irritated at yet another impediment to sleep. The other half, the resigned half, shifted eagerly.

The air stewardess proved to be an adept projectionist, and the projector soon clattered awake; its one eye opened and lit the periodic plumes of cigarette smoke wafting towards the ceiling of the fuselage.

I closed my eyes and tried to fall into some crude version of sleep, but through the cracks in my eyelids I noticed something peculiar: the opening credits announced that the film was, in fact, called *Homo Faber*—the very same phrase that adorned the cover of my seatmate’s paperback!

He furrowed his brow. This is a very peculiar choice for an in-flight entertainment, he said.

I looked at him quizzically. He shifted closer and whispered, conspiratorially, *this is a story about a plane crash.*

I began to watch, to satisfy my curiosity and to prove my seatmate to be the liar I had immediately taken him for. Soon enough, a harrowing plane crash—astonishingly, a Super Constellation identical to ours—deposited the stoic American actor Sam Shepard in the red desert of Tamaulipas with his rather annoying Düsseldorfer seatmate.

A grumble of protest rolled through the cabin. They let us off easy, said my seatmate. You should read the crash landing sequence in the book.

I told him that I do not read novels. I’m never sure if I want the movie to be better or worse than the book, he remarked. But they are never precisely as good as one another, are they?

I told him I wouldn’t know—I couldn’t remember the last time I read a novel.
awake, more awake, and he spoke with great rapidity:

“I always find that kind of intertextual bleeding to be a joyful thing, but in some cases it’s necessary. *Voyager* requires movie stars, freighted with associations and patina. Film’s toolkit for portraying the intricacies and elisions of interior subjectivity is obviously limited. *Homo Faber* gets a lot of its juice from our judgment of the narrator’s ingenuousness. Since *Voyager* can’t portray that, it has to find compensation elsewhere—it has to give us something to look at.”

Eager to let this conversation die, but vain enough to refuse being bested by someone so...poreless, I asked him why a film couldn’t be ingenuous.

“It can, to a limited extent, but generally film asks us to believe what it shows us. Movies that don’t do that are, in a sense, cheating. I don’t think there’s anything less satisfying in a film than ‘it was all just a dream.’ Faber can tell us something in the book, as he is the narrator and our only source of information, and we can choose whether or not to believe him; it’s just the two of us.”

I told him I had actually read this book, other books, all books. If my earlier deception bothered him, he did not let on.

“I assume you and I have a similar sense that we are often listening to a madman when we hear the novel’s Faber speak,” I said.

“Absolutely. We may be imputing an unreliability that only you and I can see, but the fact remains that in the novel, Faber is a much stranger specimen than in the film. When we see him deliberately trying to avoid re-boarding his plane during a layover in the film, for instance, we’re watching a man act strangely, but we don’t have any expectation for insight into why he’s inconveniencing an entire cabin full of fellow travelers. He doesn’t owe
anyone an explanation. In the book, when we’re listening to the confessional recollections of the man who tried to avoid getting on the plane, don’t we feel entitled to that explanation? A moment of reflection? A mere acknowledgement of having acted poorly or strangely? It’s bizarre behavior and stranger still for not being reflected upon.

The other passengers in our cabin were asleep, or at least had their eyes closed. The air hostess had been making faces behind the German’s back since he said *intertextual bleeding*. She had mimed the German’s last speech in puppet hands. When I shook her off sternly, she raised a finger and then disappeared. Only to return with a beret which she promptly placed on the German’s head. “Welcome to Paris,” she said, although we were en route to Sacramento from Dulles International.

I waited a moment to see if there would be any consequence to this peculiar action, and sensing none, I opened his copy of the book and looked for what I had written in the margins of my own copy: ‘Weird,’ after a dozen pages or so. “Faber may behave strangely,” I said, “but pay attention to the way Max Frisch handles time—which is always the first place to look in fiction for orientation or reliability. Faber is talking to his fellow passenger Herbert after the plane crash. They uncover a highly improbable connection, Herbert’s brother is Faber’s best friend, and, in the middle of this scene we rise above time in this bizarre way. Now read this:

“Joachim?” he said. “That’s my brother.”

“No!” I said.

“Yes,” he said, “of course—I told you I was going to visit my brother in Guatemala.”

We had to laugh.

“*It’s a small world!*”

We spent the nights in the cabin, shivering in an overcoat and rugs; the crew made tea, as long as their water lasted.

“How is he?” I inquired. “I haven’t heard anything of him for twenty years.”

“He’s all right,” replied Herbert...

Abrupt dislocations in time like that don’t happen often. We’re taken from an immediate past so close as to be almost present to the habitual imperfect, but only for one line. It’s time travel. Like some sort of rip. When we read, we see the glitch.”

Text cited, monologue delivered, and conversation essentially over with that word, glitch, I slumped against the window and began to fall asleep. But he persisted:

“It’s interesting that the same technique is deployed frequently in film and achieves a nearly opposite effect. Think of two characters playing pool. One asks the other how his mother has been. Cut to those two characters walking down the street, and the second guy reports that his mother is doing well. In film, that signals the intervening hand of the author through montage. We understand it as a stylization imposed against whatever reality the film’s narrative is hoping to simulate, and the effect is usually comic. When Frisch uses it, through Faber’s narration, there’s no director to assign the authorial decision to. The effect is not to emphasize the narration as a designed thing—although, of course, that’s still there, hence this conversation—but it instead undermines our investment in our narrator as a consistent source of reliable information.”

There was something in his face, in his hearty Germanness, that was easily dismissible. And yet, rather than dismissing him, I found myself advancing the discussion.
“It undermines the integrity of the frame,” I said. “It’s less akin to a flashback and more akin to psychedelic screen melt. We’re located in this very improbable conversation under the wing of a crashed airplane in the Mexican desert—fine, we’ll go along with you, Frisch, mainly because the images are well-rendered and it feels like we’re in good hands—and then, after we’ve embraced the improbability, he dilates time to encapsulate four days. But he does so in one sentence. First we shiver. Then we see the crew carting out tea. And then we drop back in our conversation. It seems like a break in rationality.”

“Comparing a moment like that to screen melt is, I think, apt,” he said. “It signals a fatal malfunction in the mechanism through which information is being conveyed to us.”

“It seems like these devices are in service of theme, not story,” I said. “Specifically, it feels like we’re reading a novel of ideas that’s going to always be discussing entropy, information, and Maxwell’s demon. There’s no way to really know this, since we both read the book before watching the movie, but do you think you would have picked up on the ideas if you only watched the film?”

“Funny you should ask—not in the slightest,” he said. “That is not to say, however, that the movie isn’t about those things. They’re simply internalized. Working intertextually with the novel, it’s not so much that the film intentionally evades those topics, it simply encases the consideration of them inside a particularly opaque performance by Sam Shepard.”

I suggested that opacity might be precisely what the actor was going for.

“I wouldn’t pretend to know what his intentions were,” he said. “But I’d have a hard time describing his performance as anything but opaque. And yet that’s entirely appropriate. When we are watching Faber from outside, as opposed to being tethered to his internal monologue, isn’t that precisely what he would look like as he goes about his inscrutable business?”

I told him that there are two ways of depicting uncertainty: showing a person stoppering a scream or showing someone like Faber, who seems like he’s thinking in Martian.

“Examine the contrast between Shepard’s performance, that you identify as alien or as depicting uncertainty, with that of Julie Delpy,” he said. “I’d argue that she’s equally inscrutable in a completely different way. Something about Shepard’s performance demonstrates the smallness of an incomplete thought or a handicapped thinker. Delpy seems to perform surety itself. Whatever resource fuels her performances is drilled from a very, very deep well.”

“Shepard seems like a time traveller from the future,” I said. “And Delpy seems like a time traveler from the past. I don’t see this Faber as small, more like uncanny.”

“Do you think Delpy is playing a better Dolores Haze than Sue Lyon or Dominique Swain managed to?” he asked.

“The depth that you were talking about earlier is a mystical depth. Some part of me was always thinking of Joan of Arc when Delpy was on screen. So, no. I don’t really think of her as a Lolita. Or even as the twenty year old that she is depicting.”

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ends up with Hanna! That’s unbelievably unbelievable.”
Equally unbelievable was how I’d been drawn into a conversation with this pontificating oaf and now found myself hanging on his words.

“It’s likely that the ‘Second Stop’ section of the book is unfilmable,” he said. “It both raises the curtain on Faber’s trustworthiness—notice how one acquaintance of his casually assumes that Sabeth was his daughter and not his lover at a glance, an insight that obviously eluded Faber until it was too late—and also draws it closed in new ways, particularly in Faber’s disjointed final ruminations. Is it fair to say that Voyager, in eliding the Second Stop, intentionally misreads Homo Faber as a story of star-crossed lovers? If so, is it a good love story?”

“It’s interesting, because the movie is so conscientious, almost fastidious, about faithfully rendering the details of the novel. Faber writes with an Olivetti in the book...and there’s a Lettera 22 in the film.”

“I noticed mainly differences, to be honest. I loved the detail of the crew covering up the downed plane’s tires to protect them from the sun. What acute, granular specificity! Sadly it didn’t make it to the screen.”

I looked out the window and wondered if, under the same circumstances, our crew had blankets at the ready. I absentely continued:

“All of the small details are there, but on the larger themes...I read it differently. The film is a love story. And the way information is withheld...the contortions in the plot...all of this effort goes into preserving the hope that Sabeth isn’t biologically related to Faber at all. In the book, we find out from the outset that Faber committed incest. The question is whether he holds a non-consensus view of reality—meaning, is he reliable or stark raving mad?”

“I think there’s a certain instinctual desire you have when dealing with an adaptation for the new version to stand on its own, inevitable vicissitudes of intertextuality aside. That the film can’t, or won’t address Faber’s state of mind is a strange aporia that you’d never know existed if you haven’t read the book. I’m not sure that the film plays ball taken on its own terms.”

I mumbled, “If my thought dreams could be seen...”

The German lit up, obviously a Dylan fan. “Well, the rest of that line is the important part, isn’t it?”

I sang softly. “They’d probly put my head in a guillotine.” I continued: “Let’s talk about that for a second. There are zero consequences in the film. In the book, I read the lack of consequence as proof of madness. Since the film resists that interpretation, I’m not sure what to make of it. It’s Oedipus Rex without the blinding.”

“I think you could argue that Homo Faber and Voyager portray equally deterministic worldviews as Oedipus, but the determining hand is chaos rather than some organizing notion of fate. The shrug that accompanies Sabine’s death is a classic existentialist sigh.”

I was beginning to tire of him anew. Which brought out the worst in me, “When I used to read, I read with Cervantes’s glasses. So I saw Faber as Quixote. I think an important cross-current to this conversation is Faber’s total rejection of feeling. Let me see that copy again. Aha! Read this: Feelings, I have observed, are fatigue phenomena, that’s all, at any rate in my case. You get run down. Is Frisch making fun of Faber? It’s easy to see how a character who doesn’t read novels, hasn’t heard of the Louvre, and rejects feelings could be the object of ridicule.”

