

THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

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HABITAT

My Blue Heron

Herbert Kohl

Where I live it is impossible to own the night. It owns you, swallows you, surrounds you outside of the beam of your flashlight, hints at nocturnal life, awakenings, silences punctuated by the last cries of owls and the first of ravens and jays. I love to get up before the sun and walk to my study when it is dark, when there is no moon or when the waxing and waning moon tints the trees silver and yellow. I talk to the few stars left in the sky, wish upon them, and, before getting to my writing, sit in my chair and listen to the silence, look out into nothing, and hope some unexpected event or detectable movement will inspire me for the day.

Growing up in the Bronx I also loved that time of day and sometimes in the morning I find the lyrics and tune of the eponymous song sung by Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* hitting me when I sit down in my study:

*My time of day is the dark time
A couple of deals before dawn
When the street belongs to the cop
And the janitor with the mop
And the grocery clerks are all gone.*

I laugh whenever this happens: I can't shake the Bronx out of my head. Fortunately when this occurs the sun comes up and the tune fades.

On most days it takes time to turn to writing and I vaguely look out the window hoping to detect some movement, some rustling in the trees or a flash across the sky. Mostly I look for my blue heron. Recently a blue heron has come to visit periodically. I first noticed it as a flash of wings across the sky, bigger than any bird I had seen by our pond. A few days later there it was sitting on a stump looking at the pond, waiting. It was so still that one could easily look through it, beyond it, or into the water in front of it. But a little turn of the neck gave her or him away for just a second before the bird swept into the pond and came away carrying one of our goldfish almost big enough now to be called a carp.

When our family first moved from Berkeley to Point Arena in 1977, in order to distract our children from the trauma of moving we bought a bag of a hundred or so tiny goldfish from a Chinese tropical fish store on San Pablo Avenue. The little fish were bred to feed the bigger fish that were more collectible. It seemed like a good idea to have the kids move the goldfish, as well as our dog and cats with us. It made it a total family adventure.

The first day we moved in we dumped the bag of fish into the pond and now, 33 years later, these tiny fish have grown into an interbred community of gold, black, white, and any mixture of those three, now grown to many times their original volume and a delicious treat for some of the most beautiful birds I have ever seen.

The pond, the birds, the fish all remind me, on an everyday level, that life can be beautiful and cruel at the same moment. It helps me understand the creative imbalance that drives my writing.

I always discover new things about the doings of the night around here, and in the



PT NUNN

Scheming in Color

Meanings & moods of different hues

Rebecca Taksel

For many years I have worked as an interior decorator, first full time and later as a consultant. What that means to a lot of people I meet in the other spheres of my life is that my taste in art is limited to what will look good above a sofa. Occasionally I protest, but less and less. I've learned not to talk seriously about this side of my life to anyone but my sister Martha, who owns our interior design business. Martha loves contemporary art, collects it, makes it (she's a sculptor in metal) and never advises clients to match sofas or anything else when looking at art with an eye to buying.

These days Martha and I are seldom together in our work, but we have a long history, one that has been most happily lived in the design center showrooms. In those rooms, attended by sales assistants who flit like butterflies among larger billowing wings hung with fabrics, under rainbow light cast by thousands of chandelier crystals, Martha and I inhabit an atmosphere of warmth, texture, perfume, and color. Especially color. That is our secret. Over the years we've become permeated with colors. We've absorbed them as light rays and fingered them as pigments in blocks of wood. We've watched them quivering along the free-floating warp threads of satins and the waves of cut velvets.

We learned color first in nature and in art, in our neighborhood and in our travels, in art museums and house museums. All of that was our real and subconscious training. In the houses of our clients, we've stood anxiously in beautifully empty rooms and watched a newly applied paint color play over four walls, darker and richer in corners, rising lighter here, brighter there, differently tinged around a window, to meet a ceiling which is itself not white but tinted with a breath of the same color. Martha has become better and better at predicting that play of light and shade, brightness and calm.

But it was in the showrooms that we learned to concentrate on color—in furniture, in wallpapers, in carpets, and in fabrics, especially in fabrics. In the showrooms, we often work with just one color at a time. Some of the showrooms arrange their fabrics by color group to make the process easier. And so we live for an hour or two in a narrow band of the spectrum, our eyes and hands touched only by dark blues, or pale greens, or all the many tints that are called white.

It has been instructive thus to spend time in a particular color and later to recognize it, fall back into it, when I'm walking through the larger world of myriad and disorganized hues. At those moments, when a color arranges itself into a pattern out of bits of landscape or cityscape, I know myself to be a specialist, like a chef. Chefs talk about the markets, the early mornings in the open air, planning the day's menu only half-consciously, their senses smarter and faster than their minds,

There's a lot of nonsense talked about color, as if each color were not a whole world in itself, reflecting light, absorbing light, changing from morning to afternoon to evening. Talking about color is a kind of astrology, an excuse to talk about ourselves unchecked by logic.

making perfect music out of what others might find cacophonous: mounds of color and texture, a chaos of shouts and smells. Like the chefs, Martha and I love the apparent chaos out of which we draw our ideas of color.

There's a lot of nonsense talked about color, as if each color were not a whole world in itself, with all its hues and tints and intensities, reflecting light, absorbing light, changing from morning to afternoon to evening. Still, people like to think that color follows mood, or creates it; that the so-called warm colors advance, stimulate, elevate, that the cool ones recede, bring tranquility, calm the nerves; and that a favorite color reveals personality. Talking about color this way is a kind of astrology, an excuse to talk about ourselves unchecked by reality or even logic. Why not indulge?

