

# READINGS

[Essay]

## COLOR THEORY

By Frank B. Wilderson III, from *Afropessimism*, which will be published this month by Liveright.

**I**n February 2001, I attended the Race Rave conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with my wife, Alice. Between two hundred and three hundred activists, scholars, students, and others met “to explore racism and the intersections of oppression, to promote reparations and healing, and to develop the framework for a truth and reconciliation process in the United States.” It was billed as the first of a series of such gatherings on college campuses across the country.

The organizers told us to break into groups that reflected how we were seen by the police. This meant that there would be a white group, a black group, a brown group, a red group, and a yellow group.

The non-black people of color were angry. They demanded a say in how they were categorized. The organizers said that being pigeonholed was the whole point: that the police *treated* you as a color and ignored your cultural and ethnic singularities, and that the purpose of the exercise was to assume the police’s gaze and see what came of the discussion. “That’s the exercise!” “Let’s get to it!” “Right on!” roared up from the blacks.

And it might have gone down like that. But something unexpected happened. One group of

people who had formed part of this scrum of discontent became more vocal than the rest. But they didn’t voice their objections on the basis of cultural integrity. In fact, they mobilized the same term as the organizers: “race.” They were biracial (one black parent and one white parent) and they didn’t want to be “pigeonholed” as black (though they didn’t say that they would be just as irate to be “pigeonholed” as white).

The organizers were stunned. Stymied. But not by the argument. It was the affect, the bodily performance of the biracial contingent. They postured and gesticulated in a manner more stereotypically “black” than biracial. In other words, their loud talk, their indignation, their runaway-slave rage made the organizers quake. It worked like a charm.

The organizers gave the biracial people a room of their own.

**E**ach group was given the same sheet of paper with the same instructions and discussion topics. We were to come up with ways to talk about what happened in our groups with our “allies,” when we returned to the plenary session ninety minutes later.

The first thing the blacks did when we were alone was to tear the sheet up and throw it away. We realized that the regime of violence that subjugated us could not be reconciled with the regime of violence that subjugated our so-called allies. What had happened in the auditorium confirmed this. In other words, what the organizers had prompted was a realization that racial oppression has two, not one, regimes

of violence: the violence that subjugates the subaltern and the violence that subjugates the slave, or the black.

Once we had liberated ourselves from the constraints of having to make our suffering analogous to the suffering of the other people of color, something truly profound occurred. For me, someone who was beginning to move on from Marxism to what would later be called Afropessimism, the session was instructive because I was able to see and feel how comforting it was for a room full of black people to move from a discussion of the spectacle of police violence to the banality of microaggressions at work and in the classroom, to the experiences of chattel slavery—as if the time and intensity of all three were the same. No one, absolutely *no one*, said, “Hey, hold on,” for example, when a young woman said that she

[Inquiries]

## SORRY TO BOTHER YOU

*From purposes of phone calls made by New York City residents to 3-1-1, a help line for information and non-emergency government services.*

- To discuss a neighbor who hangs underwear out a window to dry
- To obtain information about dry cleaning
- To ask whether cat litter is recyclable
- To ask about renting a wastebasket
- To ask whether Medicaid can be used to pay for a cat’s surgery
- To inquire on what to do with an unwanted pet
- To ask whether a dog can be claimed on income taxes
- To obtain information about tax fraud
- To ask how to get a television screen to stop displaying “stand by”
- To determine who won *American Idol*
- To ask how to check text messages
- To report an email scam
- To make a noise complaint about a sound coming from a refrigerator
- To ask how to dispose of a refrigerator
- To inquire about X-ray machines
- To report a naked neighbor
- To obtain information about becoming a lifeguard
- To ask whether knowing how to swim is a prerequisite for becoming a lifeguard

was forced to breastfeed all the white people at her job like she’d done on the plantation. No one said, “You’re speaking metaphorically, right?” The room simply said amen and right on. It was a collective recognition that the time and space of chattel slavery shares essential aspects with the time and space—the violence—of our modern lives.

Folks cried and laughed and hugged one another and called out for the end of the world. No one poured cold water on this by asking, “What does that mean—the end of the world? How can you say that? Where’s that going to leave us?” Or, “How will we make sense of *the end of the world* when we go back to speak with our ‘allies?’” The dangerous fuse of the black imagination had been lit by nothing more than the magic of an intramural conversation. No one wanted it to end.

With thirty minutes left, a sense of dread set in. Someone floated the idea of not returning, of just going home. But someone else came up with a better idea: we would go back in and refuse to speak with them. Not a protest, just a silent acknowledgment of the fact that we would not corrupt what we had experienced with the organizers’ demand for articulation between their grammar of suffering and ours.

Now there was movement outside our door. We looked up, thinking that the organizers had recalled us early. But when we opened the door we found the entire group of biracial people, people whose hyperbolic “blackness” had rescued them from our room. They were greeted with grunts and cold stares. One of them asked if they could come in. Silence.

I broke the silence by saying, “You never left.”

Their discussion had centered on the presumption that they could access the social capital of civil society. Their talk had ranged from what a special place on the U.S. Census questionnaire could mean for their mobility and their quest for recognition on what they had described as their “own terms,” to the gut-wrenching conflicts they experienced in the tussle of allegiance in their individual family lives. In other words, how do we honor both parents, white and black? But this discussion didn’t have the gravitas needed for ninety minutes; eventually, they turned to police violence. It wasn’t long before they realized that to meditate on this through their biracialism wasn’t going to get them anywhere. No cop had ever said, “Look here, I’m going to shoot you in the shoulder and not the heart, because you’re only half black.”

**W**hen we returned to the plenary session, the room took note of us—all of us. The



Kosar, a heat-transfer print on khaddar with gota patti and zardozi embroidery, by Spandita Malik, whose work was on view in September at the Parsons School of Design, in New York City.

organizers asked us who had been designated as the spokesperson for our group.

“We have decided to remain silent,” I said.

“Can you say *anything*?”

