





# Quercus

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(kwûrkûs) Latin. (n.) The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub

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cover image:

**Chris Reno**

Musty\_Stache\_Plotter

*Sharpie on vellum, 14" x 18", 2016*

inside back cover image:

**Sarah Holst '11**

Madeline Island

*Pen and colored pencil, 20" x 30", 2016*

Thanks to Chris Reno.

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## Requiem for an Old Oak

Is there special providence in the fall of an oak?  
Like sparrows, if not now, then when? Though small,  
unknown, a sparrow's worth's untold: so spoke  
undaunted Hamlet, "Readiness is all."

We weren't so ready when our *Quercus macro-*  
*carpa*, two-time century-old Bur,  
great branching guardian of the patio,  
thundered down suddenly to "sullen earth."

A deluge doused its million leaves, whose weight  
gave to the countless cords of wood encased  
in miles of bark such overcharge of freight,  
one wild earth-wrenching plunge its might debased.

No more insipid squirrels squawk across  
The side yard's branched highways. Whose loss?

A Tuesday. Lighter rain brought in a gray  
reluctant dawn, as we surveyed wide-eyed  
that monstrous trunk beneath the leaf-strewn fray.  
No cheering cardinals called to note that day'd arrived.

Then Friday. Busy chainsaws whined and whirred,  
spewed dust and oil across the pock-marked yard,  
so seventy-foot oak to dust returned.  
We praise its mighty past but raise our guard.

As giant oaks must bend to gravity,  
there's promise of a sort that binds us all;

in sky and heart through gaping cavity  
some light's made manifest by each fall.

Now from new vantage point we see the moon  
and stars, and know a grief can bring some boon.

—*Nancy Hayes*

**all around us was river**

lightning cracked close and giant  
above the tent

and I sat up and flung  
my arms around  
his cool  
damp shoulders

*hold me  
if the trees fall*

—Sarah Holst '11

## a prayer to the rising night

sometimes you need  
permission to crawl  
into your den  
of blankets and bones  
wool and antlers

to lick and gnaw

finally  
to sleep

leaves scratch and skip  
underneath the streetlight

the wind lives in my jacket now

yet I marvel at the stillness  
of lights going out

—*Sarah Holst '11*

**a planet that spins**

6:00 a.m. and I am missing the sun

red pines  
shadowy sentinels  
line the road

I suck in the fog through my teeth

the world rolls over  
and the sky pales yellow

—*Sarah Holst '11*

## Sequoia

Maybe you tower over me,  
so I prepare to burn you down, building  
at your feet a halo of bone-dry twigs.  
Maybe my arms can't encompass you.

I'm holding the lit match, choosing  
between sending flames up your spine  
until pine cones spring to life  
and watching the matchstick blacken  
until my fingers blister.

—*Kayla Kuffel '16*

## Serotiny

We shouldn't be the pine cones  
whose scales bristle when heat wrinkles the air.  
We should place our seeds as we please  
instead of relying on natural disaster.

We were plummy dandelion seeds,  
spreading ourselves easily. Now,  
as conifers, we have become hoarders  
of ourselves, no longer blooming for anything.

—*Kayla Kuffel '16*

## the sun

you kissed me  
rather you asked if you could kiss me  
my breath smelled like onions  
it was your birthday  
and you were the sun  
and i was the sun  
and you wanted me to be the sun

i wasn't the sun  
i wasn't the flame  
but i was there

you asked if you could kiss me  
of course  
and you kissed me  
over the gearshift in your car  
your foot slipping from the brake  
our fingers tangling into brown and red hair  
you were supposed to be dropping me off

it was your birthday  
and you were the sun  
and you are the sun  
and you asked if you could kiss me  
(again)

i never understood weak-in-the-knees  
before your lips pressed into mine  
i think i bit your lip  
it slipped into the gap in my teeth  
(i'm sorry)

it was your birthday  
and you asked if you could kiss me  
and you looked like the sun  
a beam of light.

—*Mary Roche*

*i hate playing games i don't understand*

we are both too gracious  
to make the first move

you are too scared  
to start a forever  
i'd gamble everything  
for the smallest chance of winning

you're not ready to start  
so we will never play  
i'll play with someone else

you already said you'd be jealous  
god what an unfair thing to tell someone  
the game of love is risky and terrifying  
but i love you too much to take the first turn  
and you love me too much to play the game

"draw the permanent line" you said  
as if it would be easy  
as if abstaining from playing was just something  
that had to be done

"draw the permanent line"  
but we aren't playing pictionary  
and lines can't be uncrossed just because you say so  
turns can't be reversed  
and the game started the second you said  
you could spend the rest of your life with me  
the second you joked about marrying me  
the second i joked about saying  
yes

deep in your gut seeping into your body lungs brain  
i think the game hurts you too  
and i don't understand the rules  
but i think both of us lost.

—*Mary Roche*

## Surgeon's Hands

Washing, gowning, then each finger gliding into gloves  
as you reach for the scalpel that looks welcome in your palm.  
Your hands used to shake when I touched them,  
but today they are steady as the moonlight.

I've seen this cold table before, watched you  
cut others with such dexterity and tact,  
but I could never imagine myself lying under your knife.

I see that long blink you do, then you make your first incision.  
My skin yields to you and silent screams invade my thoughts  
and I'm as still as you said I always was when we fought.

You cut and cut with a routine I've watched you master,  
and a flicker of remorse may have crept onto your face  
though it's hard to tell with your mask on.

I watch you reach in my body and remove it all.  
I see your nervous laugh, my stupid jokes, and ourselves  
at our most vulnerable, one by one cut from me and placed aside.

Maybe you hesitated, but rather than look back at you,  
I look to those moments to see us.

—Simon Gott '16

## Late-Night Arkansas Elvis

Outside Lepanto, Arkansas,  
across the dirt road from the cemetery,  
was a drive-in movie theater.  
In the good old days, Elvis  
would call the sheriff  
and request to see an afterhours show.  
He'd pull in and catch John Wayne  
strutting across the night sky, all pilgrim  
this and pilgrim that.  
Was he dressed like Genghis Khan?  
John Wayne, I mean.  
Elvis probably would have stood out  
even in the rural Arkansas dark  
donned in 12th-century Mongolian garb.

—Jeremy Burke '99

## Shards

I write poems  
about my poems  
to understand. John Ashbery  
must eat out often. His words  
make money even when they don't  
make sense  
to lesser poets  
like me. When I close his book  
endless glass stacks  
shatter into shards  
cutting me like sleet. Blood blooms  
slowly, but completely. My death  
poem is an avalanche  
of small words  
no one else  
wanted.

—*Jeremy Burke '99*

## I Did Not Take The Tennis Court Oath

—After Ashbery (titles)

Some trees inspired  
the poems, but they also shaped  
rivers and mountains and obscured the  
sunrise in suburbia while we sang our  
three madrigals. Not even a  
fragment of the  
evening in the country could destroy  
the double dream of spring, as  
the new spirit of the south gave rise to  
three poems and  
the serious doll who painted her  
self-portrait in a convex mirror. Those were the  
houseboat days,  
as we know, the time to escape the  
shadow train like  
a wave of  
April galleons in  
the ice storm. Devour the  
haibun whole. It is not a  
flow chart for the bellhops at  
Hotel Lautreamont. We scattered  
three books across the lawn  
and the stars were shining.  
Can you hear, bird? That is the thunder of  
wakefulness, of  
girls on the run. Write  
your name here and follow them  
as umbrellas follow rain. Their wisdom is carried by  
Chinese whispers farther than wonder.  
Where shall I wander in the frozen north?

A worldly country, but not one requiring a  
planisphere. It was just a  
quick question I asked you in the  
breezeway, but we were interrupted by the  
commotion of the birds.

—*Jeremy Burke '99*

## Mother

On the day my 11-year-old body  
could no longer compress itself  
into size-0 jeans,  
she blamed potato chips and Oreos  
while scowling at my back in the mirror.  
Behind the plywood dressing-room door,  
I held my breath,  
imagined my ribcage collapsing  
like the arms of sunglasses,  
my hipbones coming together  
like two halves of a locket.  
But even with my vision blurred  
and denim bunched around my thighs,  
I still could not squeeze myself into her expectations.

So I memorized the length  
of each of her knuckles  
when she pressed her hand  
against my crooked spine,  
the way she clipped the ends off of words  
as she snapped for me to stand up straight,  
and the quiver of her wine-soaked smile  
when she looked into my eyes one night  
and said I was just like her at that age.