YELLOW

Yellow is so often delicious. It is lemons, and also butter. It can be acid and almost cool—the lemons; or, when it moves just a very little along the color wheel toward its neighboring orange, rich and warm—the butter. Yellow is seldom taken seriously, though. It is dismissed as cheerful, and therefore rather stupid and naïve. That is a shame. Many tints of yellow are among the most elusively brilliant of the spectrum, especially as colors for walls. They are admittedly difficult to get right, but when a yellow room is right there is nothing more lyrically elegant. It is truly Apollo's color, of the sun and of the music of stringed instruments.

Another aspect of yellow's bad reputation is the use of the pure hue in its maximum saturation with equally terrible, equally saturated red and blue in the color scheme called "primary." This combination has been endlessly inflicted on those least able to defend themselves, the very young and the mentally ill, as it splashes over institutional walls, bedding, clothing, and implements. The advent of fast food joints and box stores has now infantilized the broader landscape, too. In their endless search for the lowest common denominator of everything, the marketing geniuses have figured out that the primary scheme is the most brutally attention-getting.

A final word about yellow. It is easy nowadays to forget its associations with the forbidden. With the lighter tints of purple, its complement on the traditional color wheel, yellow captures some of the more subtle and sophisticated sins in the Western imagination. Thus *The Yellow Book*, the *fin de siècle* magazine illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley. The yellow covers had the connotation of eroticism, an association derived from French novels of the period that were published in yellow wrappers as a warning and an enticement. Wilde speaks of a "yellow" book given by Lord Henry to Dorian Gray, which critics agree was Huysman's *A Rebours*. There, then, is the lavender connection, especially since Wilde is spectacularly linked with Beardsley by the latter's illustrations for *Salomé*.

BLUE

In many of the attempts to detect inherent links between color and personality, blue has been associated with the cool and the masculine. Ask a random group of adult Americans their favorite color, and blue wins every time. It's the right answer if you're trying to impress a potential boss or a potential mate. Blue, by this cultural association with cool, has power.

The cool of blue has also been applied to sound, thus the blue note. In fact, whole systems of links between colors and sounds have been proposed. Amateur

See **HERON** page 8

See **COLOR** page 10

EDITOR'S NOTE

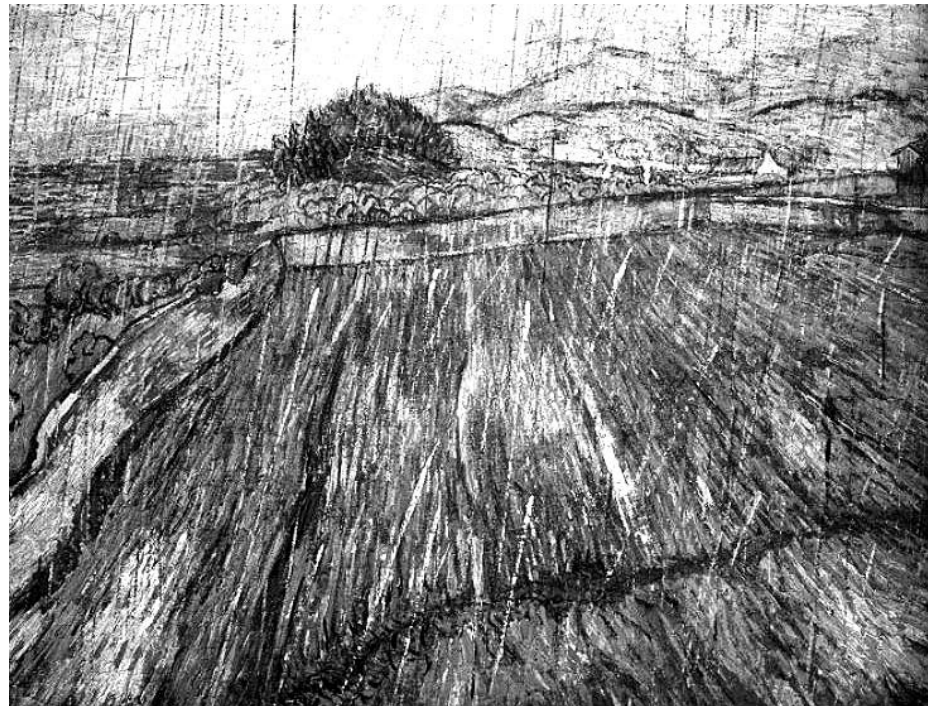
Museum Mysteries: A self-guided tour

Stephen Kessler

Art museums, those great graveyards of culture, tend to evoke in me unruly mixtures of emotions. The most moving works on display inspire awe and wonder in their manifestation of the artist's spirit, their transformation of joy or anguish or passion or irony or despair or formal experiment—or all these abstractions at the same time—into a material object that holds their creation in time as evidence of an extraordinary existence, an example of what a human being can do in the service of the soul's truth. Yet I also find an inescapable pathos in these works, a sense of loss, of the artist's individual transience, for which this kind of frozen perpetual presence is small consolation. What good is immortality if the creator can't live to enjoy it? And yet the prospect of anyone actually living forever is even more horrifying.

Such thoughts swirl through my consciousness as I stand, stunned, facing a Hopper or Vermeer or Matisse or Hokusai or some ancient anonymous Chinese scroll or Greek vase or marble sculpture or other untouchable artifact.