I said all that I had been mandated to say: “We had a good session.”

“Well, we can see that!” they said. Then they asked the biracial group to speak. One of them said, “We ended up joining the black group.”

The room was puzzled. But no explanations were forthcoming.

It went south from there. The whites reported on their bric-a-brac dialogue. The white women said it was important to divide the room along gender lines and have a discussion about how women fare under patriarchy. Several people said they were Jewish and that perhaps they should have pressed the organizers for their own room. One white man said that it was important for them to do a round-robin in which each person should name the state they lived in before they came to California. One by one, they began to shout the names of states where they were born and raised, and they would

have descended into personal narratives had Alice not exploded.

“This doesn’t have a damn thing to do with our relationship to the institution of policing! Let’s get back on track.”

But no one was willing to get back on track. Alice was shut down because the exercise threatened the most constitutive element of whiteness: white people *are* the police. At a deep, unconscious level they all intuited the fact that the police were not *out there* but *in here*, that policing was woven into the fabric of their subjectivity. No wonder that the discussion veered away from a conscious encounter with this horrifying aspect of their structural position and became a chorus of declarations about gendered identities and stories about their sojourns to California. And, conversely, no wonder that the black people, in their room, understood that no kind of psychic or material immigration would ever be expansive enough to open such doors to them—to Alice and her people. But for the non-black people of color, access remained a possibility.



© THE ARTIST COURTESY GITTERMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

"Illinois," a photographic collage by Kenneth Josephson, whose work was on view last month at Gitterman Gallery, in New York City.

The discussions among the Asians and Latinos and Native Americans had begun with questions of violence and ended with questions of access: immigration policy, Spanish in schools, Indigenous casinos, and sovereignty. It was clear: the articulation was between the whites—whose access to civil society was so unquestioned that they had no reason to question the regime of violence that fortified it—and their junior partners, who were anxious for expanded access. None of these groups were antagonistic toward civil society itself. What they embodied were gradations of marginalization.

The organizers had divided people up on the basis of their color—how the gaze of the police perceives them. But only one group of people is *essentially* subjugated by this kind of gratuitous violence. The blacks. The slaves. For all the other groups of people, there is a certain contingency that interrupts, as well as makes legible, the violence of the state. These people must transgress, or be perceived to transgress the law before the anvil of state violence falls on their heads. For the blacks, the slaves, no notion of transgression is necessary. The pleasure of maiming black bodies is its own reward. It is this pleasure that divided the conference not into five colors, but into two species: blacks and humans.

But the non-black people at the conference could not comprehend or explain this a priori species division between the human and the slave. The black people and, ultimately, the biracial (black) people knew this, if only intuitively. But the terrain wasn't fertile enough for that knowledge to flourish. The black people were shackled to the cognitive maps of their well-meaning masters.

[History]

## BECOMING HUMAN

By Roberto Calasso, from *The Celestial Hunter*, which will be published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Translated from the Italian by Richard Dixon.

**I**n the time of the Great Raven even the invisible was visible. And it continually transformed itself. Animals, at that time, were not

necessarily animals. They might happen to be animals, but sometimes they were humans, gods, lords of a species, demons, ancestors. And humans weren't necessarily humans but could also be the transient form of something else. There were no tricks for recognizing those that appeared. They had to be already known, as one knows a friend or an adversary. Everything, from spiders to the dead, occurred within a single flow of forms. It was the realm of metamorphosis.

The change was continual, as later happened only in the cavity of the mind. Things, animals, humans: distinctions were never clear-cut, always temporary. When a vast part of what existed withdrew into the invisible, this didn't mean it stopped happening. But it became easier to think it wasn't happening.

How could the invisible return to being visible? By giving life to the drum. The stretched skin of a dead animal was the steed, it was the journey, the gilded whirlwind. It led to the place where the grasses growl, where the rushes keened, where not even a needle could pierce the gray thickness.

When hunting began, it was not a man who chased an animal. It was a being that chased another being. No one could say with certainty who each of them were. The chased animal could be a man transformed or a god or simply an animal or a spirit or a dead being. And one day humans added another invention to the many others: they began to surround themselves with animals that adapted to humans, whereas for a very long time it had been humans that had imitated animals. They became settled—and somewhat staid.

Why so much hesitation before setting off to hunt the bear? Because the bear could also be a man. People had to be careful when talking, since the bear could hear everything said about it even when it was far away. Even when it retired into its den, even when it was asleep, the bear carried on following what was happening in the world. "The earth is the ear of a bear," people said. When they met to plan the hunt, the bear was never named. And generally, if the bear were mentioned, it was never called by its name: it was Old Man, Old Black Man, Grandfather, Cousin, Worthy Old Man, Black Beast, Uncle. Those preparing for the hunt avoided saying anything. Cautious, wrapped in concentration, they knew the slightest sound could ruin the enterprise. If the bear appeared unexpectedly in the forest, it was a good idea to step aside, take off one's hat, and say: "Go on your way, most honorable one." Otherwise one tried to kill it. The whole of the bear was valuable. Its body was medicine. When they managed to kill it they ran

off immediately. Then they would return to the scene, as if by chance, as though they were taking a stroll. And they would discover to their great surprise that someone unknown had killed the bear.

The first divine being whose name it was forbidden to mention was the bear. In this respect monotheism was not an innovation but a revival, a hardening. The novelty was the prohibition on images.

Knowing that the bear understood everything they said, they would talk with it before attacking, or immediately after. "It wasn't us," some would say. They would thank the bear for allowing itself to be killed. Often they would apologize. Some would add: "I'm poor; this is why I'm hunting you." Some would sing as they killed the bear, so that the bear, while dying, could say: "I like that song."

They would hang the bear's skull in the branches of a tree, sometimes with tobacco between its teeth. Sometimes decorated with red stripes. They attached ribbons to it, wrapped the bones in a bundle, and hung them from another tree. If one bone was lost, the spirit of the bear would hold the hunter responsible. Its nose ended up in some secret place in the woods.