—*Olivia McDonald '16*

## The Neighborhood Women

We drew ourselves to beggars  
who knew the right words, but words  
follow close behind you, like children.  
They played house, they hit, they cried  
when they fell. So we dressed the cuts  
in gauze, unrolled from tiny kits.  
We took the clotted wads to the trash.  
Small animals barged in to eat peels  
and bone slime, nose around, come out  
with cheekfuls of nesting stuff. The eaves  
bore hundreds of twigs. Feathers, scraps  
littered our trees, our house beams.  
When the mending cloth all was scavenged,  
our lawns were tunneled under. The grass  
slid down to the gutters. The animals  
came and went, in families.

*—Emily Kingery*

## Bloodlines

The king stretches out today, catlike. *It's hot this afternoon*, he rumbles. *Isn't it, my lioness?* He calls her that, too many syllables. *Because you're strong, sexy*, he insists. But the name is diminutive: strong, but weaker-than; sexy, as a rule. She curls beside him, also catlike. *That's my girl*, his majesty says. The words come like a reflex.

She dampens, meaninglessly. She is reminded of storm drains mopped up. If she wonders whether it counts as pleasure, does it cancel out? Is lying down a promise, regardless? Does *lying* have deeper roots in *falsehood* or in *bed*? The questions invade the home. They stay on like appliances: they hum and hum and hum and one day, she guesses, they will need to be fixed.

This lioness is not instinctive. A true cat does not complain of heat; a true cat seeks shade. A true cat eats when hungry; she knows the gore of a limb means food. Flies gathering in the manes, near the eyes? How soundly her pride sleeps. This lioness is not literal enough, or else she is too literal. On her wedding day, the phrase *one flesh* undid her. In the scatter of birdseed, the swill of champagne, the swish of her gown: *flesh, flesh*.

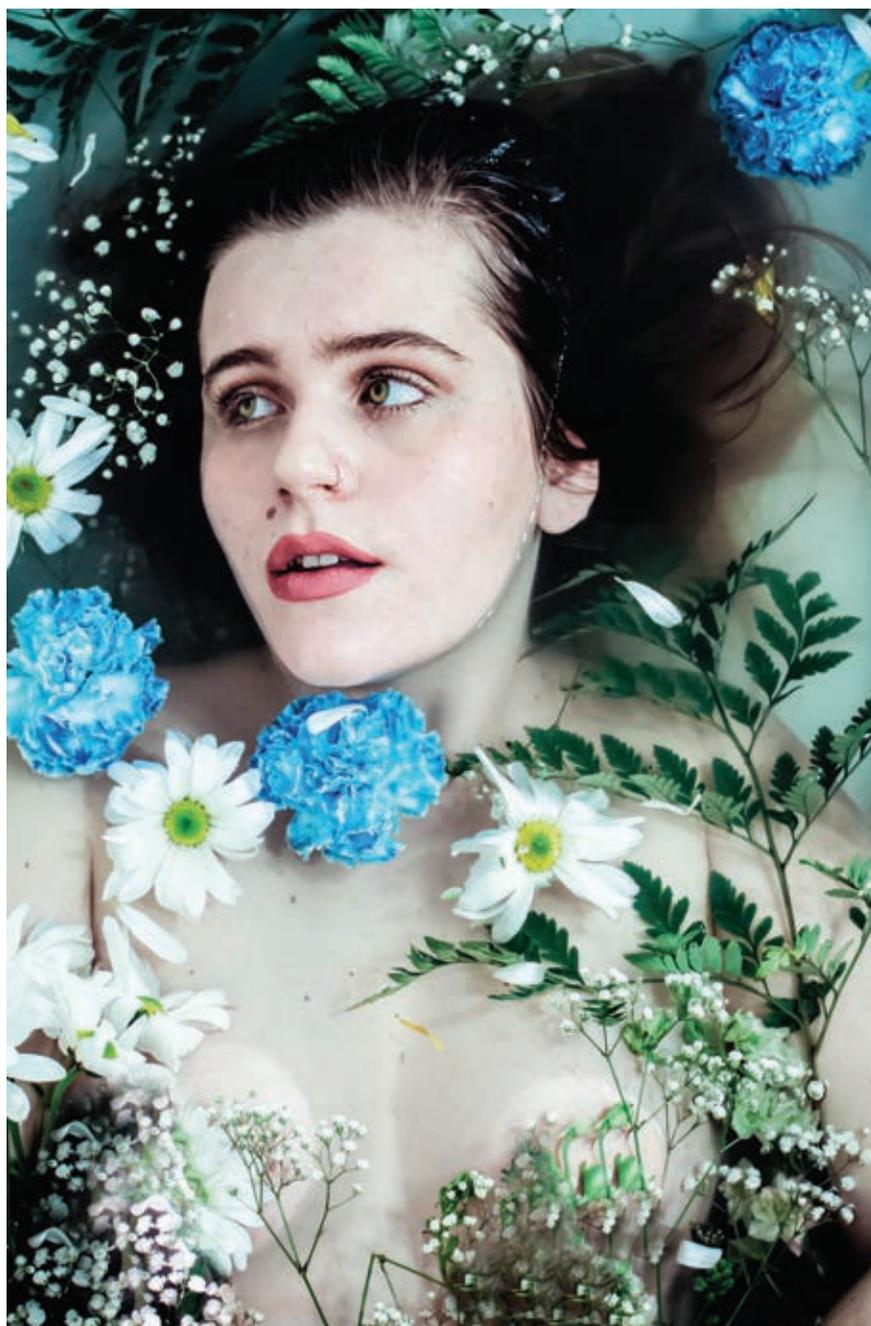
Yet her animal heart responds. She mouths the scruff of the king, pressing deep to carry him if they are chased. She is imaginative: in her sleep, they tumble in play, they soothe. But she fears her own teeth upon waking. She is afraid of a phantom pierce, an idea of blood drawn in secret. There has been too much tenderness. There will be a trickling-out from the flesh, a flourish of unretractable claws.