I understand how some museumgoers might want to temper such a response and arrive at a more rational understanding by way of a guide to the art—some knowledgeable docent or teacher to place the work in historical context and explain its compositional elements, or one of those telephone-like devices that leads the visitor on a helpful “self-guided” tour of the galleries, piece by piece—but I much prefer an unmediated encounter, possibly assisted by a card on the wall, whereby I can meet the art on my own, and its own, terms, absorbing as fully as possible its immediate sensory impression. I remember discovering, at age 19, Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* in the Louvre and being almost literally knocked off my feet by the impact of that epic image. Fifteen or 20 years later, at the Metropolitan in New York, I had a similar experience with Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*. These monumental paintings hit me with the full force of their virtuosity, driving home to my exposed psyche the genius and



Wheatfield in Rain by Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh's is a dark joy wrested from despair, a pleasure only the saddest souls can alchemize out of their suffering.

passion of their creators and their mastery of the medium more than a century apart in radically different styles yet conveying their respective stories with comparable power.

Later I would read about the historical source of Géricault's canvas, the 1816 shipwreck of a French frigate, and about Pollock's technique of action painting as a way of expressing inner states, but to stop and gaze at either picture in ignorance and amazement was an enriching lesson in surrendering to the esthetic experience, which is finally so much more than merely sensory. A great work of art can invade you in a way against which you are utterly defenseless, and for me this is the most illuminating aspect of the encounter. How one of Cézanne's still lifes—some apples or onions on a table—can be so moving is a mystery that no amount of formal explanation can account for, any more than I can rationalize the ravishment I've felt while listening to a Dvorak symphony or a Rodrigo guitar concerto.

These reflections were set in motion by recent visits I made to three museums: the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and MoMA and the Metropolitan in New York City. (Yes, I know about the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist shows at the De Young in San Francisco, but you needed a reservation to get into those spectacles, and I'd rather decide to walk in casually on the spur of the moment than drive to the city, park and stand in line at an appointed time.) At each I had a quintessential museum experience—not only with the art but with the settings and my fellow spectators—which reminded me of why I love museums and often find them exasperating.

On a Wednesday afternoon in Philadelphia I had the enormous building almost to myself. Since my capacity to contemplate masterworks is limited, an hour or so in such a place is about as much as I can take, so I went straight to the wing that houses works from Europe of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There were some wonderful things in there, including one of the aforementioned Cézannes, but what stopped me in my tracks for an extended stare, and brought me back for a longer look, was a van Gogh landscape I'd never seen before—not even in a book or a calendar. Poor Vincent: so broke and tormented and neglected in his lifetime, now worth countless millions on the art market and reproduced ad nauseum in prints until reduced

to part of the cultural scenery, domesticated, merely decorative. But more than once I've unexpectedly come upon one of his pictures and been overwhelmed by its extraordinary energy and embodiment of feeling.

In Philadelphia the picture was called *Rain* and showed, apparently from the artist's window in the hospital at Saint Rémy, a walled wheatfield and the landscape beyond—the same field seen more famously in some of his other pictures—but in this case instead of vibrant colors and dramatic swirls of form, the whole large image was muted by slanted vertical streaks of what at first glance looked like gray sheets of a downpour. The entire countryside is drenched under the force of this torrential storm. No wonder I'd never seen this picture reproduced. It seemed to lack the color and drama of Vincent's more sensational paintings.

Yet the longer I looked the more I saw, until what at first appeared to be a grim gray curtain became, one slender stroke at a time, an almost psychedelic array of subtle color, each streak of rain containing its own rainbow, until I could feel not just the richness of the paint and the patience of the painter's meticulous technique but the correlation between the visible image of that seemingly washed-out landscape and the inner condition of the artist: his tears—of grief and sorrow and loneliness, for sure—but also the flooding joy of the creator able to channel his despair through passionate skill to bring into being an object of astonishing beauty.

I was grateful to be all by myself in the gallery and to be able to linger in front of this heartbreaking, inspiring and consoling work without the distraction of other spectators or anyone trying to explain what it meant or where it fit in van Gogh's oeuvre. The fact that I'd never seen it before, unlike so many of his better-known pictures, lent it a quality of increased uniqueness, a sense that, for the moment anyway, it existed for me alone in the intimacy of discovery.

A few days later in New York I had a different kind of museum experience. The Museum of Modern Art was featuring a big retrospective on Abstract Expressionism, that volcanic mid-20th-century movement which, for a few years there, tore open tradition with greater force than anything before or since, establishing American painters as the most daring and original masters of the time and New York as the new creative capital of the world, displacing dusty old Paris. Gallery after gallery displayed an impressive array of these seminal paintings, none more astounding to my eye than the Pollocks—but the blockbuster context was inescapable. Moving in swarms through these immaculate rooms with their white walls and explanatory cards were hundreds—maybe more like thousands—of visitors, mostly tourists like me, looking, with various kinds and degrees of attention,

at the artifacts, and taking away or leaving behind whatever they may have found.

What struck me most troublingly, apart from the power of many of the paintings themselves—the Klines and Rothkos and de Koonings and Motherwells—was the strange behavior of many of my fellow tourists. Rather than gaze at the pictures long enough to begin to absorb something of their mystery, many of them would position themselves adjacent to the canvas on the wall and have a companion snap a photograph with a cellphone. The art, like any other tourist attraction, was there to serve as background for a souvenir. *Look, the photo would declare back home, I was there with this crazy painting—how cool is that?*

I couldn't help wondering what the artists, those departed souls, would think if they knew this was happening to their works. Of course, in their lifetimes they and their products became commercial commodities, so it's not as if they ever existed (beyond the walls of their studios) in some pristine realm of pure creation. And while museums serve, especially in a cacophonous city like New York, as oases of calm and contemplation, they're not exactly sacred zones of spiritual refinement where the vulgar reality of commerce is not admitted (witness the gift shop). Nevertheless, there's something slightly unsavory about the cluelessness of those who would reduce the life-and-death struggle of a great artist to a scenic setting for their own vanity.