When they captured one of the bear's cubs, they would put it in a cage. It was often nursed by the hunter's wife. In this way it grew up, until one day the cage was opened and "the dear little divine thing" was invited to the feast at which it would be sacrificed. Everyone would dance around the bear and clap their hands. The woman who had nursed it would cry. Then a hunter would say a few words to the bear: "O thou divine one, thou wast sent into the world for us to hunt. O thou precious little divinity, we worship thee: pray hear our prayer. We have nourished thee and brought thee up with a deal of pain and trouble, all because we love thee so. Now, as thou hast grown big, we are about to send thee to thy father and mother. When thou comest to them please speak well of us, and tell them how kind we have been; please come back to us again and we will sacrifice thee." Then they would kill it.

The oldest thought, the thought that for the first time felt no need to be presented as a story, took the form of aphorisms on hunting. Like a murmur, between tents and fires, transmitted like nursery rhymes:

"Wild animals are similar to human beings, only more sacred."

"Hunting is pure. Wild animals love people who are pure."

“How could I hunt, if before it I had not done a drawing?”  
 “The biggest danger in life is that the food of humans is all made of souls.”  
 “The soul of the bear is a miniature bear that is found in its head.”  
 “The bear can talk, but prefers to remain silent.”  
 “Those who talk to the bear, calling it by name, make it gentle and harmless.”  
 “An inept man who sacrifices takes more wild animals than an able hunter who doesn’t sacrifice.”  
 “Animals that are hunted are like women who flirt.”  
 “Female animals seduce the hunters.”  
 “Every hunt is a hunt for souls.”

**I**n the beginning it wasn’t even clear what hunting was for. Like actors trying to enter the role of a character, they tried to become predators. But certain animals ran faster. Others were forbidding and circumspect. And then, what was killing? It was not much different from being killed. If the man became the bear, when he was killing it he was attacking himself. And all the more obscure was the relationship between killing and eating. Those who eat are making something disappear. This is even more mysterious than killing. Where does it go when it disappears? It goes into the invisible. Which eventually teems with presences. There is nothing more alive than absence. What, then, is to be done about all those beings? Perhaps they need to be helped on their way to absence, to be accompanied for part of their journey. Killing was like saying goodbye. And, like every goodbye, it required certain gestures, certain words. They began to celebrate sacrifices.

**H**unting starts as an inevitable act and ends as a gratuitous act. It elaborates a sequence of ritual practices that precede the act (the killing) and follow it. The act can only be encompassed in time, as the prey is encompassed in space. But the course of the hunt itself is unnameable and uncontrollable, like coition. No one knows what will happen between hunter and prey when they face each other. But what is certain is that prior to the hunt the hunter performs acts of devotion. And after the hunt he feels the need to offload a feeling of guilt. He welcomes the dead animal into his hut like a noble guest. In front of the bear that has just been cut into pieces, the hunter murmurs a prayer of vertiginous sweetness: “Allow me to kill you even in the future.”

**T**he prey has to be brought into focus: the isolating gaze reduces the field of vision to one

point. It is a knowledge that proceeds through successive gaps, carving figures out from a background. Circumscribing them, it isolates them like a target. Indeed, the gesture of carving them out is already the gesture that attacks them. Otherwise the figure is not born. Myths, each time, are a superimposition of severed outlines. By pushing this way of knowledge each time to the extreme, by accumulating outlines, the backdrop from which they had been torn once again begins to form. This is the knowledge of the hunter.

[Consideration]

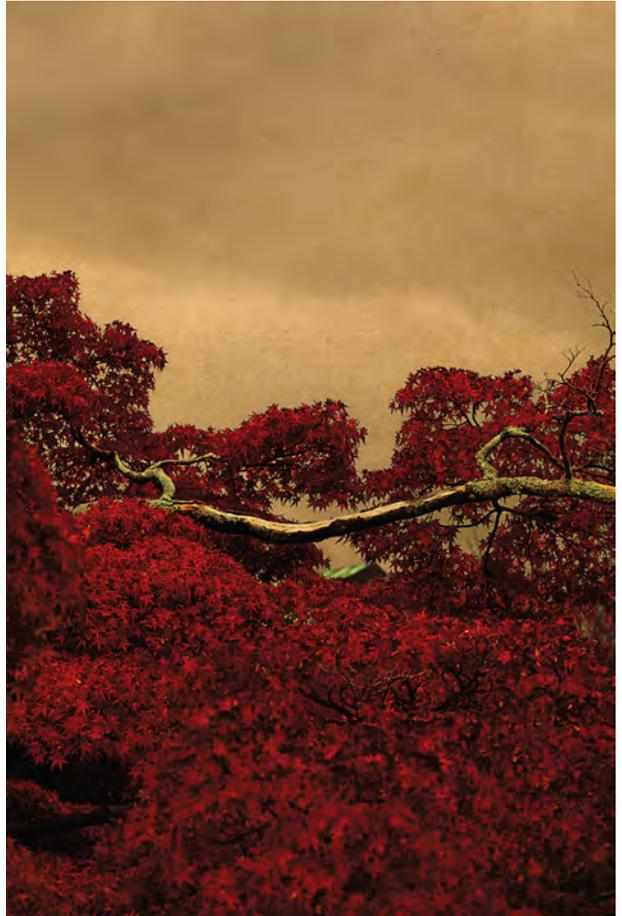
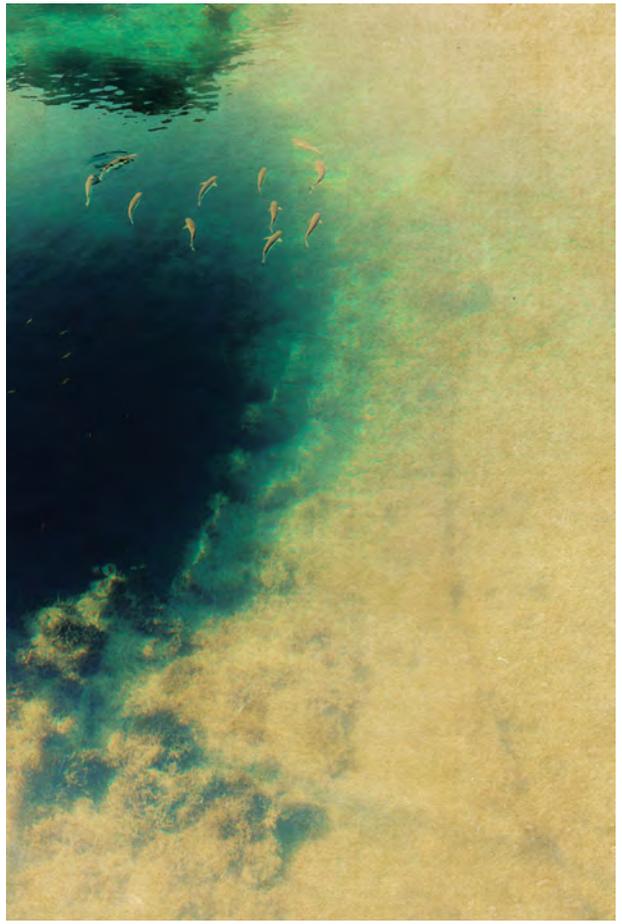
## ON FORGETTING