“Faber certainly makes me smile from time to time. It’s likely that the ‘Second Stop’ section of the book is unfilmable,” he said. “It both raises the curtain on Faber’s trustworthiness—notice how one acquaintance of his casually assumes that Sabeth was his daughter and not his lover at a glance, an insight that obviously eluded Faber until it was too late—and also draws it closed in new ways, particularly in Faber’s disjointed final ruminations. Is it fair to say that Voyager, in eliding the Second Stop, intentionally misreads Homo Faber as a story of star-crossed lovers? If so, is it a good love story?”

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whether he’s programmatically up for mockery in the text, I’m not sure there’s a way to be certain. I think you and I both occasionally find him absurd, which is good enough for me. I don’t think a judgment on the quality of his character is necessary for the text, and by my reading such a judgment is either lightly encoded in the background or suspended altogether.”

We paused, and I held out the brief hope that he had found satisfaction and I could go back to feigning sleep. That hope guttered and blew out in the wind of his next proclamation:

“Whatever sense of disorientation the narrator seems to perform, it’s in the service of character, not structural play. Can the movie find any compensation at all for the lack of this sort of subtlety?”

“Subtlety may be precisely what is disadvantageous about film,” I said. “It’s very difficult to be subtle about something you are showing to a viewer. Who does it well?”

The German’s face opened wide.

“I’m not sure what weird trap is hidden in that question, but I can’t for the life of me think of a single subtle filmmaker, good or bad. They’re all ostentatious, even if their gestures feature a wide range of expression. Every movie is enormous.”

I phrased my reply in such a way as to imply a full stop.

“And the difficulty in fiction is being direct, being able to pass the fidelity test—which was ironically Buster Keaton’s advice on acting—: ‘Just plant your feet firmly and tell the truth.’”

I tilted my hat over my head and again tried to sleep. Instantly, I felt the air stewardess lean over me. She raised the window shade and perpetual dawn fled in. She placed what seemed to be a deliberately unappetizing breakfast consisting of a solitary slab of canned ham garnished in its own packing gel in front me. The German received his breakfast, which was a second beret and half a banana. He stubbed out his cigarette in my quivering ham, tucked his napkin into his collar, and asked:

“Can you envision a filmed version of *Homo Faber* that retains what was lost in translation? What would it be like? Or, is the moral of that story the moral of this story: communications entropy obtains.”

It would have been a fine time to contemplate that question, or any of the myriad consequences-upon-consequences that furnished us with this unwelcome conversation, but my attention was immediately seized by the plane’s propeller slowing to a stop.
The Frisch Questionnaire

Many know the “Proust Questionnaire,” which Marcel Proust didn’t actually create, but made famous by answering two similar questionnaires at different points in his life—and which Vanity Fair has since prominently featured in their issues. Lesser known is the “Frisch Questionnaire,” which Max Frisch created in 1967 and which is included in his Sketchbook 1966–1971. Below author Sarah Gerard answers Frisch’s questions.

MF: Are you really interested in the preservation of the human race once you and all the people you know are no longer alive?
SG: Sure.
MF: State briefly why.
SG: Because it’s my biological imperative.
MF: How many of your children do not owe their existence to deliberate intention?
SG: 0.
MF: Whom would you rather never have met?
SG: Hard to say: in the first place because I don’t want to name names, and in the second place because they inspire a lot of my best writing.
MF: Are you conscious of being in the wrong in relation to some other person (who need not necessarily be aware of it)? If so, does this make you hate yourself—or the other person?
SG: Yes, and a bit of both.

MF: Would you like to have perfect memory?
SG: No, I think that would be a terrible burden.
MF: Give the name of a politician whose death through illness, accident, etc. would fill you with hope. Or do you consider none of them indispensible?
SG: Donald Trump would be nice, but I don’t like calling him a politician.
MF: Which person or persons, now dead, would you like to see again?
SG: My friend Brook.
MF: Which not?
SG: I’m glad not to have one of these.
MF: Would you rather have belonged to a different nation (or civilization)? If so, which?
SG: Maybe one with better public education. Finland.
MF: To what age do you wish to live?
SG: The one at which I die.
MF: If you had the power to put into effect things you consider right, would you do so against the wishes of the majority? (Yes or no)
SG: Yes.
MF: Why not, if you think they are right?
SG: ...
MF: Which do you find it easier to hate, a group or an individual? And do you prefer to hate individually or as part of a group?
SG: I really try not to use this word. But since you asked: group, and individual.
MF: When did you stop believing you could become wiser—or do you still believe it? Give your age.
SG: I still believe I can become wiser. I think I do every day. I’m thirty.
MF: Are you convinced by your own self-criticism?
SG: Usually not.
MF: What in your opinion do others dislike about you, and what do you dislike about yourself? If not the same thing, which do you find it easier to excuse?

SG: People might think I’m unresponsive with the phone, and with email. I dislike how awkward I am in social settings. I find it easier to excuse the first in light of the second.

MF: Do you find the thought that you might never have been born (if it ever occurs to you) disturbing?

SG: I’m sure everything would be fine.

MF: When you think of someone dead, would you like him to speak to you, or would you rather say something more to him?

SG: I’d like him to speak to me.

MF: Do you love anybody?

SG: Yes.

MF: How do you know?

SG: Because I want him to be happy.

MF: Let us assume that you have never killed another human being. How do you account for it?

SG: Too messy.

MF: What do you need in order to be happy?

SG: Solitude, sunshine

MF: What are you grateful for?

SG: Everything.

MF: Which would you rather do: die or live on as a healthy animal? Which animal?

SG: Live on as a healthy elephant.

——

Nocturne

Silence of the night, a sad silence, nocturnal...Why does the soul tremble so?
I hear the buzzing of my blood, a soft storm passes through my brain. Insomnia! Unable to sleep, and yet able to dream. I am the auto-specimen of spiritual dissection, the auto-Hamlet! To dilute my sadness in the wine of the night in the marvelous crystal of the dark... And say to myself: When will the dawn come? A door has closed... Someone has passed... The clock has struck three...If only it were She!...

Translated by Carmen Rodriquez.
A Selection from “Self Made Men”

We have as a people no past and very little present, but a boundless and glorious future. With us, it is not so much what has been, or what is now, but what is to be in the good time coming. Our mottoes are “Look ahead!” and “Go ahead!” and especially the latter. Our moral atmosphere is full of the inspiration of hope and courage. Every man has his chance. If he cannot be President he can, at least, be prosperous. In this respect, America is not only the exception to the general rule, but the social wonder of the world. Europe, with her divine-right governments and ultra-montane doctrines; with her sharply defined and firmly fixed classes; each class content if it can hold its own against the others, inspires little of individual hope or courage. Men, on all sides, endeavor to continue from youth to old age in their several callings and to abide in their several stations. They seldom hope for anything more or better than this. Once in a while, it is true, men of extraordinary energy and industry, like the Honorable John Bright and the Honorable Lord Brougham, (men whose capacity and disposition for work always left their associates little or nothing to do) rise even in England. Such men would rise to distinction anywhere. They do not disprove the general rule, but confirm it.

What is, in this respect, difficult and uncommon in the Old World, is quite easy and common in the New. To the people of Europe, this eager, ever moving mass which we call American society and in which life is not only a race, but a battle, and everybody trying to get just a little ahead of everybody else, looks very much like anarchy.

The remark is often made abroad that there is no space for repose in America. We are said to be like the troubled sea, and in some sense this is true. If it is a fact it is also one not without its compensation. If we resemble the sea in its troubles, we also resemble the sea in its power and grandeur, and in the equalities of its particles.

It is said, that in the course of centuries, I dare not say how many, all the oceans of this great globe go through the purifying process of filtration. All their parts are at work and their relations are ever changing. They are, in obedience to ever varying atmospheric forces, lifted from their lowly condition and borne away by gentle winds or furious storms to far off islands, capes and continents; visiting in their course, mountain, valley and plain; thus fulfilling a beneficent mission and leaving the grateful earth refreshed, enriched, invigorated, beautiful and blooming. Each pearly drop has its fair chance to rise and contribute its share to the health and happiness of the world.

Such, in some sort, is a true picture of the restless activity and ever-changing relations of American society. Like the sea, we are constantly rising above, and returning to, the common level. A small son follows a great father, and a poor son, a rich father. To my mind we have no reason to fear that either wealth, knowledge, or power will be here monopolized by the few as against the many.

These causes which make America the home and foster-mother of self-made men, combined with universal suffrage, will, I hope, preserve us from this danger. With equal suffrage in our hands, we are beyond the power of families, nationalities or races.
Then, too, our national genius welcomes humanity from every quarter and grants to all an equal chance in the race of life.

We ask not for his lineage,
We ask not for his name;
If manliness be in his heart,
He noble birth may claim.
We ask not from what land he came,
Nor where his youth was nursed;
If pure the stream, it matters not
The spot from whence it burst.

Under the shadow of a great name, Louis Napoleon could strike down the liberties of France and erect the throne of a despot; but among a people so jealous of liberty as to revolt at the idea of electing, for a third term, one of our best Presidents, no such experiment as Napoleon’s could ever be attempted here.

We are sometimes dazzled by the gilded show of aristocratic and monarchical institutions, and run wild to see a prince. We are willing that the nations which enjoy these superstitions and follies shall enjoy them in peace. But, for ourselves, we want none of them and will have none of them and can have none of them while the spirit of liberty and equality animates the Republic.
A Selection from “Of Identity and Diversity” from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

1. **Wherein identity consists.** Another occasion the mind often takes of comparing, is the very being of things, when, considering anything as existing at any determined time and place, we compare it with itself existing at another time, and thereon form the ideas of identity and diversity. When we see anything to be in any place in any instant of time, we are sure (be it what it will) that it is that very thing, and not another which at that same time exists in another place, how like and undistinguishable soever it may be in all other respects: and in this consists identity, when the ideas it is attributed to vary not at all from what they were that moment wherein we consider their former existence, and to which we compare the present. For we never finding, nor conceiving it possible, that two things of the same kind should exist in the same place at the same time, we rightly conclude, that, whatever exists anywhere at any time, excludes all of the same kind, and is there itself alone. When therefore we demand whether anything be the same or no, it refers always to something that existed such a time in such a place, which it was certain, at that instant, was the same with itself, and no other. From whence it follows, that one thing cannot have two beginnings of existence, nor two things one beginning; it being impossible for two things of the same kind to be or exist in the same instant, in the very same place; or one and the same thing in different places. That, therefore, that had one beginning, is the same thing; and that which had a different beginning in time and place from that, is not the same, but diverse. That which has made the difficulty about this relation has been the little care and attention used in having precise notions of the things to which it is attributed.
A Selection from “Denoting” from The Principles of Mathematics

§ 64

The connection of denoting with the nature of identity is important, and helps, I think, to solve some rather serious problems. The question whether identity is or is not a relation, and even whether there is such a concept at all, is not easy to answer. For, it may be said, identity cannot be a relation, since, where it is truly asserted, we have only one term, whereas two terms are required for a relation. And indeed identity, an objector may urge, cannot be anything at all: two terms plainly are not identical, and one term cannot be, for what is it identical with? Nevertheless identity must be something. We might attempt to remove identity from terms to relations, and say that two terms are identical in some respect when they have a given relation to a given term. But then we shall have to hold either that there is strict identity between the two cases of the given relation, or that the two cases have identity in the sense of having a given relation to a given term; but the latter view leads to an endless process of the illegitimate kind. Thus identity must be admitted, and the difficulty as to the two terms of a relation must be met by a sheer denial that two different terms are necessary. There must always be a referent and a relatum, but these need not be distinct; and where identity is affirmed, they are not so.