Part of the genius of Andy Warhol, who came on the scene toward the end of the Abstract Expressionists' glory and helped to finish them off as an avant-garde force, was to celebrate surfaces and commodification even as the Ab-Expressos were baring their souls. Warhol could see through the crassness of the art business and sought to give back to the public a reflection of its most superficial self. His dry wit and blatant commercialism undercut and ultimately superseded the self-styled spiritual heroism of his immediate predecessors.

Still, I confess that I was disconcerted by the antics of the picture-takers taking each other's pictures in front of or next to the famous pictures, as if trying to steal a bit of immortality by the cheapest, easiest means. (Or perhaps this was merely postmodernism in action.)

My art safari came full circle a few days later at the Met. The destination was a small exhibit of Joan Miró's *Dutch Interiors*. The Spanish painter, sometimes identified with Surrealism, had his own unique take on tradition, and in these few canvases took an assortment of 17th-century domestic genre paintings from the Netherlands and riffed on their subject matter and visual patterns to almost unrecognizable quasi-abstract, quasi-figurative stylization. Playful, colorful and strangely funny, Miró's parodies of his predecessors have a buoyant insouciance miles removed from the angst of the likes of Pollock and van Gogh. Miró is having fun—not at anyone else's expense but, like all great innovators, in the interest of creating something fresh, of revitalizing the medium, blowing away clichés and leaving his own unmistakable mark on the museum wall. Seriously silly, his pictures radiate irreverence.

I must say, though, that Vincent's gloomy Dutch interior—objectified in his rendering of that rainy wheatfield—filled me with a paradoxical happiness that has outlasted my amusement with the Mirós. Van Gogh's is a dark joy wrested at great cost from the jaws of despair, a kind of pleasure that perhaps only the saddest souls can alchemize out of their suffering. How such a grave material object, held behind glass and affixed to a wall, can generate such death-defying delight is something I'll never understand.

Stephen Kessler's new book of essays, The Tolstoy of the Zulus: On Culture, Arts & Letters, is due this fall from El León Literary Arts.

THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

STEPHEN KESSLER
Editor

BARBARA L. BAER
DANIEL BARTH
DANIELA HUREZANU
JONAH RASKIN
Contributing Editors

LINDA BENNETT
Production Director

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CULTURAL STUDIES

Eating and Writing

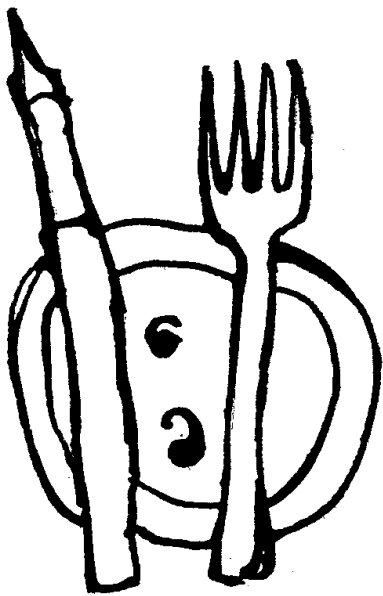
Francesca Preston

Before I learned how to form my letters, I had my mother make them for me. She was my scribe, if you will. I would lie on the ground and draw the most essential things I knew (goose, egg, tin can) and she would write the captions as I spoke them. These translated pictographs would be promptly sent to her mother—my first love-vessel—in the mail.

"A beautiful carrot," my mother writes diligently in quotes, underneath a frenetic, hairy, rather remarkable drawing of a carrot. Because my grandmother lived far away, and because it was wildly important that I get certain messages to her, I realized at a very young age that established symbols were good things. Slowly, I learned to write my name.

Mastering this first word (the caption that will accompany me for the rest of my life) took time, and a very physical effort. This was not a matter of memorization so much as training, *struggle*; my hand bent like a beak toward an all-mighty line. And in the way that all languages, all scripts, evolve, I can witness in my own ragged archives the evolution of a single letter: lowercase *a* unfolding out of itself like a hungry snail; the tail of *e* rising, first cotyledon, from a germinating seed.

Before long it felt like my words had weight, a gravity. I took to writing secret notes and burying them in little holes in the ground, with a few rocks bundled on top, to make a mound. I wasn't sure who was going to find these notes, but that seemed part of the point; I would never know. My writing always wanted deepness, a burrow, to live in and wait for the right conditions. I was about eight.



FRANCESCA PRESTON

This abundance wanted to be recorded. How do you keep track of the bundles of grain you've stored? How do you give a receipt to the messenger who will carry your goods to trade?

I remember learning, in school, the word *Mesopotamia*—a lumpy, oddly ravishing word—which I have since associated with the nebulous beginnings of important things: writing, agriculture, domesticated grains. The cradle, as they say, of civilization. It is obvious that I (and we) owe lovely Mesopotamia a great debt. But what I'm trying to figure out today is the relationship that writing has to the cultivation of things to eat, and why these two labors seem so far apart now. It's as if they have forgotten they are relatives, and once played together in the mud.

So I've done some sleuthing, and I thought you might like to hear what I found. I've deduced that we learned to write in the furrows, some time after we learned to tame the seed. It was about 6000 years ago, more or less, and wild wheat had given us the hard kernel of her heart. She was ours. We didn't have to move around any more, but we did have to save seed, and nurse it from the ground with our bare hands. Animals helped us, whether they liked it or not, and we began to stockpile edible objects.