By Kay Ryan, from *Synthesizing Gravity*, a collection of essays, which will be published this month by Grove Press.

**I**t is easy to be sentimental about memory because of its powers to intensify. If something is remembered, it has been selected by the mind out of an almost infinite pool of things that might have been remembered but weren’t. The thing remembered thus becomes important simply *because* it has been remembered. How interesting is that? Who’s to say that the unremembered silver fruit knife situated just behind the remembered peach wouldn’t have been the better thing to have retained? This of course feels like a very unnatural argument; memories are important to us because we cannot control them—exactly because we cannot choose to remember the fruit knife instead of the peach. Memories seem to us like messages from a past whose author isn’t quite the self we know. They have a position similar to dreams in the sense that they are visited upon us. They enjoy the respect and special lighting accorded the mysterious.

I suppose I have no quarrel with this, although I do think that people can get very stuck in detail if their memories are too accurate; and, alternately, they can live in an adolescent, misty, supercharged half-realm if their memories are inaccurate but nonetheless intense, memories that have so ambered with repeated rememberings that they have become simplified, enlarged, and stylized (usually in the directions of Good or Evil).

But why am I talking about memory when I want to talk about forgetting? I have always



Photographs from the series *The Mouth of Krishna* by Ángel Albarrán and Anna Cabrera, whose work is on view this month at Paris Photo New York, in New York City.

had a memory defined by forgetting. It is hard to say, in my case, what is the cheese and what are the holes: I believe that forgetting may be the cheese, in which there are occasional, suspended chambers of remembering.

If one has always tended to forget, it's not at all bad. In my case, I have been able to stand an incredibly routine daily life because each day I'm not entirely aware that I have done it all before. People with my sort of memory are good in positions requiring constant freshness in the face of what others might find unbearable repetition, the security guard's rounds, perhaps, or the toll collector's transactions. I should say here that lacking memory does not make one stupid; it could be argued that it makes one free. Of course this freedom can be frightening; one can be too untethered.

The great Borges respected forgetting and called it the dark side of the coin of memory. But I'm thinking now that he didn't go far enough. If on one side of the coin is memory, and on the other is forgetting, the coin's name can't be memory any more than the nickel's name can be buffalo. Long ago there must have been a single name for this strange amalgam of memory and forgetting. It would have been silvery and velvety at once—quite impossible for modern tongues.

[Memoir]

## LOST AND FOUND

By Harry Dodge, from *My Meteorite*, which was published last month by Penguin Books. Dodge is a sculptor and video artist.

I always knew I was adopted, and since I was born in San Francisco in 1966 (this I did know) and since my imagination was admittedly psychedelic, I had more than toyed with the idea that my conception had occurred in Golden Gate Park during a summer of love and had been abetted by an LSD-addled haze and multiple orgasms.

At thirteen, I had written a hideously long, hideously depressing research paper on the psychological stresses that attend adoption. The primary source, *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience*, was a book whose titular perspicuity was apparently enchanting enough that I couldn't help but recycle it

as my own. "Lost and Found, a Report by Harry Dodge."

After a year of university classes, I decided to move to San Francisco. I announced—avoiding the obvious and implicit erotic promise of relocation to an international gay mecca—that I might also try to find my birth mother. This was always followed by the optimistic, *Who knows? Maybe she's still there.*

Two high school friends, Cairo and Jimmy, and I convinced my dad to rent us a car (Hertz in Libertyville, Illinois), which we promptly filled with the crap we thought we'd need. We drove continuously, stopping only for gas and, periodically, to pee.

The morning of our arrival, after coffee and a decidedly impecunious bout of emptying clove cigarette butts into a "beaker bong" for smokes, Jimmy and I took a long streetcar ride to Ocean Beach. We hiked for hours through brown weeds, along cliffs, the sullen sea larboard, and then veered into old San Francisco.

It was the mid-1980s, but this neighborhood was still reverberating with the Beats, Kerouac, Gillespie. A free-jazz shamble, full of dark pawnshops, filthy record stores (I heard Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* for the first time here while we sheltered from a downpour), tattoo parlors, and loud, ubiquitous cable cars. Fog came in like disaster. There were scores of bars in rows on a steep rake and one called The Lost and Found: big orange letters on a shingle barely visible through the cheesy, slowly whorling miasma. *Lost and Found.*

I blew on my hands, roused by the jittery prospect of a hazy, sexy, psychedelic birth mother quartered nigh. What if she was in that bar? We moved on, chilled like organs.

It was the late Eighties and the Nineties. I went to shows at Gilman, Chatterbox, Albion, etc. We walked—no one had a car; hopped trains and hitchhiked; alternately rescued food from dumpsters and lit dumpsters on fire; were fired from jobs for insubordination; protested (hegemony?); conducted fragmented run-ins with college; studied poetry; generated community by making events; and made art, especially performance.