But the question arises: Why is it ever worthwhile to affirm identity? The question is answered by the theory of denoting. If we say “Edward VII is the King,” we assert an identity; the reason why this assertion is worth making is, that in the one case the actual term occurs, while in the other a denoting concept takes its place. (For purposes of discussion, I ignore the fact that Edwards form a class, and that seventh Edwards form a class having only one term. Edward VII is practically, though not formally, a proper name.) Often two denoting concepts occur, and the term itself is not mentioned, as in the proposition “the present Pope is the last survivor of his generation.” When a term is given, the assertion of an identity with itself, though true, is perfectly futile, and is never made outside the logic-books; but where denoting concepts are introduced, identity is at once seen to be significant. In this case, of course, there is involved, though not asserted, a relation of the denoting concept to the terms, or of the two denoting concepts to each other. But the which occurs in such propositions does not itself state this further relation, but states pure identity.
Two Poems

Before

There was a time before when I was alone in myself. There was a time before eating, before the time for eating. There was a time before laughing, before Mary before a lamb. There was a time before walking, before two legs and two lines. There was a time before words, before watching them form, before forming a word. There was a time before gods, before God, before God. There was a time before lie, before life, living and lived, before lived. There was a time before kings, before kingdoms, before lionizing before kings. There was a time before enumerating, before numerals written in dust, before writing, before dust. There was a time before tenuously, Tevye, a time before Tevye browning above my apple potato pancake knee, before apple or potato. There was a time before a carpenter’s song, before a Carpenters’ song, before song. There was a time, before there was, a time before. There was a time before tedium. There was a time before Alva Edison, before electric light, electric light, electric light. There was a time before the curse, before the curse of before, before the curse.

Not A ‘Poem’

Either

“Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘or’ or not ‘or’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘not’ or not ‘not’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘’’’ or not ‘’’’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘’’’ or not ‘’’’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘’’’ or not ‘’’’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’

or

’Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘or’ or not ‘or’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘not’ or not ‘not’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘’’’ or not ‘’’’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’ Either ‘’’’ or not ‘’’’ Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’

or

Either ‘A’ or not ‘A’

or not
A Report for an Academy

Esteemed Gentlemen of the Academy!

You show me the honor of calling upon me to submit a report to the Academy concerning my previous life as an ape.

In this sense, unfortunately, I cannot comply with your request. Almost five years separate me from my existence as an ape, a short time perhaps when measured by the calendar, but endlessly long to gallop through, as I have done, at times accompanied by splendid men, advice, applause, and orchestral music, but basically alone, since all those accompanying me held themselves back a long way from the barrier, in order to preserve the image. This achievement would have been impossible if I had stubbornly wished to hold onto my origin, onto the memories of my youth.

Giving up that obstinacy was, in fact, the highest command that I gave myself. I, a free ape, submitted myself to this yoke. In so doing, however, my memories for their part constantly closed themselves off against me. If people had wanted it, my journey back at first would have been possible through the entire gateway which heaven builds over the earth, but as my development was whipped onwards, the gate simultaneously grew lower and narrower all the time. I felt myself more comfortable and more enclosed in the world of human beings. The storm which blew me out of my past eased off. Today it is only a gentle breeze which cools my heels. And the distant hole through which it comes and through which I once came has become so small that, even if I had sufficient power and will to run back there, I would have to scrape the fur off my body in order to get through. Speaking frankly, as much as I like choosing metaphors for these things—speaking frankly: your experience as apes, gentlemen—to the extent that you have something of that sort behind you—cannot be more distant from you than mine is from me. But it tickles at the heels of everyone who walks here on earth, the small chimpanzee as well as the great Achilles.

In the narrowest sense, however, I can perhaps answer your question, nonetheless, and indeed I do so with great pleasure.

The first thing I learned was to give a handshake. The handshake displays candour. Today, when I stand at the highpoint of my career, may I add to that first handshake also my candid words. For the Academy it will not provide anything essentially new and will fall far short of what people have asked of me and what with the best will I cannot speak about—but nonetheless it should demonstrate the line by which someone who was an ape was forced into the world of men and which he has continued there. Yet I would certainly not permit myself to say even the trivial things which follow if I were not completely sure of myself and if my position on all the great music hall stages of the civilized world had not established itself unassailably.

I come from the Gold Coast. For an account of how I was captured I rely on the reports of strangers. A hunting expedition from the firm of Hagenback—incidentally, since then I have already emptied a number of bottles of good red wine with the leader of that expedition—lay hidden in the bushes by the shore when I ran down in the evening in the middle of a band of apes for a drink.
Someone fired a shot. I was the only one struck. I received two hits.

One was in the cheek—that was superficial. But it left behind a large hairless red scar which earned me the name Red Peter—a revolting name, completely inappropriate, presumably something invented by an ape, as if the only difference between me and the recently deceased trained ape Peter, who was well known here and there, was the red patch on my cheek. But this is only by the way.

The second shot hit me below the hip. It was serious. It’s the reason that today I still limp a little. Recently I read in an article by one of the ten thousand gossipers who vent their opinions about me in the newspapers that my ape nature is not yet entirely repressed. The proof is that when visitors come I take pleasure in pulling off my trousers to show the entry wound caused by this shot. That fellow should have each finger of his writing hand shot off one by one. So far as I am concerned, I may pull my trousers down in front of anyone I like. People will not find there anything other than well cared for fur and the scar from—let us select here a precise word for a precise purpose, something that will not be misunderstood—the scar from a wicked shot. Everything is perfectly open; there is nothing to hide. When it comes to a question of the truth, every great mind discards the most subtle refinements of manners. However, if that writer were to pull down his trousers when he gets a visitor, that would certainly produce a different sight, and I’ll take it as a sign of reason that he does not do that. But then he should not bother me with his delicate sensibilities.

After those shots I woke up—and here my own memory gradually begins—in a cage between decks on the Hagenbeck steamship. It was no four-sided cage with bars, but only three walls fixed to a crate, so that the crate constituted the fourth wall. The whole thing was too low to stand upright and too narrow for sitting down. So I crouched with bent knees, which shook all the time, and since at first I probably did not wish to see anyone and to remain constantly in the darkness, I turned towards the crate, while the bars of the cage cut into the flesh on my back. People consider such confinement of wild animals beneficial in the very first period of time, and today I cannot deny, on the basis of my own experience, that in a human sense that is, in fact, the case.

But at that time I didn’t think about it. For the first time in my life I was without a way out—at least there was no direct way out. Right in front of me was the crate, its boards fitted closely together. Well, there was a hole running right through the boards. When I first discovered it, I welcomed it with a blissfully happy howl of ignorance. But this hole was not nearly big enough to stick my tail through, and all the power of an ape could not make it any bigger.

According to what I was told later, I am supposed to have made remarkably little noise. From that people concluded that either I must soon die or, if I succeeded in surviving the first critical period, I would be very capable of being trained. I survived this period. Muffled sobbing, painfully searching out fleas, wearily licking a coconut, banging my skull against the wall of the crate, sticking out my tongue when anyone came near—these were the first occupations in my new life. In all of them, however, there was only one feeling: no way out. Nowadays, of course, I can portray those ape-like feelings only with human words and, as a result, I misrepresent them. But even if I can no longer attain the old truth of the ape, at least it lies in the direction I have described—of that there is no doubt.

Up until then I had had so many ways out, and now I
no longer had one. I was tied down. If they had nailed me down, my freedom to move would not have been any less. And why? If you scratch raw the flesh between your toes, you won’t find the reason. If you press your back against the bars of the cage until it almost slices you in two, you won’t find the answer. I had no way out, but I had to come up with one for myself. For without that I could not live. Always in front of that crate wall—I would inevitably have died a miserable death. But according to Hagenbeck, apes belong at the crate wall—well, that meant I had to cease being an ape. A clear and beautiful train of thought, which I must have planned somehow with my belly, since apes think with their bellies.

I’m worried that people do not understand precisely what I mean by a way out. I use the word in its most common and fullest sense. I am deliberately not saying freedom. I do not mean this great feeling of freedom on all sides. As an ape, I perhaps recognized it, and I have met human beings who yearn for it. But as far as I am concerned, I did not demand freedom either then or today. Incidentally, among human beings people all too often are deceived by freedom. And since freedom is reckoned among the most sublime feelings, the corresponding disappointment is also among the most sublime. In the variety shows, before my entrance, I have often watched a pair of artists busy on trapezes high up in the roof.

They swung themselves, they rocked back and forth, they jumped, they hung in each other’s arms, one held the other by clenching the hair with his teeth. “That, too, is human freedom,” I thought, “self-controlled movement.” What a mockery of sacred nature! At such a sight, no structure would stand up to the laughter of the apes.

No, I didn’t want freedom. Only a way out—to the right or left or anywhere at all. I made no other demands, even if the way out should be only an illusion. The demand was small; the disappointment would not be any greater—to move on further, to move on further! Only not to stand still with arms raised, pressed again a crate wall.

Today I see clearly that without the greatest inner calm I would never have been able to get out. And in fact I probably owe everything that I have become to the calmness which came over me after the first days there on the ship. And, in turn, I owe that calmness to the people on the ship.

They are good people, in spite of everything. Today I still enjoy remembering the clang of their heavy steps, which used to echo then in my half sleep. They had the habit of tackling everything extremely slowly. If one of them wanted to rub his eyes, he raised his hand as if it were a hanging weight. Their jokes were gross but hearty. Their laughter was always mixed with a rasp which sounded dangerous but meant nothing. They always had something in their mouths to spit out, and they didn’t care where they spat. They always complained that my fleas sprung over onto them, but they were never seriously angry at me because of it. They even knew that fleas liked being in my fur and that fleas are jumpers. They learned to live with that. When they had no duties, sometimes a few of them sat down in a semi-circle around me. They didn’t speak much, but only made noises to each other and smoked their pipes, stretched out on the crates. They slapped their knees as soon as I made the slightest movement, and from time to time one of them would pick up a stick and tickle me where I liked it. If I were invited today to make a journey on that ship, I’d certainly decline the invitation, but it’s equally certain that the memories I could dwell on of the time there between the decks would not be totally hateful.
The calmness which I acquired in this circle of people prevented me above all from any attempt to escape. Looking at it nowadays, it seems to me as if I had at least sensed that I had to find a way out if I wanted to live, but that this way out could not be reached by escaping. I no longer know if escape was possible, but I think it was: for an ape it should always be possible to flee. With my present teeth I have to be careful even with the ordinary task of cracking a nut, but then I must have been able, over time, to succeed in chewing through the lock on the door. I didn’t do that. What would I have achieved by doing that? No sooner would I have stuck my head out, than they would have captured me again and locked me up in an even worse cage. Or I could have taken refuge unnoticed among the other animals—say, the boa constrictors opposite me—and breathed my last in their embraces. Or I could have managed to steal way up to the deck and jumped overboard. Then I’d have tossed back and forth for a while on the ocean and drowned. Acts of despair. I did not think things through in such a human way, but under the influence of my surroundings conducted myself as if I had worked things out.