—Emily Kingery











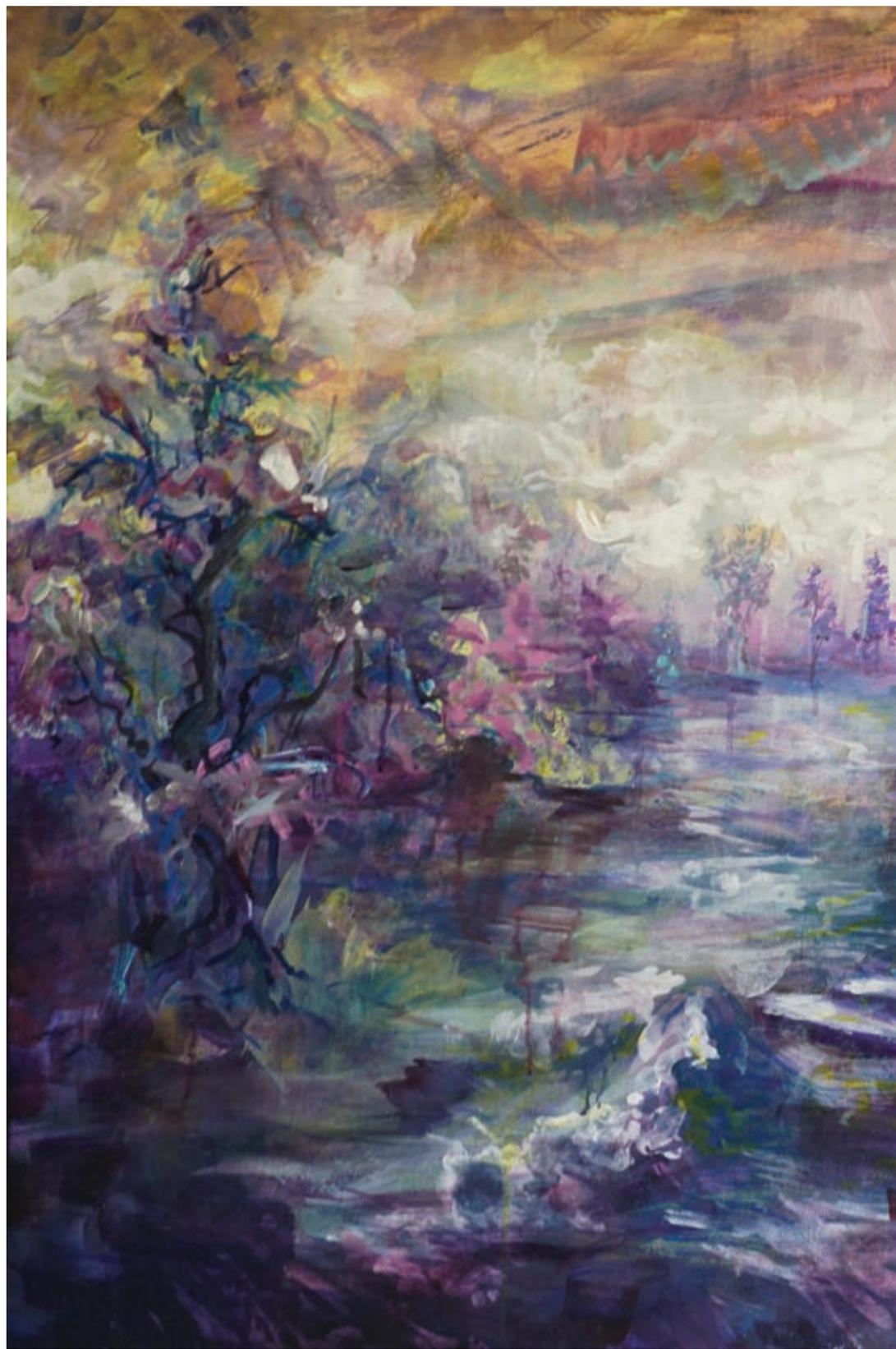








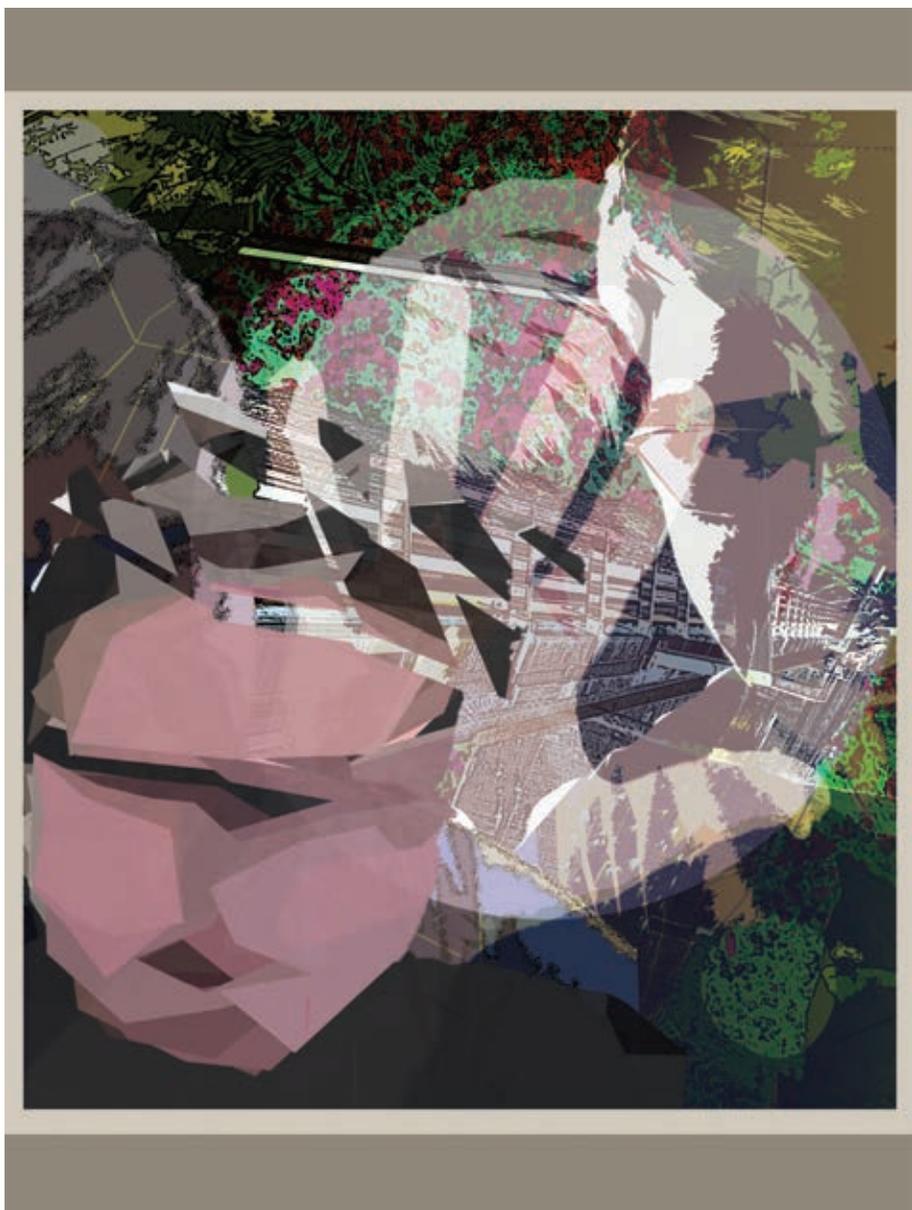


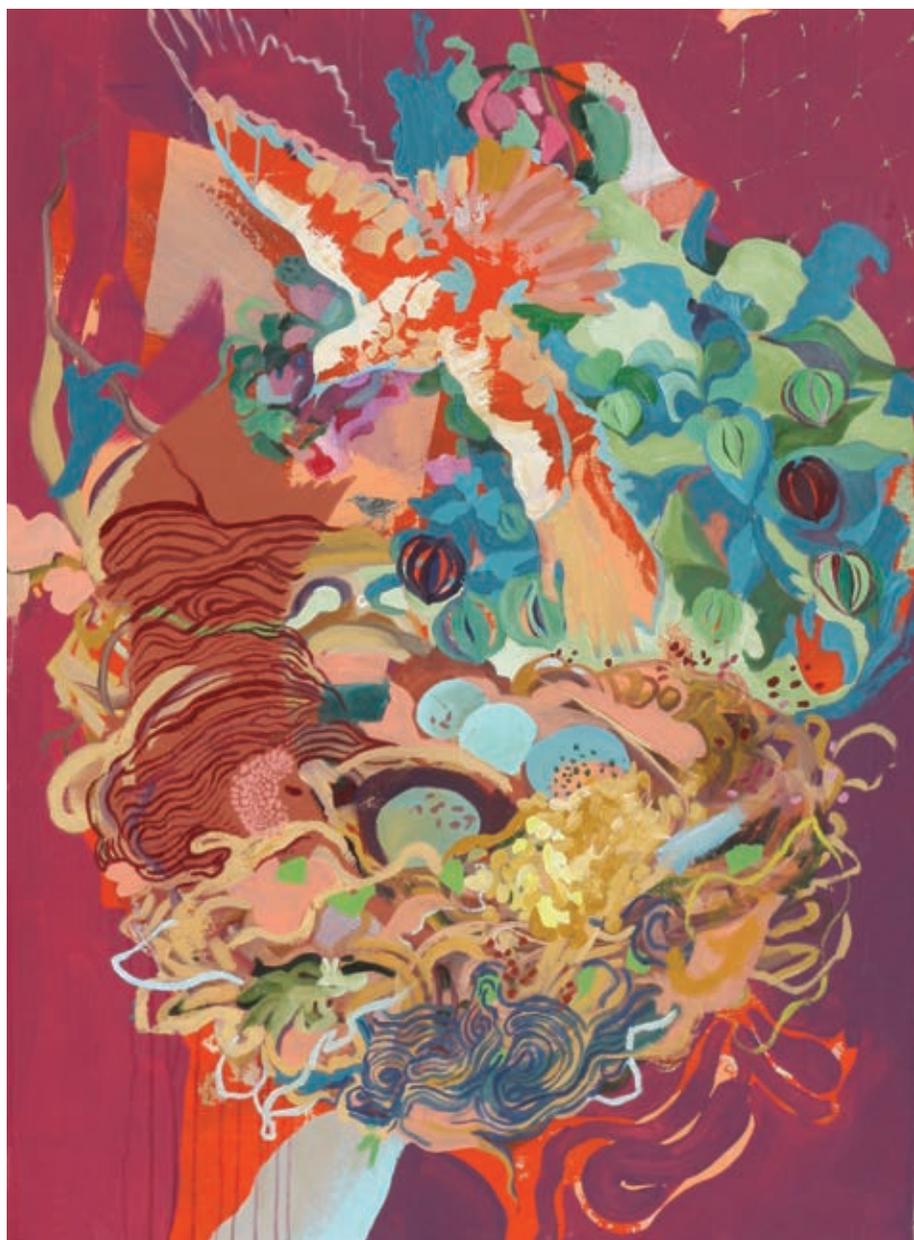


























loving heart  
commitment  
quiet strength  
gentle spirit

Bess Lives

















**THERE ARE**

**NO ACCIDENTS**

**IN ART**

**IF YOU CAN**

**MAKE UP A**

**REASON**

## Testament

Jesus meditated in gardens,  
but he also threw tables across the temple.  
Maybe I shouldn't cause a scene,  
but maybe the scene is already playing out.  
Maybe I am Peter, swinging my weapon wildly in the garden,  
saying, Don't make a scene? They're taking you to be crucified.  
At least let me have his ear.  
At least let me have something to keep in my pocket  
so I can say, Look. I was there. I was on the right side.