Later I ran this feral coffeehouse—cum-performance space (salon?) called The Bearded Lady. It was the epicenter of some heavy third-wave feminist flow for quite a while. Woven into the fabric of this textured, gritty existence was an ongoing cosmic experimentation, in which I tried and sometimes managed to materialize the spiritual (sanctify the flesh?).

These were experiments in radical sexuality, fucking. I thought I might find God this way. It was churchy.

Well—you've been waiting for this—the internet was invented. The birth mother's name started popping up in web searches that other people conducted for me; folks walked up and snuggled scraps of paper into my fist, DONNY MOLLOY jotted a few times onto each slip, accompanied by phone numbers, addresses. This was absolutely exotic at the time: raw databases suddenly thrown into the commons. Loath to know more, I forwent these tiny dossiers for a couple of years, often shuffling them into drawers, bags, the trash. Imagining the deliverance, dejection, or blue funk that might attend what the adoptee assistance group Search Angels call *contact* (lost child turns up at the fountainhead) caused me no small amount of trepidation. Plus, I luxuriated in the purity of the potential each of these slips was charged with. I had grown up waiting and was, after all, not some hasty fireball rushing to renovate my approach to personal subjectivity. I was strung out, comprised of particles that had skipped the specificity of one womb; I had grown tendrils to every cosmic iota and was not at all certain that I wanted a name. One day, however, I did write a letter.

I acknowledged, of course, that I couldn't know whether I had found the correct Donny

Molloy, but: *Did you have a baby on May 31, 1966?* I sent it to San Jose. Two days later, when my phone rang showing a number with the San Jose area code, I let it go to voicemail and then brought the device in to my roommate so that

she could check to see if Donny Molloy had phoned. She had.

**T**he next day I arrive at Chili's and spot her in a booth facing the door. I approach her, she stands up. She says, "You're Gene's kid. You look just like Memphis." I note here that Donny's current girlfriend, Jean, and my birth father seem to have the same name.

We hug. I slide into the booth, sit down across from her. She's a handsome person, big hazel eyes, with wire-rimmed glasses, flowy gray linen pants and a matching tunic. Her silver hair is in a bob; she has a studied, thoughtful way of forming her words and is surprisingly good at concocting spontaneously formidable (truly grand) sentences. She isn't taken aback by my goatee (which is both a surprise and a relief); in fact, when I describe my time running the coffeehouse and tell her that in the early Nineties I had been on the cover of the *SF Weekly*, she is gleeful, and briefly cedes her (ultimately supple) composure. "I saw that cover, I remember that cover! My daughter's the Bearded Lady. My daughter's the Bearded Lady!! You guys were the new dyke café!" She puts both arms up like

[Poem]

## AFTER I TURN SIXTY-NINE

By John Yau, from *Genghis Chan on Drums*, which will be published next year by *Omnidawn*.

I don't imagine that a chariot is hurrying near but that a sleek car is speeding up  
I have started a list of the costumes I want to be buried in, beginning with horny centaur  
I try to put aside obituaries but I am unable to do so for very long (maybe ten minutes)  
I eat the same meal every night while reading recipes of dishes I have never tasted  
I shudder nearly every time I read the phrase "Lifetime Guarantee or Your Money Back."  
I no longer find it necessary to stop and look at what is going on at a construction site  
I decide I won't tell people to stop sending me books even if I will never read them  
I stop and watch ambulances trying to get past cars that don't want to move aside  
I begin thinking about different methods I might use to remove myself from the story  
I know what my friend meant when he said his dog would take his place on the couch  
I think about the cities I will never return to, including Cadaqués and Caracas  
I wonder when I will no longer begin a sentence with the words "if" and "when"  
I dream that my ashes will be scattered in a remote spot in Ireland that no one visits  
I admit that shrinking into myself is not as unpleasant as I once thought

Muhammad Ali and bounces up and down in her seat.

She tells me my brother Memphis was stolen from her when he was just two by the birth father, Gene, the used-car salesman, who, she mildly explains, is a bad, violent guy.

She tells me she lived in San Francisco through the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties, in North Beach.

She tells me that when she was younger she supported herself with intermittent trips to Nevada where she worked, legally, as a prostitute, for cash, saving it up and carting it home. She tells me she's a femme, that Jean's a butch, and that they've been part of the LGBT leather scene in San Jose for years now, happily.

She tells me she stopped drinking at fifty and has been clean and sober for the better part of six years.

She tells me she has had a face-lift and I wonder if discarded with some tuck are the resemblances I've been waiting a lifetime to parse.

The waitress sets down a hamburger and I see Donny's mouth say, "Pearly and I drank at The Lost and Found—that was our place ... for decades."

My whole body goes numb for about ten seconds.

I manage, "I saw that bar on my first day in town. We walked by it." I can't forgive myself for saying the truth. "I stood out front and wondered if you were in there."

"Well I probably was!" she says. "We all but lived there, hon."

[Word Association]

## TERMS OF ART

By Florence Noiville, from "A Short Lexicon of Milan Kundera," an essay published in *Revue des deux mondes* in March to mark Kundera's ninetyeth birthday. Noiville is a novelist and a staff writer for *Le Monde*. Translated from the French by Andrew Alexander.

### "A" IS FOR ARCHITECT

Kundera remains first of all the father of a form. Far from being exhausted or moribund, the novel in his hands is still capable of taking in everything at once—past and present, poetry and prose, fiction and essay, reality and dream—all with the most impressive fluidity. This novel—full of life, capable of knowing all and doing all—which defies limits and lan-

guage, Kundera calls the "archi-novel." Only he could have created it.