I did not work things out, but I observed well in complete tranquility. I saw these men going back and forth, always the same faces, the same movements. Often it seemed to me as if there was only one man. So the man or these men went undisturbed. A lofty purpose dawned on me. No one promised me that if I could become like them the cage would be removed. Such promises, apparently impossible to fulfill, were not made. But if one makes the fulfillment good, then later the promises appear precisely there where one had looked for them earlier without success. Now, these men in themselves were nothing which attracted me very much. If I had been a follower of that freedom I just mentioned, I would certainly have preferred the ocean to the way out displayed in the dull gaze of these men. But in any case, I observed them for a long time before I even thought about such things—in fact, the accumulated observations first pushed me in the proper direction.

It was so easy to imitate these people. I could already spit on the first day. We used to spit in each other’s faces. The only difference was that I licked my face clean afterwards. They did not. Soon I was smoking a pipe, like an old man, and if I then pressed my thumb down into the bowl of the pipe, the entire area between decks cheered. Still, for a long time I did not understand the difference between an empty and a full pipe.

I had the greatest difficulty with the bottle of alcohol. The smell was torture to me. I forced myself with all my power, but weeks went by before I could overcome my reaction. Curiously enough, the people took this inner struggle more seriously than anything else about me. In my memories I don’t distinguish the people, but there was one who always came back, alone or with comrades, day and night, at different times. He’d stand with a bottle in front of me and give me instructions. He did not understand me. He wanted to solve the riddle of my being. He used to uncork the bottle slowly and then look at me, in order to test if I had understood. I confess that I always looked at him with wildly over-eager attentiveness. No human teacher has ever found in the entire world such a student of human beings.

After he’d uncorked the bottle, he’d raise it to his mouth. I’d gaze at him, right at his throat. He would nod, pleased with me, and set the bottle to his lips. Delighted with my gradual understanding, I’d squeal and scratch myself all over, wherever it was convenient. He was happy.
He’d set the bottle to his mouth and take a swallow. Impatient and desperate to emulate him, I would defecate over myself in my cage—and that again gave him great satisfaction. Then, holding the bottle at arm’s length and bringing it up again with a swing, he’d drink it down with one gulp, exaggerating his backward bending as a way of instructing me. Exhausted with so much great effort, I could no longer follow and hung weakly onto the bars, while he ended the theoretical lesson by rubbing his belly and grinning.

Now the practical exercises first began. Was I not already too tired out by the theoretical part? Yes, indeed, far too weary. That’s part of my fate. Nonetheless, I’d grab the proffered bottle as well as I could and uncork it trembling. Once I’d managed to do that, new forces gradually take over. I lift the bottle—with hardly any difference between me and the original—put it to my lips—and throw it away in disgust, in disgust, although it is empty and filled only with the smell, throw it with disgust onto the floor. To the sorrow of my teacher, to my own greater sorrow. And I still do not console him or myself when, after throwing away the bottle, I do not forget to give my belly a splendid rub and to grin as I do so.

All too often, the lesson went that way. And to my teacher’s credit, he was not angry with me. Well, sometimes he held his burning pipe against my fur in some place or other which I could reach only with difficulty, until it began to burn. But then he would put it out himself with his huge good hand. He wasn’t angry with me. He realized that we were fighting on the same side against ape nature and that I had the more difficult part.

What a victory it was for him and for me, however, when one evening in front of a large circle of onlookers—perhaps it was a celebration, a gramophone was playing, and officer was wandering around among the people—when on this evening, at a moment when no one was watching, I grabbed a bottle of alcohol which had been inadvertently left standing in front of my cage, uncorked it just as I had been taught, amid the rising attention of the group, set it against my mouth and, without hesitating, with my mouth making no grimace, like an expert drinker, with my eyes rolling around, splashing the liquid in my throat, I really and truly drank the bottle empty, and then threw it away, no longer in despair, but like an artist. Well, I did forget to scratch my belly. But instead of that, because I couldn’t do anything else, because I had to, because my senses were roaring, I cried out a short and good “Hello!” breaking out into human sounds. And with this cry I sprang into the community of human beings, and I felt its echo—“Just listen. He’s talking!”—like a kiss on my entire sweat-soaked body.

I’ll say it again: imitating human beings was not something which pleased me. I imitated them because I was looking for a way out, for no other reason. And even in that victory little was achieved. My voice immediately failed me again. It first came back months later. My distaste for the bottle of alcohol became even stronger. But at least my direction was given to me once and for all.

When I was handed over in Hamburg to my first trainer, I soon realized the two possibilities open to me: the Zoological Garden or the Music Hall. I did not hesitate. I said to myself: use all your energy to get into the Music Hall. That is the way out. The Zoological Garden is only a new barred cage. If you go there, you’re lost.

And I learned, gentlemen. Alas, one learns when one has to. Once learns when one wants a way out. One learns ruthlessly. One supervises oneself with a whip and tears oneself apart at the slightest resistance. My ape nature ran
off, head over heels, out of me, so that in the process my first teacher himself almost became an ape and soon had to give up training and be carried off to a mental hospital. Fortunately he was soon discharged again.

But I went through many teachers—indeed, even several teachers at once. As I became more confident of my abilities and the general public followed my progress and my future began to brighten, I took on teachers myself, let them sit down in five interconnected rooms, and studied with them all simultaneously, by constantly leaping from one room into another.

And such progress! The penetrating effects of the rays of knowledge from all sides on my awaking brain! I don’t deny the fact—I was delighted with it. But I also confess that I did not overestimate it, not even then, even less today. With an effort which up to this point has never been repeated on earth, I have attained the average education of a European. That would perhaps not amount to much, but it is something insofar as it helped me out of the cage and created this special way out for me—the way out of human beings. There is an excellent German expression: to beat one’s way through the bushes. That I have done. I have beaten my way through the bushes. I had no other way, always assuming that freedom was not a choice.

If I review my development and its goal up to this point, I do not complain. I am even satisfied. With my hands in my trouser pockets, the bottle of wine on the table, I half lie and half sit in my rocking chair and gaze out the window. If I have a visitor, I welcome him as is appropriate. My impresario sits in the parlor. If I ring, he comes and listens to what I have to say. In the evening I almost always have a performance, and my success could hardly rise any higher. When I come home late from banquets, from scientific societies, or from social gatherings in someone’s home, a small half-trained female chimpanzee is waiting for me, and I take my pleasure with her the way apes do. During the day I don’t want to see her. For she has in her gaze the madness of a bewildered trained animal. I’m the only one who recognizes that, and I cannot bear it.

On the whole, at any rate, I have achieved what I wished to achieve. You shouldn’t say it wasn’t worth the effort. In any case, I don’t want any man’s judgment. I only want to expand knowledge. I simply report. Even to you, esteemed gentlemen of the Academy, I have only made a report.

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Translated by Ian Johnston.
A Full-Circle Moment: A Conversation with Tanwi Nandini Islam

I first met Tanwi Nandini Islam at a pre-publication event for my first novel. There she was, a woman who kept smiling to my left, supposedly “from the press,” but really from a dream I had once of meeting someone I could speak to in shorthand. Fast forward a few years and now we’ve both had our debut novels come into the world, a process made less harrowing by each of us knowing the other was out there. Having the opportunity to interview her about Bright Lines—her gorgeous, intricate, lyrical novel about a family in Brooklyn coming to terms with many secrets—was one of life’s rare, full-circle moments.


TNI: Well, the character Anwar is where I enter the book. I don’t think my publishers necessarily felt that way. They think that the girls are the center of the book, but there are two kind of parallel secrets in the book that are unfolding at the same time. You have the pot-smoking, apothecary, war-surviving dad who’s self-medicating and pining after his tenant, and then you have the daughters—one adopted, one biological—who run away to live in the house, and this leads to a “coming of age” in certain ways, for all of these characters.

MJ: So, when you say this to people, the way you said it to me, when do they ask what the characters are?

TNI: You know what? You’re South Asian, and my friend, so I took it for granted—which I like. I like that I’m able to make my brown the ubiquitous “take it for granted” identity. To a white person, I might say, “Bangladeshi,” and then they say, “Are you Bangladeshi?” and it’ll just derail the conversation. Not that I’m surprised by this—I live in America, and I’ve been here my whole life. But when people say, “This is a cultural story of a Muslim family in Brooklyn,” I’m always like, “How?” The dynamics between father and daughter, the dynamics between husband and wife, the dynamics between best friends that have businesses in the community, that’s a transnational story.

MJ: I will admit I had a selfish reason for asking. I wanted to see if it happened to you too. It makes me think of this strange bit of praise for my book that kept rankling me: “This book isn’t really about Indian identity as much it is about relationships and people.”

TNI: “Surprise!”

MJ: I kept thinking, “What are they talking about? What does that mean? Why isn’t writing about Indians writing about relationships?”

TNI: I don’t feel like I want our stories to represent swathes of culture. My book was just a little keyhole into one facet of a multidimensional, infinite facet of experiences. When I read your book, I read it with Sandip Roy’s book, and I wasn’t like, “Fuck, now there’s no space for my book.” I’ve been writing about that kind of criticism, the one that says, “Hey, I’ve seen this story before, would it make your story different?” I get so annoyed by that. I’ve been writing about that phenomenon, so I went to Goodreads to see what the average American reader might say about my book, and I found something that basically said, “I’m going to give you
two reviews for the price of one, cause I just read *Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri, too!” And I thought, “Are you freaking kidding me right now?” Can you imagine? “Hey, here are my thoughts on Michael Chabon and Jonathan Franzen!”

**MJ:** “*Philip Roth and Nathan Englander!*”

**TNI:** And I have to say that it’s not people of color who ask me, “Did you feel like you had to write about being Bangladeshi?”

**MJ:** A question never asked of white writers—

**TNI:** Because it’s a universally ubiquitous identity. When I read a novel like *Pride and Prejudice*, when I was in high school, I enjoyed it, but I was also in that weird, hazy fictive world in my mind’s eye. Are we really putting ourselves in those images, or are we just imagining like faceless white people falling in love?

**MJ:** Oh, I really went the other way there. When I was a kid and would read for hours and then catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I was always shocked that I wasn’t white. One minute I would be in England fretting over whether or not I was going to find a husband, and the next I’d be blinking at my own face thinking, *who is that girl?*

**TNI:** That’s why so many of the writers who schooled me were international and Black American writers. James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Marquez.

**MJ:** Yeah, of course. That’s the only way forward when you’re the minority of the minority. Speaking of—whose work did yours get compared to when it came out?

**TNI:** It was like, “For fans of Jhumpa Lahiri and Junot Díaz!” Like they aren’t totally different. “For fans of Stephen King....”

**MJ:** “…and J. M. Coetzee!” One thing I wanted to talk about is Anwar’s pot habit, about something that is everywhere in a culture but rarely on a page.