This abundance made certain demands. It wanted to be recorded. After all, how do you keep track of the bundles of grain you've stored away? How do you give a receipt to the messenger who will carry your goods to trade? How do you make an IOU? And so we began to use the implements of farming, and the environment of farming, to teach ourselves to write. We turned, naturally, to the thick mud from the overflowing rivers that sustained us, and we pressed our sticks in the mud as it dried. And then we argued about what the marks meant.

I'm speaking for these people, the Ancient Sumerians, now—I hope they will not take offense. It seems that what they did next was take the impressionable wads of mud and bake them for safe-keeping and travel. These tablets, clay loaves woven with symbol, are our first records of writing.

In the years before I was born my parents were just beginning to farm. My mother would become a painter, and my father a baker, but they did not know that yet. I, like a poem, was just an idea. In the photographs from that time, the land (seen over my father's shoulder, as he maneuvers a small tractor) is bare, and desert-like, and brown. It does not reveal its future fertility, the grapes and olives and staffs of wheat that will rise there, every year, for decades. They are still rising now.

As the family business began to develop, my sister and I were happy to remain on the fringes, dabbling in the dirt between the rows. There are many pictures of us with the palms of our hands displayed confidently to the camera, covered with mud. I told people that when I grew up I would be a worm girl. And this has proven true: I am always trying to go to the origins of things, to the primordial ooze where the first earthworms cavorted. If I could send a letter in a clay envelope I would.

So I am intrigued that today we argue whether gardens and schools, farming and learning, ought to be mixed—that the idea of desegregating them is considered revolutionary. I worry we have forgotten what Walt Whitman once declared, that "the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery." I do believe that the fingernails of the first writer were filled with dirt. Writing is like laying out the row for seeds to be planted, and reading is harvesting what someone else has sown. A book is a fruit, an enormous seed packet.

I had an epiphany when I first learned that not all people read and write left to right. Many scripts are written right to left, or top to bottom, and in various ancient cultures, as with the Greek and the Egyptians, writing could travel down the line in one direction, and then wrap back the other way: right to left, left to right, right to left. This was called *boustrophedon*, which means "as the ox plows." The words would move back and forth, as an ox moved through the earth that humans were preparing for food.

But several thousand years have gone by, and we are a forward-looking people—compelled, it seems, always in one direction. Most of us do not farm, and many of us barely write. Mistreatment of the soil has hurt both our foods and our words, and we are beginning to realize this. What I sense, now, is a great turning: a change about to happen. It is as if we have reached the end of a line, a certain way of being, and we are preparing to turn around and go back the way we came.

Francesca Preston lives in Berkeley where she runs *Grafista*, a writing consultation and editing business. Her family's farm, Preston of Dry Creek, can be visited in Sonoma County.

HOME

Calling the Cat

Roberta Werdinger

I've lived in the woods and fields of Northern California for some time now, and there has always been a cat in the picture. No declawing or confinement here, no need for indoor litters: in warm weather, a healthy country cat will live indoors as much as out, dallying belly-up to sunlight for hours at a time, curled up around or even inside a bush, or just sitting with wide-open eyes, soaking up random movement. If the cat has its way, it will saunter in and out of an available opening frequently, mediating the radically different cultures of domestic and wild. But then the nighttime comes, and it's time to bring the cat inside.

I stand poised with one hand on the door of my cabin. I can make out the shapes of bushes, hear the loud sighing of trees, smell the cold tang the earth gives off when the sun's left. It's cold suddenly at night in this part of the world, and if you live far away enough from a town the woods are as busy as one. Into all that activity I aim a high, thin voice, pitched for distance: *Soji*, I might say, or *Gregory Fogerty!* or even *Beauty!* into the crouching bushes. The call ventures out into the huge wild; there is a pause, a heavy waiting . . . sometimes, one will be rewarded with a crunching of leaves, a smaller, nimble shape materializing out of the dark, heavy ones, and you're glad. There's a small but fervent rejoicing of both of you, a yowling and a high human voice murmuring affectionate imprecations, a turning on of lights and a lighting of stoves; a bustling about for food; a civilized stir.

But the cat carries the smell of the wind and sage from the bushes in its fur; it brings that outside inside to you. And then again, the cat doesn't always come; this is a given, a fact to be digested and lived with. It may be hurt, hiding from prey, hunting its own, or simply supremely uninterested in collecting itself into something resembling what I want to call it. In the California woods, home to raccoons (who eat kittens), bobcats, coyotes, foxes, and mountain lions, a cat is flush up against both sides of the food chain, ready in turn to devour mice, moles, voles, baby birds, the occasional rabbit.

At such times, your brave call goes out into the awaiting trees and bushes, and sticks for a moment to something, and then is gone. That is also a complete act of calling the cat, facing the humming dark and sounding it. It is the wilderness you're calling; then you resemble nothing so much as a conjurer, clad in furs or animal skin, standing on the threshold between the human and what's beyond, feeling the codes and the comforts of the two realms enter into and pass through your body, turned to go in, one hand on the door. Unanswered, the calling of the cat is an elegy, for all the beings in your life who never came back.

It is the wilderness you're calling; then you resemble nothing so much as a conjurer, standing on the threshold between the human and what's beyond.



The cat is poised on an open window ledge: one ear pointed towards outdoors—the world of sudden movements, of perfect alertness, of blood, and hunting, where shapes and bodies blend into and devour each other, unjudging and endless. The other ear points indoors, to the world of propriety and warm sofas, where one can (and does) spend hours delicately washing one's face. The cat straddles both worlds; it's only a chance, random movement from one direction or the other—a snapped twig outside, or a comforting voice within—that will set her off. Most often, she sits in between, resting easily underneath two ears that are ever ready to respond to circumstance.