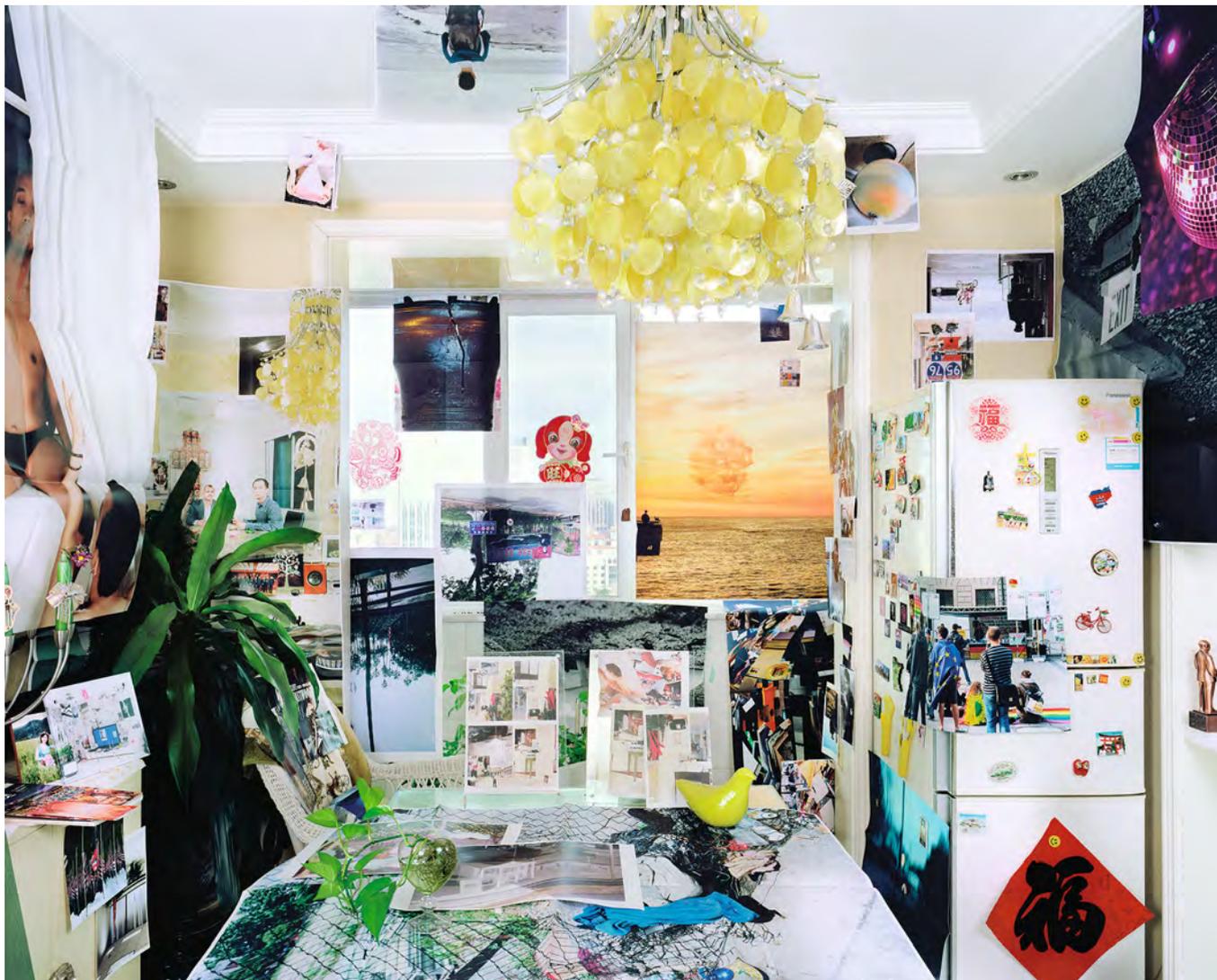
### "B" IS FOR BOHEMIAN

"Czechoslovakia": I have hardly ever heard this word from Kundera's mouth to designate the country where he and his wife, Věra, lived until 1975. Věra speaks always of "Czecho"—more as a shorthand, I think, than to distance herself from her Slovak neighbors. As for Milan, he never uses the term, especially not in his novels, which are so often set in that place. "The word is too young; it has neither beauty nor history," he told me one day. And he was right: born in 1918, the name died before its time, in 1992, not yet eighty years old. Words too have to prove themselves, and this one had not shown that it could be counted on. "Even if one could build a state on such a flimsy word, one can't build a novel on one," Kundera remarks in *The Art of the Novel*. This is why he always uses the word "Bohemia." Are he and his characters Bohemians? "From the standpoint of political geography, the term is not perfect (my translators often correct me), but from the standpoint of poetry, it's the only possible denomination."

### "C" IS FOR COMIC

Or for the absence of the comic—the two go together in Kundera's world. In his study of laughter, published in *Encounter*, he provides an anthology of laughs drawn from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. In it, he shows that the people who laugh the most are often those with the least sense of humor. He finds the same in the TV show he describes later in the text: "There were hosts, actors, celebrities, writers, singers, models, politicians, politicians' wives, all reacting to any remark at all by opening wide their mouths, letting out loud noises, making exaggerated motions—in other words: they laughed."

How sad, but also funny, is this artificial laughter, entirely lacking any source in humor. "The Comic Absence of the Comic," is the title of Kundera's study. In it, he imagines Pavlovich, the Dostoevskian hero, watching this pathetic performance. He is at first frozen, then he lets out a great burst of laughter. The laughs take him for one of their own. Welcome to "this world of laughter without humor in which we're condemned to live," Kundera concludes. In this phrase, Kundera shows us a tragic vision of life, one that is completed by laughter. One can lean on it like a cane when one is embarrassed by misplaced laughter, uncomfortable with vulgar society or with oneself on account of a word or a laugh that one regrets. Kundera: a moralist who helps us to live.



"Facing North, Looking West," a photograph by Guanyu Xu, whose work is on view this month at Yancey Richardson Gallery, in New York City.