**TNI:** I wanted to show someone who is not just in suppression, but is actively seeking medicine and healing. He smokes because he knows it makes him feel better, it allows him to access the part of him that feels so much guilt for his friend’s death, it allows him to build community with the people in his life. There’s a tradition in South Asia of transcendence through smoke. That’s a very Sufi, mystic thing. For someone like Anwar, I feel like if he had lived in Bangladesh longer, and probably the time that he did live in Bangladesh after the war, he was hanging with Sufis and understanding they had just survived seeing people hacked to death in front of them and murdered in mass, and now they have to build a country. And it’s also a parallel to the hallucinations, as you know.

**MJ:** I loved the light touch you used with the hallucinations. I sometimes feel like to be an immigrant in America is to live with those kind of visions.

**TNI:** There’s trauma, you’re trying to transcend it, so you’re envisioning something else. I actually named the book *Bright Lines* because of a little thing that happened in my brain when I was young, something that stayed with me. When I was about four years old, I used to stare at our blinds, and they would move when I would stare at them. That happens to everyone, of course, but I was so tripped out by that when I was like a little kid. I used to think, “I can control things with my mind.” But Ella doesn’t have control over what she’s seeing. So what happens there? What does she see?

**MJ:** When did Ella come to you?

**TNI:** Anwar was first, and then Ella was second. She’s the adopted child in this family, and it has made her a
very reserved, awkward, held-back person in certain ways. Then, add to that not really knowing how to process these feelings that have come up for her cousin, which is something that I think is not actually bizarre for any culture, it’s just so uncomfortable.

MJ: It’s a really interesting choice, to have a cousin who has fallen in love with her cousin/almost-sister.

TNI: It’s weird, yeah. For Ella, it’s such an internal world that she’s grappling with at that age, at that time, all feeling very alienated, and Charu is just someone who just allows her to feel out in the world and connected.

MJ: A lot of the times when you read about somebody who’s adopted into a family, the way that their separateness presents itself is a distance from the family, but you kind of punched right through that to the other side: “I am in love with you, and that is the thing that I cannot tell you.”

TNI: “...and never will.” There’s no judgment on her at all, but it’s not something that’s feasible, possible, or good for her. The shame about that is a natural thing that humans have developed for their family in terms of evolution, but Ella is still grappling with this desire, and it’s something that’s very uncomfortable for her. She’s disgusted by it, but she’s also wondering, “What is this attraction?” For the reader coming from a heterosexual, heterosexist space, if Ella was just like, upfront like a cisgender biological male, maybe that reader would be like, “I get it.” I wanted to dial that up.

MJ: One of the things you do very well is adding a level of basic humanity to everything so that even things that seem like they could be a reach are not within the story. I want to switch gears and ask if there is anything you were asked repeatedly that you never want to be asked again about your book?

TNI: “We’ve read these stories, how are you doing anything new?” That one comes from not just white people, it’s Asian people, it’s Indian people....

MJ: Often I will find the Indian press says things like, “Yes, it’s another story about Indians in America...” and I just think, “You guys do realize we are not a whole people? This diaspora business means there are many, many stories?”

TNI: Yes! And I like talking to South Asians about the book, and I like talking to Indian people and Pakistani people who’ve read the book. I want to hear what the diaspora thinks but because I am a Bangladeshi-American writer, I don’t think that the book is seen as being part of the Indian diaspora. So it’s weird. I feel almost like this polarity, something that’s been unspoken, but I feel it. And I don’t know if it’s just me being sensitive, or if that’s....

MJ: I’m pretty sure “sensitive” means “something the world will be ready to discuss in twenty years.” It’s going to take us a while to find our vocabulary to talk about this, and it’s going to take the world a while to then recognize it as a worthy topic. Meanwhile, it lives in us as discomfort. So I just want to end by asking you the question that you don’t want to answer anymore, and allowing you to answer it as honestly as you want to. Are you ready?

TNI: Yes.

MJ: How is your book different?

TNI: My book is about a pot-smoking guy who has an affair, one daughter who is attracted to the other, and a wife that hates him. My book is a Bangladeshi-American story that talks about the tendrils of war that have never escaped these people, always threaten to suffocate them, and also allows them to have vivid, sexual, sensual, open
lives connected to that past. My story is about brown people fucking, brown people loving each other, brown people smoking pot, brown people surviving traumatic shit, and brown people living after all of that. I’m writing about this right now, and if you want to tell me, “We’ve read this before,” my answer’s just going to be, “No. No, you fucking haven’t.”

Petrified Archway
A Selection from *The Tempest*

PROSPERO
Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself
Upon thy wicked dam, come forth!

Enter CALIBAN

CALIBAN
As wicked dew as e’er my mother brush’d
With raven’s feather from unwholesome fen
Drop on you both! a south-west blow on ye
And blister you all o’er!

PROSPERO
For this, be sure, to-night thou shalt have cramps,
Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins
Shall, for that vast of night that they may work,
All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinch’d
As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging
Than bees that made ’em.

CALIBAN
I must eat my dinner.
This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,

That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee
And show’d thee all the qualities o’ the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o’ the island.

PROSPERO
Thou most lying slave,
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee,
Filth as thou art, with human care, and lodged thee
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honour of my child.

CALIBAN
O ho, O ho! would’t had been done!
Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
This isle with Calibans.

PROSPERO
Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I have used thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endow’d thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
Though thou didst learn, had that in’t which
Good natures
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
Deservedly confined into this rock,
Who hadst deserved more than a prison.

CALIBAN
You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!

PROSPERO
Hag-seed, hence!
Fetch us in fuel; and be quick, thou’rt best,
To answer other business. Shrug’st thou, malice?
If thou neglect’st or dost unwillingly
What I command, I’ll rack thee with old cramps,
Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar
That beasts shall tremble at thy din.

CALIBAN
No, pray thee.
Aside
I must obey: his art is of such power,
It would control my dam’s god, Setebos,
and make a vassal of him.

PROSPERO
So, slave; hence!

*Exit CALIBAN*
On Our Nightstand

If you’re looking for interesting books to read, here are some recommendations for you from writers, artists, and intellectuals that we know and trust.

Luc Sante on The Death of Napoleon by Simon Leys

Somehow this swift little book flies by with the machine-tooled efficiency of a crime novel, while at the same time each particle of it hangs suspended, like a lyric poem. The premise is that Bonaparte escapes from St. Helena, assisted by an immense conspiracy to bring him back to power. One link in the chain snaps, however: his ship docks at the wrong port, and he must remain Eugène Lenormand, cabin hand. In search of his empire he visits Waterloo, which has become a tawdry tourist attraction. He makes his way to Paris, where the Old Guard has become too old to recognize him. He is led to a rustic estate that turns out to be an insane asylum—where many of the inmates believe they are him. He finds a home and a willing female partner, with whom he employs his strategic gifts to organize a trade in melons. He finds himself on the perilous verge of becoming happy and settled—he cannot allow that to happen!

Stacy Schiff on The Leopard by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

The very prospect of returning to Lampedusa’s The Leopard delights, and not only because I seem to have a weakness for the literature of nostalgia, history’s dewy-eyed cousin. It’s a novel scored for full orchestra. Lampedusa gives us a sumptuous world on the edge of extinction. Every detail strikes a chord, from the cut of a coat to the tilt of a chin, precisely as its author intended. “The problem,” he wrote his wife in 1956, “was to convey in six lines in all the nuances, historical, social, economic, and amatory, of the first (public) kiss Tancredi gave his fiancée Angelica.” A dog and his velvety paws carry the story. Then there’s the moment—all roiling under the glittering surface—when our hero heaves himself from his bath but fails to find his dressing gown before his priest finds him: “The sight of the Prince in a state of nature was quite new to Father Pirrone; the sacrament of penance had accustomed him to naked souls, but he was far less used to naked bodies; and he, who would not have blinked an eyelid at hearing the confession, say, of an incestuous intrigue, found himself flustered by this innocent but vast expanse of naked flesh.” Of course Lampedusa got Tancredi’s kiss exactly right. He got everything else right too in his only novel, one he wrote late in life and—somehow appropriately—never saw published.

Bill Cheng on Lord of the Flies by William Golding

He didn’t have a name so much as a role: the perpetual victim; a lodestone for hate and ridicule and derision. Back in high school, you were supposed to sympathize with Piggy—a boy Ralph comes to call his “wise true friend.” But if ‘Lord of the Flies’ is allegory, then Piggy is an avatar for weakness and Eurocentric empire. He is the inevitable casualty in the boys’ retrogression into animal savagery—a symbol of the breach of our social contract. But it’s hard being grown and not hating what Piggy is: soft, weak,
unable or unwilling to assert agency between the warring personalities of Ralph and Jack. I was Piggy growing up—pudgy, asthmatic, a social pariah—unable to even imagine myself inside my own narrative. Here and now, that strikes me as the greater crime. For Ralph and Jack—there exists a reserve of strength that “was inside them all along.” But for the Piggies of the world, the narrative is not as generous. They are doomed to be foils, to have their glasses broke and their brains dashed out. For Golding, the conch is a horn, an instrument of power but not for the slug inside it.

Michele Filgate on Coming to Writing and Other Essays by Hélène Cixous

There are books you keep on your nightstand because you intend on reading them from cover to cover and putting them back on the bookshelf. And then there are books you keep next to your pillow because you need them to be there; they are like a nightlight for your soul. A friend gave me a copy of Coming to Writing and Other Essays a few months ago, when I was feeling restless and not sure of my direction as a writer. We met for coffee and she gave me the kind of direct advice she specializes in. I started reading the book while on the subway, and I became so engrossed in it that I missed my stop. There are lots of memorable moments in Cixous’s essay collection, including a nearly perfect piece on Clarice Lispector, but the piece I return to again and again is the title essay, in which Cixous declares: “Let yourself go! Let go of everything! Lose everything! Take to the air. Take to the open sea. Take to letters. Listen: nothing is found. Nothing is lost. Everything remains to be sought. Go, fly, swim, bound, descend, cross, love the unknown, love the uncertain, love what has not yet been seen, love no one, whom you are, whom you will be, leave yourself, shrug off the old lies, dare what you don’t dare, it is there that you will take pleasure, never make your here anywhere but there; and rejoice, rejoice in the terror, follow it where you’re afraid to go, go ahead, take the plunge, you’re on the right trail!” We’re not meant to know where we are headed. The uncertainty is where creativity happens—and flourishes.

Ocean Vuong on When I Was a Twin by Michael Klein

Michael Klein’s latest collection of poems When I Was a Twin (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2015) is a book steered by interrogations of form, questions that continually reward the poems’ investigation of grief, political ruptures, and art making. Through a restless, at times fervid, search for the exact formal enactment of aftermath, these poems privilege surprise and discovery at the level of the line, the word. What’s more stunning is that these formal manipulations, at once risky and myriad, are relatively new to Klein’s arsenal. For a poet in his early 60s, with numerous collections of poetry and memoirs under his belt, perhaps the last thing one expects is a new and refreshed demand for even higher stakes, and yet Klein’s does so, not for the sake of novelty, but in service of earnest and startling questions of our American moment, one that begins at how far lineation can charge itself, where it’s “the line keeping the world in the sky.”