—*Hannah Blaser*

## Advent

*Can I have a light, madam?*  
I lower my candle over his  
and watch the wax melt sideways.  
He needs a light to read Hymn 142.  
I wonder if we weren't in pews  
and his wrinkled hands tapped me on the shoulder,  
dirty from warming them under his legs  
on the cold sidewalk  
and asked me for a light,  
would I be so willing?  
I look for God in churches,  
in candles and hymns and silence.  
I've never looked at a shaking hand  
holding a cigarette  
and seen anything more  
than something I can walk away from.

—*Hannah Blaser*

## Repentance

For a long time  
I wanted to call you my brother,  
but I've never been good with names  
or nicknames or making people feel like family,  
even when they are.

I never had a sister,  
but if I did, I'd want her to look like you.  
I wouldn't want her to cry  
alone on the bus.  
I wouldn't want people to turn their faces  
so they wouldn't have to see her.

I wanted to pray with you,  
but I was too ashamed of the skin I had picked off  
around my nails to take my hands out of my pockets.  
I wanted to wash your feet with my tears  
and beg forgiveness for all the times I've walked past.

*—Hannah Blaser*

## Impacts

The first thing I remember you saying  
is that you spent a lot of time wondering  
how that first monkey in space must have felt.  
I thought then that you must have known something  
about loneliness.

The last thing I remember you saying  
is that it was bullshit for me to think things were easy for you.  
I knew then that you didn't know anything about loneliness  
or you wouldn't be throwing me into its orbit.

I read about that monkey, and the ones after him,  
how they died of suffocation, parachute failures, explosions.  
I wish I could remember if you knew that—  
if you knew there were others after him.  
All I remember is that I thought you would always be here  
even when I told you not to be, even when my poems  
kept turning into your name.

*—Hannah Blaser*

## Desolate

When they painted over the water tower, they painted it red and black, but first they painted it purple. We were seventeen, and we didn't know why they'd decided to cover the fuzz-green mold with the color of our biggest rival. Men in white washboard tank tops would shrink above us and slap on streaks of purple as we hopscotched over the paint that fell from the sky during our cross-country runs.

We were small-town crazy, because of both the way we rebelled and the way we'd pace our bedrooms like big caged cats until we were sure we'd go mad from another Friday night surrounded by corn. Stretch up from the bed when the afternoon sun hit, walk lazily to the closet, shift eyes to the window searching for life beyond it, touch the door that led to the hallway, repeat.

Three days a week I'd sprint to the bathroom at 2:58 to change into my Subway t-shirt, run to my car, pulling my hair back as I went, and park underneath the permanent WE HAVE \$5 FOOTLONGS sign at 3:03, just in time for the afternoon rush that never came. Just in time for you to raise your eyebrows at me, *You're late*. Just in time for me to roll my eyes and tie my apron once, twice around my waist.

The trick was to know what nights our boss would stop in so we could save all the vegetable cutting for when he was watching over us. The trick was to rip the handwritten SHAKE MACHINE IS BROKEN, SORRY! sign off the ice cream window before he made it through the door. The trick was to pull you into the back, behind the mops, and beg you to talk to him so I wouldn't have to. *He doesn't like me. He doesn't like girls.*

But most nights, he didn't come, and we'd work hard for an hour, slicing through red onions, braiding bread, scooping frozen shredded steak into paper boats, and peeling apart soggy cold-cut paper that you'd fling at me until we'd done enough for Bonnie to not complain about us when she opened in the morning. Then you'd throw six white chip macadamia

nut and six chocolate chip cookies on a tray for us, pop them in the giant oven for five minutes, and take them out just as they started to melt while I sat in the pick-up window and swung my legs and told you about my boyfriend.

He was horrible. You knew. I knew. He knew. You'd come sit in the window with me, prop the hot tray on your khaki-covered knees, and tell me all those things I already knew. One humid night, after I hauled the giant black bags to the dumpsters and you'd set the door alarms and run out before they locked you in, you kissed me in the cigarette-butt gravel behind the building.

I couldn't, I said, but I did. I told my mom that we had summer hours, open 'til 11 now, and we'd sit in the parking lot and make out and talk and make out until midnight. After high school, you told me, you'd go wherever I went. *Close your eyes. What future do you want?* You'd ask, kissing my forehead, eyelashes. *Anything in the world.* And I'd tell you about an old farmhouse and a garden and a lot of faded sundresses and a wine cellar. You'd build it, you'd buy it, you'd work your whole life for it. You promised.

I had to tell him. I would tell him. I did tell him, one afternoon as he was driving me home from lunch. He was so still, I started to repeat it. *I totally understand that you'll never want to see me again after thi—*he held up his hand to silence me. *It's fine. Don't ever do it again. Don't ever talk about it again.*

I told you about it that night while we were slicing through tomatoes that were too soft to be properly sliced. The metal machine squished them to juice and spit out the skins and seeds, and the acid burned the cuts on my fingers. You didn't speak. In the parking lot you begged me to leave him. I couldn't, I said, after he'd been so understanding. You cried.

I cried. I reached out to touch your hand, to tell you I couldn't give you up either, but you jumped away from me.

You changed your work schedule. We graduated a year later, my boyfriend back from his first year at college, laughing with my family outside the double doors of the gymnasium. In the car, my mom asked if I was glad to be done. My boyfriend answered for me, *I'm glad she is*. And as we passed the water tower he commented on how stupid it looked, half red, half black, a gaudy Babel reaching toward nothing in particular. *It was purple for a while*, I mused. *I kinda like the horribleness of it now that it's done*.

—Hannah Blaser

## Erótisi

*“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.”*

—Howard Phillips Lovecraft

It was Josef Reiter who first told me that there is a book in the heart of the world. Every morning, he said, God pulls open its leather binding and reads from it, and what he dictates from that writing becomes our lives. The writing was predetermined and set forth six billion years ago. God is merely its steward—He took no part in its creation.

I met Josef in Austria while I was studying philosophy under Professor Moritz Schlick at the University of Vienna. Schlick was a brilliant man, and I learned much from him about ethics and positivism in my five years at the university, but I learned nowhere near as much from Schlick as I did from Josef Reiter. You see, Reiter was a bit of a pariah in the theology department in those years. He had performed brilliantly in his early studies at the university, and his efforts delving deeply into the question of evil had earned him a professorship at the age of only twenty-seven. It was at this point that his colleagues claimed that his mind began to deteriorate. He became obsessed with strange questions about the nature of God, and this obsession quickly devolved into an indelible fascination with the occult.

Reiter’s fellow theologians began to shun him when, in department meetings, he would stand before them and present for hours about such outlandish things as the Fountain of Youth, the Philosopher’s Stone, the Temple of Solomon, and the *Necronomicon*. When Reiter noticed their aversion to his new studies, he closed himself off, sharing his inner thoughts only with those few closest to him, and eventually with no one at all.

When I arrived in Vienna in the fall of 1931, Reiter had been shut off from the world for over a decade. He still taught and wrote, and,

according to those few that took his classes, he was still evidently a brilliant man. I read his first book, *God in the Great War: A Theological Perspective*, and was astounded by his insight into questions I had never even thought to ask. When I read through some of his other books, I realized that his writing echoed the tales I had heard about him; the books became more and more about the strangeness of the world, and less about theology, so much so that his publisher stopped releasing them altogether. Something about his intellect and the mystery surrounding his character fascinated me, so in my second year I decided to take his class on God in ethics.

I will never forget the first day I met him. I had come to class fifteen minutes early—as was my custom due to the fact that I liked to prepare my notes and questions from the previous lecture—and, to my surprise, Reiter was already there. He was sleeping in a wooden chair at the front of the hall. His long black hair was tousled and strewn about in every direction, and the short, patchy hair on his face seemed to hold bits of food. It looked as if he had been sleeping for hours. I entered the hall quietly and sat in a lower seat, waiting for the other students to arrive. Young men began to fill in, and upon each one's entering the room I noticed a look of shock on his face at seeing the haggard man who was their new professor. Once everyone had arrived, I decided to take charge, and I walked to the front of the room and gently pulled on Reiter's shoulder.

"Professor Reiter?" I said. "I am sorry, but the class has arrived, and we are curious if you would like to begin."

Reiter nearly jumped from his chair. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am a student here," I said. "Is everything okay, sir?"

Reiter relaxed his shoulders and sank back into the chair. He looked around the room and seemed to notice the rest of the students for the first time. "Oh, oh," he said, "thank you. You can sit back down. Thank you." He stood and approached the podium at the front of the room. He ran his right hand through his hair, then let both of his elbows rest on the podium. "I am sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I am afraid that I

cannot lecture on this day. Come to class next time and we will begin in a more structured way." At that, he gathered his papers and nearly ran out of the room.