[Interview]

## DAYDREAM BELIEVER

By Carlos Busqued, from *Magnetized: Conversations with a Serial Killer, a collection of interviews he conducted with convicted murderer Ricardo Melogno, which will be published in June by Cata-pult. In 1982, at the age of nineteen, Melogno killed four taxi drivers in Buenos Aires over the course of a week. He is currently imprisoned indefinitely. Translated from the Spanish by Samuel Rutter.*

**RICARDO MELOGNO:** Whenever I imagine a group of people meeting together, I imagine myself in the darkest possible corner, happy to watch everything from the outside. In my own world, I was always the protagonist, and

even if I was stuck in that dark corner, everyone else was beholden to what I was doing there. In real life, I was still in the dark corner, but nobody paid me any attention.

There was one psychiatrist who said it wasn't a case of my having no emotions. I had emotions, but my emotional education as an individual had been so insignificant that I didn't think emotions had anything to do with me. Maybe that's where my alternative world came from. In that other world I had everything I needed, and here I had nothing. Here I felt no desire, no sense of the future, nothing.

**CARLOS BUSQUED:** What did you do in that other world?

**MELOGNO:** I made my own films: I imagined the scenes, putting together bits and pieces of the same stories. Which is to say, I'd relive the TV shows and films I had seen in my head,



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"Twins, Utah, #5," a photograph by Steven B. Smith from *Your Mountain Is Waiting*, a monograph published last year by Radius Books.

with myself as the main character. I'd spend the whole day doing this. For example, I was obsessed with *Shogun* for about a year. I spent the whole year reliving the story, reconstructing it scene by scene, changing little things like the dialogue or the ending. I can still remember the characters: there was Mariko, and Toranaga, who was the leader. I would take on the role of the main character and tweak it as I wanted. Some scenes would get me so worked up I would cry. That's how deeply re-creating these stories affected me. I'd take a secondary character and live out their story too.

BUSQUED: What sort of changes would you make?

MELOGNO: It would depend on how I felt that day. I would take a problem from this world and resolve it in the fantasy world. I also used comics this way, I was obsessed with *El Tony*, *Fantasia*, *D'Artagnan*...

BUSQUED: These were all comic books from Editorial Columba. They had a whole universe of stories.

MELOGNO: These were the most important things in my life—I'd wait for the kiosk to open so I could get the latest issues. One of the most important characters for building stories in my head was Dax, because I was obsessed with the Far East. Dax was blind and had supernatural powers. It was set in the time of the Widower Empress in China, the Boxer Rebellion, a time of revolution and upheavals. Dax had French parents but he had been raised in China. He was blind but he could hypnotize people, and he had telekinetic powers.

BUSQUED: There was a time when I used to fantasize about being Darth Vader at work. I'd be chatting with my colleagues but in my head I'd be watching them fall down dead right in front of me.

MELOGNO: For me, my whole life was more or less like that, except for one big difference. You talk about imagining those things to escape being in the moment. I was already out of the moment. That state of mind came naturally to me.

Between these two worlds there was a huge level of dissociation. I crossed over because I was much happier on the other side. If I could have found food and shelter there I would have stayed. I would never have come back.

In some ways, everyone lives in a fantasy world. Buying a lottery ticket is living a fantasy. But it's a normal fantasy. Normal fantasies always have a wall around them, something that stops you from crossing over to the other side. I didn't have that; there was nothing to stop me. If I hadn't been arrested . . . I believe that because of the way I was living my life, unmoored from the real world, I believe that by the age of twenty-five I would have killed myself.

BUSQUED: Why?

MELOGNO: Because I couldn't cope. The real world demands attention. If you don't pay attention to the real world, you lose it. And the other world doesn't provide a way of living—you can't live there. Because it's one thing to live in a fantasy world when you're a teenager, but it's something else entirely when you're an adult and you have to perform a job or live with a family, pay attention to this and that. If you spend your whole day in this parallel world, you'll end up ruined, as lonely as a paving stone, or living on the street.

BUSQUED: At any time in these fantasies you've told me about, was there anything related to killing?

MELOGNO: No. I want to emphasize this point very clearly: I never fantasized about killing. In my little films I was the good guy, the hero—I was never the bad guy, the murderer. No matter what the fantasy was, I was the protagonist. In the real world, I was never the protagonist. In my fantasy world, I didn't imagine killing people or torturing them. I fantasized about being a person, which I never was in real life.

[Fiction]

## RIDE OR DIE

By Lee Durkee, from *The Last Taxi Driver*. The novel, which tells the story of a cab company in Northern Mississippi, was published last month by Tin House Books.

**T**hey never tell you what they were in for—only that they just got out. This one's a handsome

white dude—mid-thirties, a few missing teeth, a few prison tats—who's in a fantastic mood. He's carrying a twelve-pack of Bud Light when he slides into the back of my Town Car and tells me he's just been released from Parchman and then gives me the name of some street in the Bethune Woods Project, says it's an old girlfriend's house.

"Man, is she gonna be surprised to see me," he adds.

[Definitions]

## LOST BOYS

*From a list of terms defined by the U.S. Department of Defense in a report on men who identify as involuntary celibates, or incels. Elliot Rodger was a twenty-two-year-old self-described incel who, in 2014, killed six people near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and explained that he wanted to punish women and sexually active men.*

**NORMIE:** A person who can function normally within society

**INCEL:** A person who is not in a relationship and has never had sex, despite attempts

**MENTALCEL:** An incel whose reason for failure is related to mental illness or insecurities

**VOLCEL:** A person who is voluntarily abstinent

**FEMOID:** A female human, from humanoid; indicates that women are subhuman

**ALPHA:** A man who is able to get the sex and affection he desires

**BETA:** A man who is not confident and who is submissive

**OMEGA:** A male lower in status than a beta

**CHAD:** A man who is perceived as being sexually superior to an incel; the top 20 percent of males

**TYRONE:** A black man who is a Chad equivalent; usually accompanied by racist undertones

**STACY:** A woman who is considered beautiful and promiscuous; perceived as unfairly rejecting incels for Chads

**BLACKPILL:** The idea that there is no personal solution to systemic problems

**BLACKPILLED:** Describes a person who is not an incel or a sub-incel but who has the black-pill mentality

**GOING E.R.:** A reference to an incel conducting a mass-casualty attack

**SAINT ELLIOT:** A reference to Elliot Rodger, who is a hero to incels for his 2014 attack

We're at the Mobil station near West Gentry Loop waiting to pull into traffic.