Kelly Bradley on Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays by Zadie Smith

Zadie Smith is unquestionably one of the sharpest minds writing today. Many are familiar with her novels—White
Teeth and N/W are favorites of mine—but her essays are equally enlightening. Split into five sections—“Reading,” “Being,” “Seeing,” “Feeling,” and “Remembering”—these seventeen essays look at everything from the Oscars to Franz Kafka, from Katharine Hepburn to Christmas. In her foreward, Smith claims, “Reading through these pieces, though, I’m forced to recognize that ideological inconsistency is, for me, practically an article of faith.” This is what makes Zadie Smith worth reading, always. I don’t know what she’s going to argue about a subject until she makes the argument herself. She doesn’t seem to come with a certain ideology, but instead let’s the piece inform her approach. In one essay, while discussing Shakespeare, she says, “he made himself a diffuse, uncertain thing, a mass of contradictory, irresolvable voices that speak truth pluraly.” Though she may act like her “ideological inconsistency” is more accidental, Smith is clearly following in the Bard’s footsteps intentionally.
A Long, Easy Afternoon

Stir ingredients together well in a chilled mixing glass filled with ice. Strain into an ice-chilled coupe glass that you have prepared by rolling around a few drops of absinthe (or Pernod or Herbsaint) until the inside is thoroughly coated. Pour out the excess; it’s there for the nose, not the tongue. Squeeze the mist of a lemon peel over the drink and discard. Then squeeze a good-sized twist of orange peel over the drink, making sure the oils fall into glass, brush damp peel along outer lip of glass, then drop into glass or use for garnish. Serve up.

—— — — —

MONTAUK IS A MEMORY


AND SO I’M IN THE MIND OF

I’m in the mind of memories. Wavy reflections in the salty Atlantic, shadows cast on beach chairs. Ping-pong paddles abandoned atop a dark table. Our bodies. The betrayal of our bodies. Classical figures. But the Erinyes.... Will they get me if I try to employ the scientific techniques of the contemporary mixologist—molecular gastronomy?

Nitrous infusions
Vacuum-concentrated tinctures
Flavored sodas

2 ½ oz. Hudson Manhattan Rye Whiskey
3/4 oz. Carpano Antica sweet vermouth
3/4 oz. Aperol
2 dashes Peychaud’s bitters
3 dashes Angustoro bitters
Orange peel
Lemon peel
Absinthe
MAX, SOME SAY THE COCKTAIL BEGAN

Some say the classic cocktail in America began in 1806, in Hudson, New York. A Hudson newspaper reported the story of the local bartender who had travelled through Europe and returned to New York and named his libation after the egg-cup in which his drink had been served to him in France: the “coquetier,” which his 19th-century New York patrons and local barflies pronounced “cocktail.” Because you, Max, were a European in New York, a European older than the young American lover you took for that memorable weekend in May, that merry, mad month of budding and bloom, I thought I’d play with the old-fashioned ingredients that the Hudson newspaper reported: spirit, bitters, sugar.

BUT BECAUSE THERE WERE TWO OF YOU

But because, in this memory, there are two of you, Max and Lynn, old and young, I’ll mix old-fashioned elements with fresh new blood. And because of where your story took place, I’ll use the spirit that bears the name of that region. For you and Lynn, then, I’ve created this elegant but potent drink, one intended to live long in memory if, of a long, easy afternoon, you sip slowly and savor. But, please, do take your time crossing the street.
Panel of Dead Authors

Earlier this year, music icon Prince died. What is your favorite Prince song?

DOROTHY PARKER:

“I like my ballad, ‘The Ballad of Dorothy Parker’ — and not just because it’s got my name in it. Mostly I just feel a kinship with anyone who wants to take a bubble bath with their pants on. Bonus points if it makes all the fighting stop. I hope next time everyone will do it sooner.”

RÉNE DESCARTES:

“My new philosophical dictum is: I like Prince’s song ‘I Rock Therefore I Am’ therefore I am.”

EDGAR ALLAN POE:

“Quoth the Poe: ‘Joy in Repetition.’ But is that really a surprise? I mean, you’ve heard my poem ‘The Bells,’ right? The only thing that brings me more joy than repetition is enough opium to make me wander the streets of Baltimore yelling at every passerby ‘For the love of God, Montresor!’”

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE:

“Do I have to tell you that it’s the song ‘Sister’ or is that what you would have guessed?”
A Selection from a Letter to Georgiana Keats, February 14th – May 4th, 1819

The most interesting question that can come before us is: How far by the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates mankind may be made happy? I can imagine such happiness carried to an extreme, but what must it end in? Death. And who could in such a case bear with death? The whole troubles of life which are now frittered away in a series of years, would then be accumulated for the last days of a being who instead of hailing its approach, would leave this world as Eve left Paradise. But in truth I do not at all believe in this sort of perfectibility. The nature of the world will not admit of it; the inhabitants of the world will correspond to itself. Let the fish philosophise the ice away from the rivers in winter time and they shall be at continual play in the tepid delight of summer. Look at the poles and at the sands of Africa, whirlpools and volcanoes. Let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly happiness. The point at which man may arrive is as far as the parallel state in inanimate nature and no further. For instance, suppose a rose to have sensation; it blooms on a beautiful morning, it enjoys itself. But there comes a cold wind, a hot sun; it cannot escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances. They are as native to the world as itself.

No more can man be happy in spite, the worldly elements will prey upon his nature. The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is “a vale of tears” from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven. What a little circumscribed straightened notion! Call the world if you please “the vale of soul-making.” Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal, which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it). I say “soul-making,” soul as distinguished from an intelligence. There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions, but they are not souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. Intelligences are atoms of perception; they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God. How then are souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one’s individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I sincerely wish to consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the Christian religion, or rather it is a system of spirit-creation. This is effected by three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years. These three materials are the intelligence, the human heart (as distinguished from intelligence or mind), and the world or elemental space suited for the proper action of mind and heart on each other for the purpose of forming the Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of identity. I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive, and yet I think I perceive it. That you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible. I will call the world a school instituted for the purpose of teaching little
children to read. I will call the human heart the hornbook used in that school, and I will call the child able to read, the Soul made from that school and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the heart a hornbook; it is the mind’s bible, it is the mind’s experience, it is the teat from which the mind or intelligence sucks its identity. As various as the lives of men are, so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, souls, identical souls of the sparks of his own essence. This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity. I am convinced that many difficulties which Christians labour under would vanish before it. There is one which even now strikes me: the salvation of children. In them the spark or intelligence returns to God without any identity, it having had no time to learn of, and be altered by, the heart or seat of the human passions. It is pretty generally suspected that the Christian scheme has been copied from the ancient Persian and Greek philosophers. Why may they not have made this simple thing even more simple for common apprehension by introducing mediators and personages in the same manner as in the heathen mythology abstractions are personified? Seriously, I think it probable that this system of soul-making may have been the parent of all the more palpable and personal schemes of redemption, among the Zoroastrians, the Christians, and the Hindoos. For as one part of the human species must have their carved Jupiter, so another part must have the palpable and named mediator and saviour, their Christ, their Oromanes, and their Vishnu. If what I have said should not be plain enough, as I fear it may not be, I will put you in the place where I began in this series of thoughts; I mean, I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances, and what are circumstances but touchstones of his heart? And what are touchstones but proovings of his heart? And what are proovings of his heart but fortifiers orALTERERS of his nature? And what is his altered nature but his soul? And what was his soul before it came into the world and had these provings and alterations and perfectionings? An intelligence—without identity—and how is this identity to be made? Through the medium of the heart—and how is the heart to become this medium but in a world of circumstances?
A Selection from the *Procunier v. Martinez* Concurrence

The First Amendment serves not only the needs of the polity, but also those of the human spirit—a spirit that demands self-expression. Such expression is an integral part of the development of ideas and a sense of identity. To suppress expression is to reject the basic human desire for recognition and affront the individual’s worth and dignity. Such restraint may be “the greatest displeasure and indignity to a free and knowing spirit that can be put upon him.” J. Milton, *Aeropagitica* 21 (Everyman’s ed. 1927).

When the prison gates slam behind an inmate, he does not lose his human quality; his mind does not become closed to ideas; his intellect does not cease to feed on a free and open interchange of opinions; his yearning for self-respect does not end; nor is his quest for self-realization concluded. If anything, the needs for identity and self-respect are more compelling in the dehumanizing prison environment. Whether an O. Henry writing his short stories in a jail cell or a frightened young inmate writing his family, a prisoner needs a medium for self-expression. It is the role of the First Amendment and this Court to protect those precious personal rights by which we satisfy such basic yearnings of the human spirit.

A Selection from *Hamlet*

Enter Barnardo and Francisco, two sentinels.

BARNARDO
Who’s there?
MASTHEAD & DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Masthead:

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Frederick Douglass
Joseph Ducreux
Mary Duffy
Marguerite Duras
Friedrich Dürrenmatt
Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr.
Ségrid Estrada
Michele Filgate
D. Foy
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Bishan Samaddar
Luc Sante
Stacy Schiff
Volker Schlöndorff
J. M. Schreiber
John Sebestyen
William Shakespeare
Zadie Smith
Stephen Sparks
Matthew Specktor
Dorian Stuber
Scofield Thayer
Jakob Vala
Antoine Volodine
Ocean Vuong
Phillip B. Williams
Walt Whitman
Dieter E. Zimmer

Author Portraits for Issue 1.4 by Chris Ames
Kōbō Abe was a Japanese writer, playwright, photographer and inventor. In this issue, Andrew Mason recommends his novel *The Face of Another* for our Frischesque section.

Renata Adler is an American author, journalist and film critic. She won the PEN Ernest Hemingway Award for her debut novel, *Speedboat*. In this issue, Matthew Specktor recommends *Speedboat* for our Frischesque section.

Jeffery Renard Allen is the author of the novel *Rails Under My Back*, the story collection *Holding Pattern*, and two collections of poetry. Raised in Chicago and now living in New York, he teaches at Queens College and in the writing program at the New School. This issue features his story “Testimonial (Supported in Belief / Verified in Fact)”

Chris Ames is a writer who also draws. He created the Dramatis Personae portraits for this issue.

A. Igoni Barrett is a Nigerian writer. A review of his novel *Blackass* appears in this issue.

Olaf Berwald is Chair of Foreign Languages and Professor of German Studies at Kennesaw State University. He is the editor of *A Companion to the Works of Max Frisch* (Camden House, 2013), and recently co-founded the Interdisciplinary Network for Narratives & Mental Health. This issue features his essay “Against Aboutness: The Corpse That Almost Got Away.”

Sven Birkerts is the author of *Changing the Subject* and nine previous books, including *The Other Walk*, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, *The Art of Time in Memoir*, and *My Sky Blue Trades*. Director of the Bennington Writing Seminars, he also edits the journal *AGNI* based at Boston University. Birkerts lives in Arlington, Massachusetts. This issue features his essay “‘That Brought Him to That Creaking Room Was Age’: Max Frisch’s Man in the Holocene”
Jean-Jacques de Boissieu was a French draughtsman, etcher and engraver. His drawing *Self Portrait (With Cows)* appears in this issue.

David Bowie was an English singer, songwriter, actor, and record producer. He is considered by critics and musicians to be an innovator, especially for his work in the 1970s. His career, spanning over fifty years, significantly impacted pop music. He is the subject of Tyler Malone’s interview with Simon Critchley and his mixtape liner notes “Who Can I Be Now?: The David Bowie Identity Mixtape.”