For the next three weeks, I went to class and found Reiter nearly as disheveled as he had been the first time I met him. Despite this, however, he lectured through the entirety of each class, and I found it confirmed that his genius was not overstated. I learned much about God, the question of evil, the holy trinity, and the fall of man in those first weeks, but I still found myself put off and disturbed by Reiter's unseemly countenance. It seemed to me that there was something off.

As the weeks drew on, I began to grow on Reiter, and we would frequently exchange pleasantries before and after class. Once, he even invited me to talk over lunch, but I had to decline because of a prior engagement. I felt that he was comfortable with me, and I wanted to help him, because, at the time, I viewed him simply as a brilliant intellectual suffering from some sort of psychological ailment. One day after class, in my naiveté, I asked if he thought he needed to see a psychoanalyst.

Reiter laughed, something I had never heard him do. "Do you think that will help?" he said. "I wish it was that easy, friend, I truly do. But my troubles run much deeper than that. Do I really seem that distressed to you?"

I nodded.

"Well, I have to say I am not shocked by that. I have been very busy with a new question these past few weeks—a breakthrough in something that I have been looking at in different ways for quite some time. Psychotherapy would not help me at all in this regard, I am afraid. You know what, though—you should come to my house. I think I might have something that will interest you."

I agreed, and Reiter led me off the university's campus to places in Vienna I had never been before. He took me over the churning brown waters of the Danube, and once across the bridge we turned into a neighborhood that was nearly a slum. There are few places in Vienna like this—in general I found it a quality example of what a modern, sensible

city should be—but I suppose that these places exist in every corner of the world.

Old men and women stood around in doorframes as if stuck in time and stared hungrily at those who passed by. Children with their shirts torn and ribs nearly protruding through their skin ran around the elderly's ankles and pushed each other to the ground in a game of brutality. The smell of sewage, horse droppings, and spoiled food was potent, and the combination of it all nearly made me faint.

We turned down an alleyway and stepped over a ragged man lying in our path. Reiter stuck an ancient key into a small wooden door and held it open for me. I entered a small cupboard of a room filled with papers, open books, and writing on the walls. The drawings of a feverish man were plastered on every square inch of space. Reiter stumbled over a book as he entered the room.

"I suppose I should have cleaned a little," he said. "No worries, though. Even this poor condition will serve our purposes." Reiter stepped across the small room and pointed to some scribbles on the wall.

"What does this say?"

The scribble read *ερώτησι*. I squinted my eyes in the dim light. "That's Greek. The word is *erótisi*, I believe."

"And that means?"

I strained to remember my rudimentary Greek. "I think that it means 'Question.' "

Reiter clapped me on the back. "Very good. 'Question.' Why is this important, you may ask? I'll tell you; it's the title of the book for which I've been searching."

He continued to tell me the story of the book at the heart of the world, and from the very first moment, I was enraptured; despite my typical disdain for anything seemingly or even remotely illogical, Reiter made me feel as if this was a sure thing. His words gave the fantasy life, and his enthusiasm conveyed a sense of certainty in the thing's existence. He just had to find it to prove it to the world.

"This book doesn't seem like it would be a physical thing," I said.

“Why would God need to read from a book? I would expect it to be recorded in some other way.”

Reiter smiled. “Ah, you are exactly right. It was not a physical book. Until someone wrote it down, for most of history the world had no knowledge that this book existed. The first mention I found of it was in the writings of Merek the Blasphemous.”

I shrugged my shoulders. I had never heard of him.

“It’s perfectly fine.” Reiter said. “I wouldn’t expect you to know of Merek. He was little known—a thirteenth-century philosopher who was burned at the stake for his inquiries into pagan rituals. But that’s beside the point. What matters is what he wrote.” He reached into an overloaded bookshelf near his cot and pulled out an old book filled with loose papers. He slammed the book down on the table, licked his finger, and flipped through the pages. He stopped and pointed his finger at a paragraph. “Read that.”

I bent over the dusty table. “‘It would appear that in God’s ways,’ ” I quoted, “‘there is no knowledge that men can attain. I object to that statement. God is limited in wisdom and power. God is directed by things beyond His understanding. In my journeys to the depths of human knowledge, I have come across laws and information beyond my wildest imaginings. The questions stemming from these things are summed up in the preceding argument of this essay. The only true, tangible information that I have ever come across in my search, however, is found in the *Erótisi*. It is termed elsewhere the Book of Life, the Book of the Dead, and the Book of Secrets. It is even mentioned briefly by the Mad Arab Abdul Alhazred in the *Necronomicon*. It is named *Question* because it raises impossibly more questions on the nature of the cosmos. The author was transcendent, and was a person for whom I feel empathy. I do not wish the information I have learned from this book upon anyone; I could not imagine what it would be like to discover this information first hand.’ ” I finished reading and looked at Reiter. “Is this it?” I asked. “How do you even know where to begin with finding this book?”

“It is a much more difficult task than even you make it out to be,”

Reiter said. “Merek says that the *Erótisi* is mentioned in the *Necronomicon*, but I cannot find that reference anywhere. No sign of it at all. But, others have made significant headway in the search, and I feel that I am nearing it by following their trail. Various religious orders and cults have been obsessed with this thing for generations, and for good reason; I have to admit that the power this book holds is appealing. From closely following some of their rites, I believe that I am on the verge of a breakthrough.” He pulled a silver pocket watch from his trousers. “I am afraid that is all the time I have for now. I do not have much time to work. I will see you in class.”

I said goodbye and left Reiter’s hovel. It would be the last time I saw him for at least three weeks. The next several lectures he did not appear, and there was never an explanation given by the university or anyone else. No one seemed to know.

I scoured the library for hours. I wanted know more about the book. I started with Merek the Blasphemous. His writings were prototypical for a philosopher in his age, and he even seemed to remind me of Reiter in some ways. There was a sudden shift in his book *Polycestra*, written in 1274. It seems that after that date all of his writings turned drastically toward occultism. Despite all of his volumes being in our library, I found no mention of *Erótisi*, not even the paragraph that Reiter had shown me. I had to look elsewhere.

I approached the wiry, bug-eyed librarian at the circulation desk. “Do you know where I could find the *Necronomicon*?” I asked.

The librarian looked at me as if he had a crick in his neck. “That is quite a rare book, sir. What do you wish to view it for? You might need special permissions.”

“I have heard it referenced in other works,” I said. “I am seeking out information about a specific book. I believe the *Necronomicon* might contain hints as to where I could find this book, or at least that’s what I’ve been told.”

“I don’t like to go back there,” the librarian said. He hesitated for a moment and slid a key out from under the desk. “Follow me.”

He led me deep into the interior of the library where the rare and expensive volumes were kept. He unlocked a metal gate and held it open for me. We entered a dry chamber that smelled of leather and aged paper. He pulled a Latin translation of the *Necronomicon* from a shelf and laid it on the table. I waited for him to leave the room, but he stood in the corner and would not take his eyes off of me.

“Sorry,” he said, “I am not allowed to leave anyone alone with these books, especially that one.”

I sat and opened the ancient leather cover. The pages cracked and crinkled with every turn, but I did not feel that they would ever tear; the book purveyed a sense of strength and fortitude that made me uneasy.

I searched the ancient pages for nearly an hour before the librarian cut me off. I read about the Old Ones and the terrible rites practiced by their worshippers, but I found only one small passage that was in any way relevant to my search:

*Of ancient books worthy of note there are few. The Old Ones wrote little, and what little they did write is incomprehensible to us. A human mind has only once touched their minds, and his unbridled diary reveals things far in the future potent enough to break unprepared minds.*

I was sure that this passage was talking about the *Erótisi*, but it didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. I was frustrated with the dead end, and I began to think that Reiter had fabricated the whole story about the book.

I decided once more to check Merek's works once more, and I read an obscure note in his final book, *Answers*. On the last page, underneath where the writing had stopped, was a scribbled note that read, “To the seeker of questions: visit Mikael Gruber on the Ringstrasse. There you will find it.”

I couldn't contain myself. I grabbed my things and rushed out of the library. I ran to the Ringstrasse and then realized that I had no idea how to find Gruber. The Ringstrasse at that time of day was filled with foot traffic, automobiles, and horse-drawn carriages trundling down the paved

street, so I went from person to person asking if they knew anything about a Mikael Gruber, and the answer I received was a resounding no. No one I talked to that day knew anything, or at least everyone pretended not to know anything, about Gruber.

I returned to those red-brick streets every day for three days, and still I heard nothing. I was about to give up on my search when one night I saw a figure gesturing to me from an alleyway. When I approached, he sank back into the dark.

“Hello,” I said as I passed through the low entrance. “What do you want?”

A bald man wearing a short black overcoat and brown trousers stood leaning back against the wall. “Why are you looking for me?” he said.