"Maybe you should call her first?" I suggest, looking into the rearview.

"Man, I don't even know her number been so long. She's probably been married and divorced twice."

We hit the four-lane and head east toward the largest of the five projects, which I didn't know existed before I started driving a cab. These projects are arranged like black moons around a white planet, and it's my job to ferry kitchen workers into the city square or wherever it is they work, a twenty-dollar bookend on a job that pays them maybe nine bucks an hour.

It's a late spring midafternoon but already feels like summer as I drive under the Fordice Bridge past campus. As I do this I'm wondering if Uber will steal all my rides from the projects. I've never used an Uber and don't understand how that works, but my hope is that when they come into town next month—it's not just a rumor anymore—they'll shun the projects the same way all the other cab companies in town do.

Bethune Woods is one of our nicer projects. It has a suburban façade fronting the grim rows of public housing.

"Damn," my fare says, as the Lincoln bottoms out on a speed bump.

"You get used to it," I tell him.

"Is it yours?"

"Nah, company car. I get to keep it at my house. I mean, as long as I put in my seventy a week, I do."

"Seventy hours? Man, that sounds kinda dangerous."

I laugh and tell him, "I know guys drive ninety."

**O**ur destination turns out to be a beater house. Somebody has stolen the garage door, and a plastic wave of kid junk is cresting into the driveway. The lawn is that bright-green ryegrass with brown jigsaw pieces where somebody sprayed ant poison. The one catalpa tree is either blighted or a late bloomer. No cars. All the lights off.

"Man, can you wait here a minute? I'm just gonna look-see inside."

Leaving his beers on the floorboard, he rings the bell and waits, combs his hair back with his fingers, then knocks and waits some more. Finally, after glancing back at me, he wanders into the garage, pokes around in there, and then opens the side door and disappears into the house.

I sit there thinking, *Well, I didn't see that coming*, and once again I find myself wondering what makes an accomplice an accom-

plice. At what moment do you stop being a taxi driver and start being a getaway driver? But I don't leave, not yet. For one thing, I haven't been paid. Also I happen to like the guy. He looks like a discarded version of my friend Earl, who hustles golf for fun. This guy is like Earl's prison twin—Rich Earl, Poor Earl—the Earl who owns nothing and has lost a few teeth in Parchman. Same year, same model: opposite fates.

Opposite Earl gets back into the cab lugging a pilfered six-pack of High Life to add to his floorboard collection.

"Man, she ain't even here. You mind taking me out to 243? I know this other girl. I can't remember the street but I can point you there."

"Pays the same," I say, my way of letting him know I'm not taking him there for free. I should tell him it's two bucks a mile outside city limits, plus two bucks for each additional stop, but instead I start telling him about my friend Earl.

"He drinks Bud Light, too. Y'all look so much alike it's crazy. When I first saw you standing there I was sure you were him."

"All he does is play golf?"

"Yeah, I guess. He wins all the local tournaments—they call them *scrambles*—and he doesn't even practice. I don't think he even likes golf."

"That how he got rich, hustling golf?"

"No. He was born that way."

"We really look that much alike?"

"Twins," I say, and then think, *Well, except for that neck tat depicting the great state of Mississippi.*

"So where's this guy live at?"

I hesitate and then tell him, "Out on 40."

"What'd you say his name was?"

"Earl. Earl Jones."

I am a bad liar. It always sounds like I'm asking a question.

"Huh. You think I could fool his wife?"

I don't comment on that. Earl's wife is my friend Kyla, who does not fool easily. We turn onto 243 near the Soul Food Stop and wind our way into some suburb near the county middle school. It's a much nicer house this time but has a ramped driveway that causes the Lincoln to bottom out again. Like I said, you get used to it. He knocks on the front door, does his hair again, then removes a key from under the doormat and goes inside. This time, he comes out with a corked bottle of red wine and an orange.

"Maggie ain't home, either," he tells me, and a moment later I hear the cork pop. "Man, I ain't had wine in fuck forever. Ain't the only thing I ain't had."

"Please don't peel that orange back there," I say.



*Night Gazers*, a painting by Keita Morimoto, whose work was on view in February at Nicholas Metivier Gallery, in Toronto.

“No, sir,” he replies, in what I assume to be the voice he used in prison to talk to guards.

I’ve started driving us toward the house of this third girl he knows when we are passed on the road by a robin’s-egg-blue ’57 Chevy convertible.

“Wow,” I say.

I never cared about cars before driving a cab. Now I like them better than I like most people.

“That’s her!” he yells. “That’s Maggie’s Chevy—catch her!”

I gun the twenty-year-old, broke-dick Lincoln. It takes about ten minutes and five gallons to catch up, and right as we do the Chevy turns into a gas station and it becomes clear the platinum blonde behind the wheel is accompanied by some guy with the largest bald head I’ve ever seen. His meaty arm, draped over the passenger door, is covered in those Japanese gangster tattoos, like sleeves that end at the wrist.

“Fuck. Man, let’s get outta here.”

Opposite Earl stays glum for a few miles but then rallies and still wants to go to this other girl’s house. I tell him I won’t take him there unless he promises not to steal anything. In total he has four ex-girlfriends. Either that or he’s just scouting houses to ransack later. None of the women are home. Finally he makes me take him back to the first house, the one in the project. I charge him twenty bucks—the freedom-is-sweet special—and leave him sitting in a lawn chair in front of the doorless garage drinking wine and looking happy. That’s what she’ll see when she pulls into the driveway that evening with her kids.

As I coast away, he grins and lifts his wine bottle. I start to honk but then remember my horn doesn’t work. Then I start to wave before remembering the tinted glass. Then I wave anyway. ■