Shane Boyle lives in London where he teaches in the Drama Department at Queen Mary University of London. He is currently working on his first book, *The New Spirit of Performance*. In this issue, he recommends Bertolt Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* for our Frischesque section. He also translated into English for *The Scofield* Dieter E. Zimmer’s interview with Max Frisch.

Kelly Bradley is a writer based in Los Angeles. In this issue, she recommends Zadie Smith’s *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* for our On Our Nightstand section.

Bertolt Brecht was a German poet, playwright, and theatre director. In this issue, Shane Boyle recommends his play *Caucasian Chalk Circle* for our Frischesque section.

Anthony Brown is a reader and writes about books at his blog Time’s Flow Stemmed. This issue features his essay “A Month of Frisch: Notes from a Reader’s Diary.”

Lewis Carroll was an English writer, mathematician, logician, Anglican deacon, and photographer. His most famous writings are *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*. An excerpt from his novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* appears in this issue.
Will Chancellor is the author of *A Brave Man Seven Storeys Tall*. He created a dialogue concerning Max Frisch’s *Homo Faber* & Volker Schlöndorff’s *Voyager* for this issue, co-written by Kevin Jaszek.

Bill Cheng is the author of *Southern Cross the Dog* (Ecco Press, 2013). His fiction has appeared and been collected in *Guernica*, *The Book of Men*, and *Tales of Two Cities: The Best and Worst of Times in Today’s New York*. In this issue, he recommends *William Golding’s Lord of the Flies* for our On Our Nightstand section.

Scott Cheshire is the author of the novel *High as the Horses’ Bridles*. His work has been published in *AGNI*, *Electric Literature*, *Guernica*, *Harper’s*, *One Story*, and the *Picador Book of Men*. He is a Managing Editor at *The Scofield* and lives in Los Angeles. This issue features his essay “The Fundamentalist Reader: On Plotless Novels and the Meaning of Life.” He also recommends Max Frisch’s novel *Bluebeard* for our Ports of Entry section.

Jared Chipkin studied Philosophy at Florida Atlantic University. His work has appeared in *e-ratio* and *otoliths*. This issue features two of his poems.

Hélène Cixous is a professor, Algerian/French feminist writer, poet, playwright, philosopher, literary critic and rhetorician. She served as the A. D. White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University from 2008 to 2014. In this issue, Michele Filgate recommends her book *Coming to Writing & Other Essays* for our On Our Nightstand section.

Jonathan Russell Clark is a staff writer for *Literary Hub*. His work has appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Republic*, *Tin House*, and the *LA Review of Books*. He is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. In this issue, he reviewed A. Igoni Barrett’s novel *Blackass*. 
John Cotter is the author of the novel *Under the Small Lights* and a founding editor of *Open Letters Monthly*. In this issue, he recommends Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s novella *The Assignment* for our Frischesque section.

Joseph S. Cotter, Jr. was an American poet, playwright, and author. He is best known for his posthumously published play, *On the Fields of France*. This issue features his poem “Is It Because I’m Black?”

Simon Critchley is an English philosopher and teacher, who writes primarily on the history of philosophy, political theory, religion, ethics, and aesthetics. Tyler Malone interviewed him for this issue.

Ruben Dario was a Nicaraguan poet. He is responsible for the initiation of the Spanish-American literary movement, modernismo, which flourished towards the end of the nineteenth century. This issue features his poem “Nocturne.”

A. M. Davenport is a writer and an educator in Brooklyn, NY. He is also an Editor at *The Scofield*. This issue features his essay “A Likeness.”

Mark de Silva is the author of the debut novel *Square Wave*, which was released by Two Dollar Radio in February of 2016. He holds degrees in philosophy from Brown (AB) and Cambridge (PhD). After several years on the editorial staff of the *New York Times*’s opinion pages, he now freelances for the paper’s Sunday magazine, while also serving as a contributing editor for *3:AM Magazine*. He answered the Frisch Questionnaire for this issue.
Emily Dickinson was an American poet, born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She is considered to be one of the most significant American poets to date. This issue features her poem “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?”

Frederick Douglass was an African-American abolitionist, orator, author, and statesman. As an escaped slave, he became a national leader of the abolitionist movement, gaining traction with his powerful oratory and his vehemently anti-slavery writings. An excerpt from his essay “Self-Made Men” appears in this issue.

Joseph Ducreux was a French portrait painter, pastelist, miniaturist, and engraver. His portraiture was particularly successful at the court of King Louis XVI of France. His painting Self Portrait, Yawning appears in this issue.

Mary Duffy is a writer, editor, and genealogist at work on a book about the Jewish refugee crisis prior to America’s entry into the Second World War. She is an Editor at The Scofield. She interviewed Volker Schlöndorff for this issue.

Marguerite Duras was a French novelist, playwright, scriptwriter, essayist, and experimental filmmaker. She is best known for writing the 1959 film, Hiroshima Mon Amour, earning her a nomination for Best Original Screenplay at the Academy Awards. An excerpt from her novel Abahm Sabana David appears in this issue.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt was a Swiss author and dramatist. His politically driven canon included avant-garde dramas, macabre satire, and philosophical crime novels. In this issue, Aashish Kaul recommends his letter collection Correspondence for our Ports of Entry section. John Cotter also recommends his novella The Assignment for our Frischesque section.
Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr. was an American pictorial photographer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His photograph *Who Is That?* appears in this issue.

Sigrid Estrada is a photographer. Her photographs of Max Frisch are featured throughout this issue.

Michele Filgate is a contributing editor at Literary Hub and VP/Awards for the National Book Critics Circle. Her work has appeared in *Gulf Coast, Slice, Tin House, The Rumpus, Salon, Buzzfeed, Barnes & Noble Review, Refinery29*, and many other publications. In this issue, she recommends Hélène Cixous’s book *Coming to Writing & Other Essays* for our On Our Nightstand section.

D. Foy is the author of the novel *PATRICIDE* (Stalking Horse Press, Oct. 2016). His work has appeared in Guernica, Salon, Post Road, Electric Literature, BOMB, the Literary Review, Frequencies, Midnight Breakfast, the Collagist, and the Georgia Review, among others, and has been included in the books Laundromat and *Forty Stories: New Writing* from Harper Perennial. He is the author of a previous novel *Made To Break* (Two Dollar Radio, 2014). This issue features his essay “The Heart is the Record.”

Ian Francis is a British mixed-media artist, whose paintings, inspired by visual style of modern computer games, often depict violent, urban scenes. His paintings are featured throughout this issue.

Max Frisch was a Swiss playwright and novelist. His works focused on problems of identity, individuality, responsibility, morality, and politics. He was one of the founders of the Gruppe Olten. This issue is based around his work.
Róbert Gál was born in 1968 in Bratislava, Slovakia, and, after a period of study and itinerancy in New York, Jerusalem, and Berlin, currently resides in Prague. He is the author of several books of aphorisms and philosophical fragments, one of which, *Signs & Symptoms*, is also available in English translation. *On Wing*, the author’s first work of fiction, was recently published by Dalkey Archive Press. This issue features a selection of his aphorisms.

V. V. Ganeshananthan, a fiction writer and journalist, is the author of the novel *Love Marriage*, which was longlisted for the Orange Prize. She has received fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *Ploughshares*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Best American Nonrequired Reading 2014*. She teaches in the MFA program at the University of Minnesota. This issue features her fiction “Here’s The Truth.”

Juan Gelman was an Argentinian poet, publishing over twenty books of poetry over the course of his life. He was awarded the Cervantes Prize, the most prized award in Spanish literature, in 2007. This issue features three of his poems.

Sarah Gerard is the author of the novel *Binary Star* (Two Dollar Radio), and the forthcoming essay collection *Sunshine State* (Harper Perennial). She answered the Frisch Questionnaire for this issue.

Friedrich Glauser was a German-language Swiss crime writer. In this issue, Dorian Stuber recommends his novel *In Matto’s Realm* for our Frishesque section.

Nikolai Gogol was a Russian dramatist, novelist, and short story writer, considered by his contemporaries to be one of the preeminent figures of the natural school of Russian literary realism. This issue features his story “The Nose.”

William Golding was a British playwright, novelist, and poet. His infamous novel, *Lord of the Flies*, won a Nobel Prize for Literature. Golding was also awarded the Booker Prize for literature in 1980 for his novel, *Rites of Passage*. In this issue, Bill Cheng recommends his novel *Lord of the Flies* for our On Our Nightstand section.
Kaitlyn Greenidge lives in Brooklyn. Her first novel *We Love You Charlie Freeman* is due out from Algonquin in June 2016. This issue features her commentary “Quicksand: A Conversation Regarding the Max Frisch & Identity Issue” co-written by Mira Jacob.

Alison B. Hart’s writing has appeared in the *Missouri Review*, *The Offing*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, the *Brooklyn Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She is the co-founder of Pete’s Reading Series in Brooklyn, and she received her MFA from the New School. This issue features her story “We Were All Lesbians Once.”

Zachary Hatfield is a writer and journalist based in Cincinnati. His work has appeared in the *LA Review of Books*, *The Rumpus*, *DIAGRAM*, and *Electric Literature*, among other places. This issue features his essay “A Holocene Diary (15 Sketches).”

Conor Higgins is a writer and professor. He interviewed Tony Perez, Jakob Vala, and Jonathan Dee for this issue.

Dustin Illingworth is a Managing Editor at *The Scofield*. His work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *LA Review of Books*. He is a staff writer for *Literary Hub*, and an editor for *3:AM Magazine*. This issue features his essay “Ragged Voices: Reading and Writing through the Nightmare of Self” He also recommends Max Frisch’s novel *I’m Not Stiller* for our Ports of Entry section. In addition, his comic strip *Yellowed Archives* appears in each issue of *The Scofield*.

Tanwi Nandini Islam is a Brooklyn-based writer. Her debut novel, *Bright Lines*, is a finalist for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. She is the founder of Hi Wildflower Botanica, a small-bath niche perfume, candle, and skincare line. Her writing has appeared in *Elle*, *Fashionista*, *Open City*, *Women 2.0*, *Billboard*, and *Gawker*. Mira Jacob interviewed her for this issue.

Mira Jacob is the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing*. She is currently working on a graphic memoir called *Good Talk: Conversations I’m Still Confused About*. She is also an Editor-at-Large for *The Scofield*. This issue features her commentary “Quicksand: A Conversation Regarding the Max Frisch & Identity Issue,” co-written by Kaitlyn Greenidge. She also interviewed Tanwi Nandini Islam for this issue.
Kevin Jaszek is a writer. He created a dialogue concerning Max Frisch’s Homo Faber and Volker Schlöndorff’s Voyager for this issue, co-written by Will Chancellor.

Alejandro Jodorowsky is a Chilean film and theatre director, screenwriter, playwright, actor, author, poet, and musician. He is best known for his avant-garde films, which have attracted audiences with their surrealist imagery and blend of spirituality and mysticism. An excerpt from his novel Albina and the Dog-Men is appears in this issue.