I'll leave her there, strolling off to the darkness when she's ready, hoping that when the time comes I too can move with such sudden grace.

Roberta Werdinger is a writer and editor living near Ukiah.

VERY OLD AND HOLY

I bought the old guy a drink when I caught him brooding over an empty glass. During a lull in the jukebox onslaught he said, "You seem like a okay feller. In the same business I used to be. So I'll give you some free advice. When you're raisin' walls? Look at every stud first and try and see what way the knots is bevelled at. That'll be toward the bottom of the tree they was cut out of. And that's the manner you want to install 'em. Bevels down. That's how the tree stood alive and that's how you want to stand the parts of 'er. That way you'll be makin' a happier house. Less trouble. And that's gospel."

Suddenly resurrected by money, the jukebox exploded again and my friend started on his stool and stared around the bar, which, with its glacier of smoke, blurry faces, stale air and clamor, brought to mind a stricken submarine.

"I know why that's so," he shouted over the thump and bellow. "But I just can't say it in here. Very old and holy, though. And right as rain."

—DANIEL RICHMAN

Daniel Richman is a poet and builder living in San Francisco.

PLACES



KAY BRADNER

Goodbye to Ocean Beach?

Ryder W. Miller

For years now I have been walking on Ocean Beach, which lines the west side of San Francisco for seven miles, looking at the waves, observing the bird life and what washes ashore, and dreaming. One can learn from landscapes. The seashore, the subject of so much visual artwork and drawing so many visitors, has been a successful and inspiring teacher. I have been caught up in the wonder of it regularly and open to the ideas it inspires. The regular visits have also been an exploration of my inner life, but these visits may be coming to an end.

I have put down many of my thoughts in a column, Ocean Beach Diary, for *The West Portal Monthly* in San Francisco. The column has been part news, part nature writing, part environmental education, and part diary. It was not always clear to me why I would be so interested in having experiences by the sea—that is, compared to walks through city parks, the nearby woods, or local mountains. On some level these walks at the shore were encounters with the wild, something you cannot experience fully in a manicured urban park. Trails and walkways remind us of our human alteration of the natural environment—a disturbed Nature defined in contrast to technological culture.

Though it is easy to get to Ocean Beach in San Francisco, which is not very dis-attached from civilization, one can experience the primeval there. Henry David Thoreau in *Cape Cod* wrote that when he looked out at the ocean, with his back to the land, he was facing the world. When we look out at the empty sea, at the arriving waves, we can imagine, we can dream, that we are somewhere else in time. Though altered by the dumping of sand at the beach, the ocean resembles that same ocean that was here before the dawn of humankind. The sound and looks of the waves are primeval. Historical and fictional tales were set there. Walking through the wilder parts of Fort Funston we can imagine we are time traveling as well. Facing west over the empty sea we encounter the wild.

The Pacific is different from my old childhood ocean haunts in the East. When one faces the Atlantic one thinks about Britain, Europe, Africa, the Middle East. My forefathers were from Eastern Europe. Many of the big military events of

the last century took place in Europe. The East Coast is crowded with people and history. All sorts of stories occurred up and down the eastern seaboard. There was the American Revolution, the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, and much else. History also occurred on the waters of the Atlantic, less so in the Pacific.

For Americans throughout our history, the West held the promise of a new land and new start. One could become a new Adam or Eve. There were migrations to the West, but it still has its wide-open places. There were still the wild seashores and seas of the Pacific. Out there beyond the Farallon Islands were the potential paradises of our dreams.

When we look out at the empty sea, at the arriving waves, we can imagine we are somewhere else in time. Though altered by the dumping of sand at the beach, the ocean resembles that same ocean that was here before the dawn of humankind.

When we face the Pacific we remember these dreams. We remember the stories we have read. The East Coaster who visits Ocean Beach rediscovers the Pacific when they gaze out on the horizon. Ignorant of its deadly rip-currents, sometimes they run into the ocean and drown. Out beyond the waves is Hawaii, the Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, China, Russia, Australia, India. No British tea times, Spanish bullfights, City of Lights, or bratwurst. This can be a poetic realization. The massive Pacific still beckons the explorer who may find undiscovered islands and indigenous cultures. There are also the exotic locales which might invite newcomers. Maybe there also would be unforeseen adventures out there still.

Some find tranquility there, but the seashore is also violent, a meeting place between irreconcilable worlds. The sea is impersonal. It does not care about your fate or if your feet stay dry while walking along the shore. Stephen Crane, in "The Open Boat," noted that the sea is impervious and unconcerned with your welfare. We are now more prepared to protect ourselves than we once were, but for some, our sense of the sea is still filled with foreboding.

There is also the night sky by the shore, which can be surprisingly wondrous. One can witness the stars coming out at night. Planets like Mars, Jupiter, and Venus are visible early during certain seasons. Sometimes there is the thin crescent of moon in sight. Later one can see Orion and his companions Sirius and Procyon. There is also the Big Dipper and the North Star Polaris in sight.

One does not see at Ocean Beach as many stars as one would see in the desert. The fog and the lights of the city infuse the sky with light, but piercing through the dark are some of the major constellations. Over the years, as the waves break on the shore, I have also seen the constellations Gemini, Cassiopeia, and Scorpio. The wonder of night at the seashore was also noticed by another Ryder. Albert Pinkham Ryder, a Gilded Age painter, painted this same night sky at the turn of the last century. I have revealed here in the star shine, alone, as maybe he did, bathing in the the sounds of the night waves.