“Are you Mikael? Mikael Gruber?” I said.

The man didn’t respond. He stood still and stared at me, tilting his head slowly back and forth as if he was stretching. “I want to know about the *Erótisi*,” I said. “I am a student of Josef Reiter. I have heard that you can tell me more.”

The man didn’t speak for a few moments. Then he nodded. “Follow me.”

He led me through the dim streets of Vienna, turning and twisting with no regard for direction. I was quickly lost, and I would not have been able to find my way home had he left me there. As we walked, the houses and storefronts became grander and more colorful; we were entering the wealthier part of the city.

We climbed a hill to a large manor perched on its top. Gruber opened the iron-gate for me, and I walked into the front garden. He pulled me roughly by the shoulder into the foyer of the manor, and we darted off into a room at the side. It looked to be a study—bookshelves lined the walls and there was a messy desk in the center of the room. Gruber sat in a chair behind the desk and looked at me. “You don’t want to know,” he said.

“What?” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Keep quiet, please. I can tell by looking at you that you don’t really want to know. I thought for a moment in the dark that you were ready,

but now I know that you are not. You must have found my name by some mistake, a fluke.”

“I don’t understand. What won’t you tell me? About the *Erótisi*?” Gruber shuffled some papers around on his desk. “Have you ever heard of the Polycestran Brotherhood?”

“The *Polycestra*? Like the book by Merek?”

“This was a mistake. It is best if you leave now.”

“Wait, wait,” I said. “You have to tell me something, please. Reiter . . . Reiter is missing. I think something may have happened to him.”

“I’ll tell you this,” Gruber said as he rummaged around in a desk drawer. I didn’t like not being able to see his hands. “You better stay away from whatever Reiter is trying to do. You don’t want to know about the things these people have found. It’s taken them hundreds of years just to be able to read it safely. Don’t think that you can do that in a matter of weeks, or even years. That’s foolish. Please leave now.”

I left the manor disturbed but now even more curious after what Gruber had told me. It came to me later that I had heard of the Polycestran Brotherhood in my studies of the ancient world, and that gave the whole situation an even more dreadful sense of reality. Despite what I had learned, after Reiter missed two more lectures I decided to pay him a visit. I feared that his mental or physical condition may have deteriorated, and if that was the case I wanted to get him help.

I approached his slum of a neighborhood. The night was particularly cool, an early harbinger of the encroaching winter months. As I passed over the Danube, the sun dropped below the horizon and the whole of the city became cold and dark. I thought twice before entering that section of the city at night, but I figured that I had come that far already, so I might as well finish my visit. To my surprise, the walk went without incident. There did not seem to be a soul on the streets, but I swore I could feel eyes peeking through blinded windows; it was as if the residents were hiding from something, and I didn’t think it was me.

As I approached the tiny alleyway that housed Reiter’s apartment, I heard a dull hum and the distant sound of a man chanting. By the

time that I got to Reiter's door, the chanting had nearly become a roar. It sounded as if there was a crowd—some twenty people—in Reiter's tiny hovel chanting "Mata Mata Tu Itoit" over and over again. I stood petrified in the doorframe, not believing what I was hearing. I had nearly summoned the courage to knock on the door when the chants reached a breaking point, and then they stopped altogether. I heard one last whisper of "Mata Mata Tu Itoit," and then silence reigned again.

I was so disturbed by what I had heard that I could not bring myself to knock on the door; I scampered back to the university as quickly as I possibly could. I did not hear from Reiter for another two weeks, and, to be honest, I didn't want to. I was frightened by what I had read and heard, and at that point I simply wanted to rid myself of the situation.

I was almost successful. I wish so badly now that I had left Vienna that day and never looked back. What happened next is difficult to approximate, and I feel that I will never know exactly what occurred.

Late at night, several weeks after I had heard the chanting in Reiter's apartment, there was a raucous knocking on my door. I contemplated leaving it be and going back to sleep, but when I heard Reiter's high pitched voice yelling my name, I ran down the stairs and unlocked the door.

Reiter rushed into the foyer and nearly threw himself into my arms. "It is beyond what I had even imagined," he said. He grabbed me by the shoulders. "It's even more magnificent than they have said. There are things . . . beyond us. I am having trouble conceptualizing it. I need to read more."

"Hold on, hold on," I said. "What are you talking about?"

"The book! *Erótisi!* I don't even know why I came here. Wait. I need you to help me home. The book is there, and, and, I can't seem to remember where I live."

I touched Reiter on the shoulder. "I think we need to get you help, Josef. I'm not a psychologist, but there has to be something else going on."

He threw off my hand. "Oh shut up! I know exactly what I'm talking about. I thought you could understand. Please, just take me home."

I thought for a few moments and then decided that he would be better off at home than in the streets. “Let’s go,” I said. I put on my jacket and overcoat and led him out my door.

As we walked through Vienna’s snow-covered streets, Reiter continued to ramble incoherently about what he had learned. “It was exactly as I thought,” he said, “but it was different too. Somehow it was greater. Far greater.” He questioned every turn I took toward his apartment, and his disorientation seemed to worsen as we went on. His speech began to slur. Just before we crossed the Danube, he began to call me strange names—Ishtar, Kikuid, and Taribum. I nearly collapsed as we neared his apartment; once again, I heard the chanting.

*Mata Mata Tu Itoit*

Reiter suddenly seemed to regain his senses, and he ran far ahead of me and pushed his door open. “What is this?” he asked. “The book!”

I rushed in after him. This is where things become obscured. The room was empty, and it was much, much larger than I remembered it. The longer I stood there, the larger the room seemed to be, until it had to have been larger than even the Volkstheater. The chanting seemed to be coming from every direction. In the center was what I assumed to be the *Erótisi*, sitting on a pedestal covered in giant thorns.

Reiter rushed toward the book. “You can’t take it from me! Not now! Not yet!”

“Stop, Josef, stop!” I managed.

He reached out and snatched the book from the pedestal. The whole room reverberated, knocking me to the ground. I could no longer see Reiter, and I could just barely hear his screams over the deafening chanting.

*Mata Mata Tu Itoit*

I lost consciousness with those words echoing in my skull. In my primal dreams I saw glimpses of hooded men standing bathed in candlelight. They were chanting at the *Erótisi* in the center of their circle. The wind picked up and the book blew open, its pages flipping in the breeze. I caught a glimpse of the things on those pages before I passed into a much deeper unconsciousness.

The next morning, I awoke in the middle of the street. Reiter was nowhere to be seen. I stumbled home and did not leave my room for the rest of the week. I glimpsed for a mere moment what Reiter had stared at head on. That alone was enough to kill any idea I had of what my life was, or was meant to be.

At my urging, the local authorities went out to Reiter's flat to investigate his disappearance. From what I was initially told, the room was normally sized, and there seemed to be nothing amiss outside of the strange books and scribbling on the walls. I later learned that a talisman had been found wrapped in Reiter's bed sheets. It was a characteristic of an ancient cult, the Polycestran Brotherhood.

They never found Reiter, but they didn't try very hard. They had heard the wild stories about him from the faculty at the university, and they concluded that he must have run away to some god-forbidden corner of the world to practice his strange religion. I didn't argue when they ended the investigation.

I struggled through my classes but managed to finish out my final term at the university. People would occasionally ask me if I knew what had happened to Reiter. I always told them I had no idea. There was no way they could even begin to understand, and I didn't want them to—for their sake.

When I finished my term, I hurried from Europe back to Boston. I found a job as an accountant in the city, and have been working there ever since. I told everyone that I'd left Austria because I'd been afraid of the rising Nazis, but I had no explanation as to why I wouldn't go back after the war. Sometimes I hear the wind blowing the leaves at night outside my bedroom window, and I swear that it is the same as that chanting I heard that dreaded night in Reiter's apartment. I stay up shuddering, thinking about what might have happened to him. I know it's pointless for me to hide. The evil isn't in Austria, or even Europe. It's not tangible or measurable. Nowhere is safe. There is nowhere to hide. The things in the book told me at least that much.

*Mata Mata Tu Itoit.*

—Andrew Leathers

## Dark Rooms

The man who answers the front door tells me Helen is not there and upon further inquiry adds, "No, she left behind neither word nor a note." He is a little man, short of stature. "Was she expecting you, sir?"

"We had made plans," I say. "Just last week."

"Oh, so sorry." When he bows in apology, I see the crown of his head is balding. He straightens and asks, "And your name, sir?"

"Charles Weatherby," I say, like a man not used to forgotten appointments.

"Would you care to leave her a short letter? We have stationery."

I tell him that is not necessary. "Who are you," I ask. "In relation to Helen, I mean?"

"I'm just the housekeeper's husband," he says in a self-deprecating tone.

"Helen didn't mention a housekeeper," I say.