Tennessee Jones is the author of the Lambda Literary Award nominated collection Deliver Me From Nowhere, a “cover” of Bruce Springsteen’s Nebraska. He is the recipient of awards from the Jacob K. Javits Foundation, the Christopher Isherwood Foundation and Hunter College, where he received his MFA in Fiction in 2010. He currently lives in Brooklyn. This issue features his essay “The Prism at Rock Bottom.”

Edyson Julio is a writer and teacher. This issue features his essay “We All Frontin’: Identity & Internalized Racism.”

Franz Kafka was a German-language novelist and short-story writer, who is widely regarded as being one of the most significant figures of 20th-century literature. His work is lauded for its fusion of realism and the fantastic, exploring themes of existential anxiety, guilt, and absurdity. This issue features his story “A Report from an Academy.”

Aashish Kaul completed his doctoral studies at the University of Sydney. He is the author of A Dream Horse & Other Stories (2014) and The Queen’s Play (2015). In this issue, he recommends Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s Correspondence for our Ports of Entry section.

John Keats was an English Romantic poet best known for his odes, including “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode to a Nightingale.” He is also known for coming up with the concept of negative capability. In this issue, an excerpt from one of his letters appears.
Paul Klee was a Swiss-German artist, whose work was heavily influenced by Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism. His paintings are featured throughout this issue.

Michael Klein is a Lambda literary award-winning poet and faculty member of the English department at Goddard College. In this issue, Ocean Vuong recommends his collection When I Was a Twin for our On Our Nightstand section.


Gaston Lachaise was a 20th-century American sculptor of French birth whose female nudes helped to redefine the form. His bust of Scofield Thayer appears on the title page of this issue.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa was an Italian writer and the last Prince of Lampedusa. He is best known for his first and only novel, Il Gattopardo, or The Leopard, published posthumously in 1958. In this issue, Stacy Schiff recommends his novel The Leopard for our On Our Nightstand section.


Simon Leys was a Belgian-Australian writer, essayist, literary critic, translator, and professor. His work primarily focused on the politics and culture of China, calligraphy, and French and English literature. In this issue, Luc Sante recommends his novel The Death of Napoleon for our On Our Nightstand section.
John Locke was an English philosopher and physician, regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment period. His work had a tremendous influence on the development of epistemology and political philosophy. An excerpt from his book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* appears in this issue.

Tyler Malone is a writer and professor of English. He is the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Scofield* and a Contributing Editor for *Literary Hub*. His writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Huffington Post*, *The Millions*, and elsewhere. He wrote the Letter from the Editor for this issue. In addition, he interviewed Simon Critchley for this issue. This also issue features his essay “Paging Dr. Freud: Prince Cracked Something Open in Me” and his mixtape liner notes “‘Who Can I Be Now?’: The David Bowie Identity Mixtape.”

Justice Thurgood Marshall was an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, serving from October 1967 until October 1991. Marshall was the Court’s first African-American justice. An excerpt from his ruling *Procunier v. Martinez Concurrence* appears in this issue.

Andrew Mason is a Brooklyn-based reader and writer. In this issue, he recommends Kōbō Abe’s novel *The Face of Another* for our Frischesque section.

Alex McElroy is a writer living in Bulgaria. His work has appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, the *Kenyon Review Online*, *The Georgia Review*, *Tin House*, *New England Review*, *Music & Literature*, and elsewhere. In this issue, he reviewed Antoine Volodine’s novel *Bardo or Not Bardo*.

Claude McKay was a Jamaican-American writer and poet. He was a seminal figure in the Harlem Renaissance, writing avidly about racism in the United States versus his experiences growing up in Jamaica. *Home to Harlem*, his most famous novel, won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature. This issue features his poem “I Know My Soul.”

Charlie Meyard is a guy who likes to draw the funnies. His comic strip *The Panel of Dead Authors* will appear in each issue of *The Scofield*. 
Mark Jay Mirsky is a Professor of English at the City College of New York. He founded the journal *Fiction* in 1972 with Donald Barthelme, Max and Marianne Frisch, and Jane Delynn, and has served since then as its editor-in-chief. This issue features his essay “Some Remarks on Stiller.” He also recommends Max Frisch’s novel *Gantenbein* for our Ports of Entry section.

Prince Rogers Nelson, best known mononymously as Prince, was one of the most prolific musicians in the history of pop music. He was the only artist besides Elvis Presley and the Beatles to simultaneously have the number one single, album, and film in the United States. He is the subject of Tyler Malone’s essay “Paging Dr. Freud: Prince Cracked Something Open in Me.”

João Gilberto Noll is a Brazilian writer. An excerpt from his novella *Quiet Creature on the Corner* appears in this issue.

Idra Novey is the author of the debut novel *Ways to Disappear*, a *New York Times* Editors’ Choice. Her poetry collections include *Exit, Civilian*, *The Next Country*, and *Clarice: The Visitor*. In the fall of 2016, she will be the Visiting Distinguished Writer in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at LIU Brooklyn. She answered the Frisch Questionnaire for this issue.

Jennifer Packer holds an MFA from the Yale School of Art and a BFA from the Tyler School of Art. She is a current second-year fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, a former artist-in-residence of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the recipient of the Rema Hort Mann Foundation Grant. Packer lives and works in New York City. Her paintings are featured throughout this issue.

Kristen Palmer is a playwright and theater maker whose plays have been seen in New York City, Los Angeles, Washington DC, and elsewhere. She is a recipient of the Jerome Fellowship and an alum of the Women’s Project Theater Lab and Soho Rep Writer Director Lab. Currently she is the Artistic Director of Oddfellows Playhouse Youth Theater in Middletown, CT. In this issue, she recommends Max Frisch’s play *The Firebugs* for our Ports of Entry section.
Tony Perez is an editor with Tin House Books. He writes about food, books, and basketball, and lives—for the most part happily—in Portland, OR. Conor Higgins interviewed him for this issue.

Li Po was a Chinese poet. This issue features his poem “Drinking Alone by Moonlight.”

Jason Porter is the author of the novel Why Are You So Sad? He answered the Frisch Questionnaire for this issue.

Gerhard F. Probst was professor of German at Transylvania University and was also on the faculty of the Technische Universität (West Berlin). He co-edited the book Perspectives on Max Frisch. He provides one of the epigraphs for this issue.

Soheil Rezayazdi is a workhorse for Columbia University’s graduate film program. He’s also a writer whose work has appeared in Filmmaker magazine, McSweeney’s, Consequence of Sound, Pop Matters, and the very publication you are reading right now. This issue features his piece “Nihilistic Password Security Questions.”

Bertrand Russell was a British philosopher, logician, mathematician, historian, writer, social critic, and political activist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950. An excerpt from his book The Principles of Mathematics appears in this issue.

Joseph Salvatore is the fiction and poetry editor for the Brooklyn Rail. He is a frequent fiction reviewer for the New York Times Book Review, and an assistant professor at the New School. He created “The Long, Easy Afternoon” cocktail based on Max Frisch’s Montauk for this issue.

Bishan Samaddar is Editor at Seagull Books, Calcutta, and an ardent admirer of Shakespeare and Star Wars. In this issue, he recommends Max Frisch’s novel An Answer from the Silence for our Ports of Entry section.
Luc Sante is a writer and critic. His work has appeared in the New York Review of Books, the New York Times, Harper’s, Granta, the Village Voice, Artforum, Bookforum, and Vogue. In this issue, he recommends Simon Leys’ novel The Death of Napoleon for our Ports of Entry section.

Stacy Schiff is the author of Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov), winner of the Pulitzer Prize; Saint-Exupéry, a Pulitzer Prize finalist; and A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America, winner of the George Washington Book Prize, the Ambassador Award in American Studies, and the Gilbert Chinard Prize of the Institut Français d’Amérique. In this issue, she recommends Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel The Leopard for our On Our Nightstand section.

Volker Schlöndorff is a British-based German filmmaker. He was a prominent figure of the New German Cinema in the mid-20th century. His film, The Tin Drum, based on the novel by Günter Grass, won an Oscar and the Palme d’or at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival. Mary Duffy interviewed him for this issue. He is also the subject of a dialogue by Will Chancellor and Kevin Jaszek.

J. M. Schreiber is a writer based in Calgary, Alberta. He runs a blog called Roughghosts and is a contributor at Numéro Cinq. His writing has also appeared at 3:AM Magazine and Minor Literature(s). In this issue, he recommends Max Frisch’s novel Homo Faber for our Ports of Entry section.

John Sebestyen is a communication professor at Trinity Christian College located in Palos Heights, Illinois. In this issue, he recommends Max Frisch’s play Andorra for our Ports of Entry section.

William Shakespeare was an English poet, playwright, and actor. He is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world’s preeminent dramatist. Excerpts from his plays The Tempest and Hamlet appear in this issue.

Zadie Smith is an English novelist, essayist, and short story writer. Her novel, White Teeth, was included in Time magazine’s list of “100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005.” In this issue, Kelly Bradley recommends her collection Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays for our On Our Nightstand section.
Stephen Sparks is a writer and bookseller in San Francisco. This issue features his essay “Seven Lives of Bluebeard.”

Matthew Specktor is the author of the novels American Dream Machine and That Summertime Sound, as well as a nonfiction book of film criticism. His writing has appeared in the Paris Review, the Believer, Tin House, Black Clock, and other publications. He is a founding editor of the LA Review of Books, and an Editor-at-Large for The Scofield. In this issue, he recommends Max Frisch’s novel Montauk for our Ports of Entry section and Renata Adler’s novel Speedboat for our Frischesque section.

Dorian Stuber teaches at Hendrix College. His work has appeared in Words without Borders and Open Letters Monthly. In this issue, he recommends Friedrich Glauser’s novel In Matto’s Realm for our Frischesque section.

Scofield Thayer was the publisher and editor of the Dial from 1920 to 1926. He is the namesake of The Scofield.

Jakob Vala is the graphic designer at Tin House. Conor Higgins interviewed him for this issue. His Montauk cover designs also appear in this issue.

Antoine Volodine is a French writer with a variety of different heteronyms, his own name being a pseudonym. His latest novel, Terminus radieux, won the Prix Médicis in 2014. A review of his novel Bardo or Not Bardo appears in this issue.

Ocean Vuong is the author of Night Sky With Exit Wounds, just released by Copper Canyon Press (2016). His poetry and fiction have been featured in the Kenyon Review, the Nation, the New Republic, the New Yorker, the New York Times, Poetry, and the American Poetry Review. He is a 2016 Whiting Award winner. In this issue, he recommends Michael Klein’s collection When I Was a Twin for our On Our Nightstand section.
Phillip B. Williams is a Chicago, Illinois native and the author of the chapbooks *Bruised Gospels* (Arts in Bloom Inc. 2011) and *Burn* (YesYes Books, 2013). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Anti-, Callaloo, Kenyon Review Online, Poetry, Southern Review, West Branch* and others. He is the poetry editor of the online journal *Vinyl Poetry*. **This issue features two of his poems.**

Walt Whitman was an American poet, essayist, and journalist. Often referred to as the father of free verse, he is one of the most influential poets in the American canon. **Excerpts from his poem “Song of Myself” appear in this issue.**

Dieter E. Zimmer is a German journalist, author, and translator. **His interview with Max Frisch has been translated into English for this issue.**