But there were also times I felt worried at night. I doubt one could take such a night walk in some of the really big seashore cities in this country because of those who turn to crime. Walking south one can see the street lights shining over the seashore. After dark I sometimes think of the Dire Straits song "The Tunnel of Love." The lyrics would run through my mind, an acknowledgment of my fears because of the band's name, the dark, and allusion to the long trip home: "Girl it looks so pretty to me / Like it always did / Like the Spanish City to me / When we were kids . . ."

It takes me at least an hour to get home on these nights, taking the light rail cars to the Mission District from The Great Highway. I was reading books, mostly science fiction and realistic American literature. I also have collected books written about the ocean, some about the Pacific, books by John Steinbeck, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, and others.

Dead things also sometimes wash ashore at Ocean Beach, but the biggest show, besides the occasional sea lion that looks out at you from the waves, are the birds. One cannot conjure the sea lions at Ocean Beach as one can at other parts of the coast. The birds are always present, finding a home along the shore. Over the years I have seen brown pelicans flying in formation north along the shore. Occasionally they will dive for fish. Though awkward in shape, they are keen fishers. I have seen terns fighting or mating, over the shores. Ravens dance together in the spring skies. Blackbirds have chased birds of prey away from the heights above Sutro Heights Park near the Cliff House. Stoic seagulls have watched the sunset in the cold winds during the winter, summer, and spring. Sophisticated shorebirds have gathered in the surf to dine. Sanderlings and

plovers have scampered around to avoid the waves, also looking for food. Ravens have marked out their own territories eating the detritus. Seagulls have filled the air with their marvelous calls.

Maybe I was inspired by the birds who can fly away. Hard to forget here was more yearning for something different. In a sense it was a complaint against the city that I would be drawn to the ocean to dream of a better life elsewhere. I wished to journey out over those seas to discover what I would find there. I wanted to take a sea cruise, even though on a ship one may feel imprisoned by the sea. But there is also hope that there would be something out there beyond the horizon.

I wished like Jack London to sail out into this Paradise to see if I could find something better. I was not seeking a muse, Ocean Beach had been my Muse of the Pacific.

I wonder if I need an exit strategy to finish my Ocean Beach Diary.

Perhaps global warming will provide one. We should enjoy this seashore while it lasts. Predictions suggest that within 100 years we will be observing the sea from the streets we once sauntered down to get to the shore. One day maybe we will see the ocean between the buildings. Maybe some homeowners will need to have boats that transport them from their waterstep to the wider city. Rather than a backyard some may instead have a standing pond in the back.

There are also more immediate threats. There is talk of building alternative renewable energy machinery in the waters off Ocean Beach. It is very sad how much free energy we are losing if we don't set such things up someplace. But ultramodern structures along the shore will detract from our experience and connection with the past there, and with the infinite. Such beauty should be protected.

I could stay on as a columnist and argue against this. There are also a lot of other subjects I could write about. There is the erosion research at Ocean Beach. There is the literature of the Pacific. There is the novel *Jack London in Paradise* by Paul Malmont, which may have articulated my longings. We are also related to fish, as described in *Your Inner Fish* by Neil Shubin. Maybe I could write about choosing on some days to go swimming instead of walking. Maybe I could write about taking a cruise someday.

Like the birds of Ocean Beach I could also stay, even though they can fly away. Like the fish I could return.

Maybe the ending is not to forget, but like others, to visit less often this place of dreams.

Ryder Miller is a freelance writer living in San Francisco. This is his first appearance in the RCR.

WRITE TO US

The RCR welcomes your letters. Write to the Editor, RCR c/o ICO, P.O. Box 1200, Gualala, CA 95445 or by email to skrcr@stephenkessler.com.

FICTION

Greenway Street

By Thomas Fuchs

Some years ago, after my mother died, I found among her things an envelope with two photographs in it which I had never seen before. One is of my mother and a man who might be my father, squinting in the sun as they face the camera; the other is of myself and that same man. I'm about three years old, sitting on a trike. The man kneels next to me. We are looking at each other in mutual excitement and adoration. Behind us in this photo are fragments of background, a small section of picket fence, a glimpse of a tree. I don't remember our house or the street we lived on in Los Angeles. I have no memory of my father.

Why didn't my mother ever show me these pictures? Why did she want me to forget?

I do remember the plane trip when my mother and I left Los Angeles and moved back to Toledo to live with Grandma and Grandpa. At some point, I was told that my father was in Heaven and another time, more specifically, that he had had a heart attack, but other than that, my mother rarely mentioned him. I am sure she was never with another man for the remainder of her life.

Sometimes in my dreams, I do sense a presence I think of as my father, a presence without a face, without form really, just a sense of presence. Is this some primitive form of early memory—I was five when we returned to Toledo—or is the presence merely an unconscious effort to fill a void?

I do know where we were living when I was born—the address is on my birth certificate—so when I have to come to Los Angeles for a conference, I decide to visit the old neighborhood.

Even with the GPS on the rental car, I miss the turn off Sunset and have to work my way back through a maze of twisting streets and small hills in what is called the Sunset Junction district, just west of downtown. My heart leaps when I finally find our street, Greenway. I follow it up and over a hill, past a mix of small houses and apartment buildings, and then suddenly, I am on our block, and then at our old address.

I had always imagined that we lived in a house, but this is a squat, ugly, two-story stucco box apartment building. I look it over. It stirs no memories. Then I begin to walk down the street and as I move past the building and get a clearer view of the block, I am seized by a tremulous wonder, a conviction that I do remember this street after all, not from my early years but from my dreams.