"My wife has been in the owner's employ now for near fifteen years. Our own children have grown right in this very house. We know the house well, sir."

This time when he calls me *sir*, I feel a professional distance placed between us, a curtain falling more than a wall built. I've been elevated, if only a little, by convention. He's no longer answering questions; he's become a gatekeeper to his wife's housekeeping. I take a step back.

"Are you certain you wouldn't care to leave a message? Or wait in the parlor? Her . . ." He's become lost for words. I wait, watching him knot and unknot his fingers. ". . . appointments," he finally says, "are important to her."

"Does she have many appointments?"

"No, sir, not many. Occasionally people will call. People she's met. Like you, sir. As I've said, they are important to her."

"Maybe I will take the stationery," I say. "And while I'm composing my note, she may well return."

The little man takes a step inside, opening the door wider. "I'll show you to the study. The light is good there, and the writing table should be well suited."

I follow him to this study he considers so ideal. The house is dark, and coming in from the outdoors requires my eyes to adjust to the shad-

ows. As if reading my mind, the little man says, “We keep the lights off during the day. The owner prefers it that way.”

“The owner lives here?” I ask, surprised. When Helen implied she lived in a rooming house, I assumed the owner lived elsewhere.

“Oh, yes, certainly. His presence is never far, although we rarely see him.”

“Rarely, you say?”

He nods as if burdened. “He will emerge on occasion, but for the most part, we bring him his meals and the paper. Clothes he wants washed and pressed he’ll leave outside his door.”

“Helen never mentioned him,” I say, “but then we didn’t visit long.”

“He keeps to himself. Like I said, we rarely see him.”

“In fifteen years?”

“We knew this would be the case when he hired us. He told us that over time we might forget he’s even around, but that hasn’t happened. We know—believe me, we know.” And with that he turns to the door, almost as if to see if someone might be listening. “Well, here we are. See, if you sit there you’ll have enough light.” He turns his chin in the direction of a small, round table near the window where a pool of muted light covers the surface like a cloth.

“And the stationery?”

“You’ll find that and a pen in the drawer. Anything else, sir?”

“Yes, there is. How many boarders live here?”

“Boarders, sir?”

“I ask because it seems too quiet to be a home for boarders. Not the usual milling about, doors closing, idle conversations—that sort of thing.”

“I believe I’ve already said the owner enjoys his quiet.”

“You have. Still, it’s hard to get others to always comply, especially young women.”

He shakes his head, and says, “I’m afraid you are mistaken, sir, about this being a boarding house.”

“I’m sure Helen left me with that impression. In fact, she mentioned someone by the name of Rose. Another boarder, I believe. One that she’s fond of.”

“Rose?” he repeats, rubbing his chin in thought.

“Helen said they got along well. Affectionately called her Rosie.”

“She mentioned Rosie?”

“Said she relied on her. On Rosie.”

“Rosie,” he repeats, again rubbing his chin. “Did she say anything else?”

“Only what I told you. You see, she had this tickle in her throat and started coughing. Said she needed to see Rosie.”

He shakes his head like that of a man hearing bad news. “Sorry, sir. My mind, you see. Ever since the war. Things come and go.”

“But you haven’t forgotten Helen, have you? You remember her, right?”

“Helen, of course. She’s not here. I mentioned that.”

“Come on, man,” I say, feeling a growing irritation. “That’s why I’m in this room. That’s why you’ve given me the use of the table. The paper. The pen.”

“Of course, sir. Now, will that be all? I’ll return in a few minutes to see if all is well.”

When the little man departs, I sit, open the drawer, and extract one plain sheet of embossed paper and an ink pen. I pause over the sheet, trying to form my words, when I realize my chat with him has unsettled me. Helen suggested this day and time, I know. Although said in passing, I recall her telling me she lived in a room. Her exact words—*I live in a room, Charles*. How could I not think she meant a rooming house? Was I so infatuated that I simply failed to listen? That what she said became lost among her charms, the curls upon her shoulders, and her complexion, a shade of cream mixed with embarrassed reticence? That, and the unexpected way we met?

I turn back to the sheet, poise the ink pen over its daunting blankness, and make several attempts to touch tip to page.

When a sudden draft cools my neck, I turn to see whether the door is open. I expect to find the little man there, or even Helen back to receive me. Indeed, the door is open but there is no one. Could it have been the wind? I look outside, but see no leaves moving, no flags waving.

I get up to stretch. It’s obvious I’m not ready to compose. The little man was correct about the quiet. There simply is no sound. No floor-

boards creaking, no doors opening or closing, no housekeeping noises of vacuuming or mopping. I start to look down the hall, when the little man appears in the open doorway, startling me.

“Is all well, sir?” he inquires. He must have seen my surprise.

“Of course.” I return to the writing table and sit. In truth I’m relieved to see him. “You said your wife is the housekeeper?”

“For the last fifteen years, sir.”

“And is she on duty today?”

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

I begin to explain about the quiet but decide not to. He would simply remind me that he had said as much earlier. “Nothing. Just wondering.”

“And your note, sir. How is that progressing?”

“Fine.”

“Very well, then. I did mention notes are important to her, didn’t I? She enjoys reading them. She saves them.”

“Explain yourself. About the notes.”

He clears his throat, pauses, becomes apologetic. “Sorry, sir. Sometimes I just say things. My wife tells me it’s become a problem. But I’m not concerned. Tea, sir?”

“Please. And lightened with cream.”

Alone, I decide the house is so quiet due to superior construction. I get up, pace, the tea now giving me something else to wait for. On each wall at least one thing hangs that was previously alive. There’s a deer’s head, a large pheasant, an immense snake, a family of doves. I pause before a bookcase filled with dark volumes with titles stamped in gold leaf. Then it comes to me. Would not the quiet allow me to explore the house? And should the little man find me walking about, could I not say I am looking for the lavatory?

After several minutes and no sign of the little man, I’m ready. The door, heavy and well-oiled, opens without sound. To the right is the foyer. The front door’s oval glass is the hall’s only source of light. Looking left is like staring into the mouth of a cave. I cannot make out where it ends or what is required to get there. Across from me is the staircase that ascends

into darkness. Shall I leave? Come back another day? Wait for Helen on the porch? Instead I turn left into the cave's mouth, keeping my hand on the wall to help guide me. My steps become smaller and smaller, as is practical when one is crossing unfamiliar territory without light.

The wall guiding me ends, and I realize I've reached an intersection. When I peer right, I see a band of light coming from beneath a door. *The kitchen?* I wonder. I make my way toward it when the silence breaks. I hear what sounds like a dish being stacked on another dish. Someone is there, I know. The little man or his wife preparing my tea? I am about to open the door when the light band disappears. I listen but hear nothing.

I return to find the study as I've left it, except now a tea cup and saucer is on the writing table. Has the little man gone to find me?

The tea is tepid as if it has been there for some time. I must find someone, even the owner, if that is possible. I must know what is going on. I return to the door, and when I open it, I see the little man. I step back.

He notices my surprise and asks, "Is all well, sir?"

I take a deep breath, trying to relax. "Of course."

"I hope the tea is not too cool. The owner likes his no more than room temperature. I'm afraid that's how we always have it now."

"Tell me about this owner. Has he lived here for some time?"

"Before my wife and I arrived fifteen years ago . . ." he gives a shrug indicating either he does not know or does not want to say. "His research took him far afield, I understand, to many exotic places. But he doesn't speak about it now. He's prone to melancholia, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

The little man clears his throat and looks behind him, no doubt sorry to have said so much. He steps closer and whispers, "The owner is a private man, but it's with him all the time. It's why he prefers quiet."

"And you? Where were you before you arrived?"

"The country, sir. I was a farmer, and for many years happy. Then it happened, over time, worse and worse every year."

"Not sure what you mean," I say.

“The drought. You probably do not remember. You were very small then. And what can you say about a drought, really? News like that is soon forgotten. So, we came to the city, like so many, and found this position. An adjustment, of course.” That shrug again. “Your note, sir. Need more time?”

“I’m afraid I’ve not made much progress. Keep hoping she will return.”

“Yes, well. One never knows. Will there be anything else?”

When he leaves, I count to one hundred before I return to the door and open it. I pause, listening, but it’s no use. There simply is no sound. I must take a chance, trusting the quiet will be more friend than foe.

I no longer feel compelled to disguise my footsteps. As I climb the stairs to the second floor, I remember something Helen said to me that afternoon we first met. It was Sunday in the park, and I was alone on the bench by the lake when she sat beside me. She contented herself with watching the geese. We exchanged pleasantries: the weather, the shortening of the days, the cool evenings, the coming autumn.

Then out of nowhere, she said, “It’s a horrible thing to be forgotten.” I turned, not knowing what she meant, and saw that she was watching a goose who had paddled far from the others.

Delighted as I was to be near her, I said, “But who could ever forget you? Trust that I won’t forget this afternoon.”

She tossed her last bit of crust to the goose and laughed. Touching my arm, she turned, blushed, said, “I do get silly sometimes. Please, pay no attention to me.” She sighed, then began to cough. A little cough at first, as if a tickle had just appeared in her throat. Then hard enough for her to turn and pull a handkerchief from her sleeve.

“Is there anything I can do?” I said. “Water?” She waved to say there was nothing.

When the fit ceased and calm returned, she stood, readying herself to leave. “I need to return to my room and find Rosie,” she said, trying to smile. “My good friend Rosie.”

Standing too, I said, “I’d like to see you again. We can come back, feed the geese, resume our conversation.” I pointed to the recipient of her

last bit of crust. "I'm sure your new friend will remember you."

She touched my arm again. "That would be lovely." Then we made these plans to meet. The week at work seemed to last forever.

The light from the front door fades the higher I climb until at the top I'm in darkness. The little man said the owner lives upstairs and never leaves, so he has to be here. I proceed by sliding one hand along the wainscoting. I come to a door. Locating the doorknob, I start to open it, when I stop and knock gently instead, holding my ear to the door. Hearing no sound, I knock again, louder, and wait. I turn the doorknob but find it locked.

I sense rather than know that a door opens behind me. A breeze on my neck, maybe, or an instinctual awareness that something is different. I turn with the caution of one entering a dark cavern, when my knee bumps something, and I hear an object hit the ground.

"Who's there?" a woman's voice calls. I feel the ground for what has fallen, find a small object, and place it in my coat pocket.

"Who are you?" I hear, as someone comes around a corner holding a light. "Identify yourself." The little man's wife, I suspect. The housekeeper.

I smile, pretending innocence, confusion—someone who has made a mistake. I remain calm, and say, "I'm looking for the lavatory."

"No one is allowed up here. You must have been told."

"I had no such instructions."

"What do you want?" she demands. The light remains in my eyes. All I can see of the speaker is a halo of hair and an indication of size. Taller than her husband, I see, and stouter.

"Are you the housekeeper?" She does not answer. "Your husband mentioned you." Still nothing. At last, I say, "I'm here for Helen. We planned to meet today."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

A noise from the dark hallway causes her to turn. Her light reveals a door partially open. In the doorway I make out the figure of a tall, gaunt man holding onto the door frame.

"Someone say 'Helen'?" he says, his voice more a rasp than a whisper.

“Did I hear someone say ‘Helen?’”

The housekeeper turns back to me. “See what you’ve done? You’ve upset him.”

Before I can say anything, another light appears behind me. The little man has come upstairs. “Come back down, sir,” he says. “You should not be up here.”

The housekeeper says, “He tells me you did not give him instructions.” She sounds accusatory, the one in charge, the one whose orders have been ignored. “And now look what’s happened.”

“I must have,” he pleads. “I explain the rules to everyone.”

“He is the second one this month. Do your job, Henri.” She departs, her lamp illuminating the dark hall before her. The old man’s door is now closed. I see other doors and a hallway. She stops and says, “You haven’t been to the apothecary like I instructed, have you? The vial remains where I left it. Don’t forget this time.” She continues down the hall, the light growing faint before disappearing.

“Come, sir,” the little man says. But his voice lacks authority, as if he’s been diminished by her reprimand.

“So, that’s your wife,” I say. “The housekeeper.”

“Sir, you must come. You heard her. There are rules.”

“Is she always like that? I mean, belittling of you?”

He takes no offense and does not defend himself. “Her job is demanding. It’s a large house with many rooms. And the owner likes things a certain way.” He waves the light in the direction he wants me to go.

“Come, sir. This way.”

“Was that the owner?”

“He’s been anxious lately.”

“He mentioned Helen. He knows her.”

He shrugs. “Yes, well . . .”

The little man returns me to the study. “Your note, sir. You haven’t started.” He seems disappointed.

I sit at the table. Something has happened. Helen must have changed her mind and left instructions for the help to remain quiet. Yet she had

acted agreeable when we made our plans. Even said she looked forward to it. I pick up the pen to write.

“That’s better,” the little man says. He remains near the door, watching, making sure I don’t wander.

The letter’s tone eludes me. I’m not sure how to start. Upset? No, that will not do. This may well not be her fault. Regret? Maybe. Sorry it did not work out as planned? I settle on a short note, something expressing disappointment, but desiring to try again, meeting, perhaps, somewhere other than this house. When I finish, I re-read my words.

“Sir,” the little man says, startling me.

I turn, bothered by this interruption. “What is it?”

“A message has arrived, sir. For you.”

“A message? From where?”

“Brought just now, sir. Addressed to you. Maybe this will solve your mystery.”

He hands me the envelope. It’s sealed and my name is written in a light, delicate hand. I open it and turn for privacy. The note is signed by Helen, but I don’t know her handwriting. She explains being detained, the cause of which is not shared. Like my own note, I detect disappointment. Unlike mine, she offers no possibility of another meeting.

“Is all well, sir?”

“At least there is an explanation.”

“That must be a relief,” he says. “Will you be leaving now, sir?”

I stand. “Yes, there appears to be no use in waiting.” He nods in agreement and, I suspect, in relief. I hand him my finished letter.

“I’ll make sure Helen receives this. She will be pleased.” He shows me out, handing me my hat as I depart—neither of us bidding the other a good day.

Outside, the air carries the cool crispness of a mid-fall day, the kind of day it was when Helen and I met at the park. She expressed a love for such days then, enjoying them all the more knowing they would soon turn bitter with cold wind and snow.

“A death’s watch,” I recall saying, an expression I remember my

poor, departed mother used to describe autumn.

She had turned back to the pond and watched as the lone goose found her last bit of crust. “No, death has already happened. The leaves, so beautiful now, have already gone. They just haven’t fallen.”

As I walk away, reflecting on my disappointment and determined to see Helen again, I hear someone call my name. I look up and am surprised to see Crawford Lynch coming toward me. An acquaintance from the office and several years my junior, he is a bachelor like me. We have on occasion met for drinks, and I have twice invited him to the country for bird hunting. I believe he relies on me to learn the customs and expectations of the firm. He is pleasant enough, and we get along well, but his presence here, far from his usual haunts, surprises me. He too acts surprised.

“Charles,” he says, and we shake hands.

“What brings you out this way, Crawford?” I ask. “Exploring parts unknown?” He seems caught off-guard, as if I’ve just walked in on him doing something he didn’t want anyone to see.

“Something like that,” he says. “And you?”

Now I want to evade, to say something reasonable but short of the truth. “A family visit,” I say. “My elderly aunt,” and I point up the street to no house in particular.

“Well,” he says, “we must get together soon. There’s so much to discuss.”

“Yes, let’s do.” Then he pauses, looks up the street, and says, “Charles, I’ve stumbled upon something exciting and unexpected. How it unfolded is truly remarkable. Maybe I’ll have good news to share, then. I hope so, anyway.”

An uneasy knot forms and twists in my stomach. “Very well, then. Let’s plan on it.”

We part, and after proceeding another half-block, I stop near a well-trimmed spirea bush and pretend to check the time. Holding my watch, I turn and look up as if taking the measure of the late afternoon. Enough leaves from the oak tree have fallen to allow me to see Crawford on the porch of the house from which I’ve just come. The door is open and he is talking to someone—the little man, I assume. After several moments,

Crawford stops turning his hat brim through his hands and his shoulders sag. Then he says something. The door opens wider, and Crawford enters the house.

I return to the sidewalk, trying to understand. Had Helen ignored me, knowing Crawford would be arriving? Had she only been teasing me that afternoon? I consider going back to confront her, when upon returning the timepiece to my pocket, I find the object I'd taken from the second floor. I see it's a brown, glass vial—something used to hold a potion, a remedy of some kind. The handwritten label reads *Cough Suppressant*, and below that, *laudanum*. This must be the vial the housekeeper wanted taken to the apothecary. Then it comes to me—the nearest apothecary is Roseauer's. Roseauer? Rosie? Could it be that she was not a boarder but Helen's playful name for her medicine? I begin to understand—her complexion, the cough, her sad, faraway countenance, even collecting notes from suitors she'll never have. The White Plague.

While turning the vial over in my palm, something catches my eye. On the second floor—the same floor on which I had just been, in a room the housekeeper may well have come from and returned to—a curtain moves. The room is dark, of course, like the entire house. But the southern light from a falling sun illuminates for a moment what may well be fingers holding the curtain to one side. Behind the fingers, I convince myself, is a strand of curls and the contours of a face. I raise my hand to wave when a dark cloud moves to conceal the light. When the cloud passes, the curtain is in place and the house is back in shadows.

—James O'Gorman