I often dream vividly, often of places I have been—landscapes, old apartments or offices—but with an entirely new aspect. Rooms, hallways, windows, whole buildings and side streets exist in the dream versions which extend them and give me a sense of discovery. Thus it has been with this street, distorted and extended in my dreams of it, but recognizable now as this place in its discrete details—a doorway, the gray silver grain in the stone of the old lamp posts, a chimney, the very angle and slope of the street. Will some magic happen if by returning to it, I unite and reconcile dream, memory and concrete reality?

I continue down the block. Another apartment building stands at the end but most of the houses in between are small, single story wood frame. Is this how it was when we lived here? There are some details which must have changed since then—steel bars bolted over the windows of some homes, some front lawns torn out and replaced with cement to provide extra parking. A set of swings sits in one of these cement spaces and two small children, a little boy and a little girl, pump up and down, determined to outdo each other. When I pause to watch, wondering if I ever played here, a woman supervising the children eyes me with suspicion. I nod to her, keep on going. The enveloping sense of being in a dream lifts. There's really nothing here for me.

I cross the street and start back. Halfway along I see a beautifully maintained bungalow that looks as it must have when I was a child. No bars on the windows, lawn intact, a row of old rosebushes. On the roof, a tell-tale sign, a television antenna. TV antennas are usually removed when an old house is sold. Who lives here now? Were they here when I was? I stand, transfixed, lost in these thoughts when a man trimming some shrubbery comes around from the side of the house. He's about my age, perhaps a little older.

"Afternoon," he says.

I tell him I used to live on this street.

"When was that?"

"Long time ago. The early sixties. We left in '64."

"We were living here then," he says. "What's your name?"

"Elkins," I tell him. "I'm Jerry Elkins. We lived at 201."

Something stirs in him. "On the corner?" he asks. "The house on the corner? It was a house then."

"Was it?" I say. "I don't really remember. I thought it was a house."

"Sure it was. They tore it down in 1970, '71." Then he asks, "Do you remember me?" There seems to be a wariness in him now.

I don't recognize him but it seems rude to admit this, so I say, "Yes, I think so."

"We had color TV before you did. You and your folks came over a couple of times. I'm Eddie Armstrong."

"Yes, yes," I say. "It's good to see you after all these years."

In fact, I still don't remember him.

He asks, "How's your mom?" I tell him about her passing and he responds with the customary condolences and even as he does so, I'm very much aware that he hasn't asked about my father. Maybe he remembers when he died.

"Your folks?" I ask. "How are they?"

He tells me his father died ten years ago. His mother still lives here, with a housekeeper. He comes by regularly to check on her.

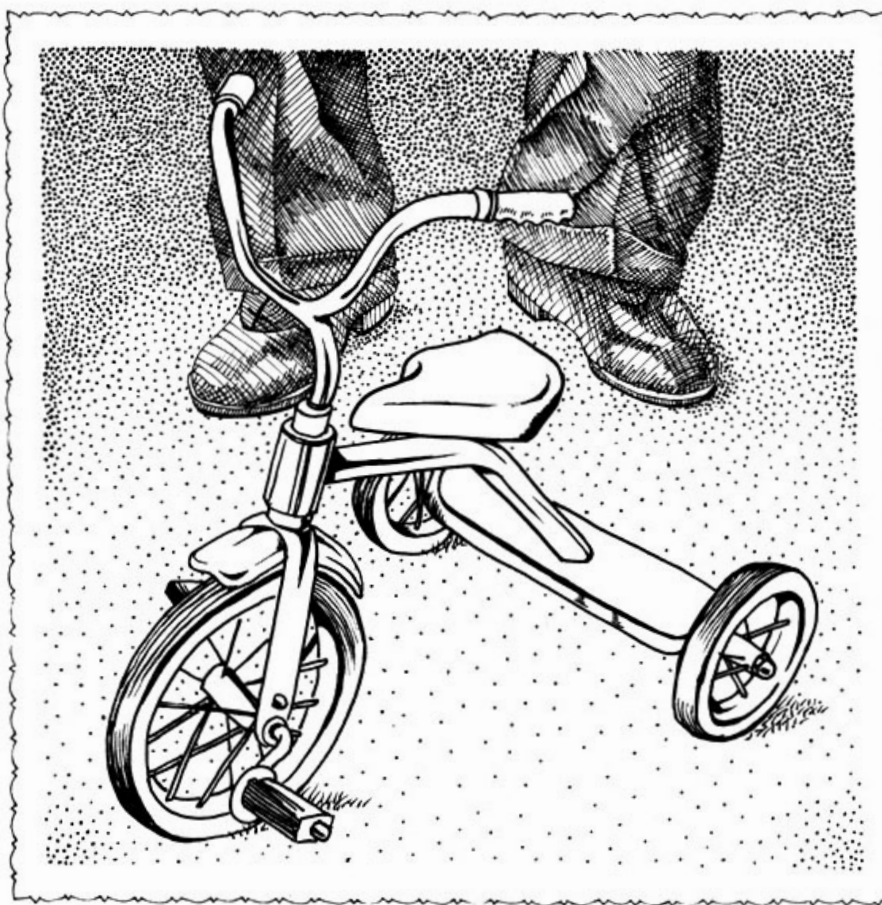
He's left the front door open and at this moment an old woman in a housecoat, with a nearly full head of white hair, appears on the doorstep.

"Ma," he says, "it's Jerry Elkins. You remember. From 201." The old woman steps into the sunlight, peers at me, studies me for a beat, then says, "My gosh. Yes. You look like your father. I can see him in your face." This is the first time in my life that anyone has said this to me.

Eddie says, "Do you mind my asking, why did you come back?"

"I don't know," I say, finally having to put it into words.

Whatever happened, whatever I saw or heard, my mother certainly succeeded in erasing that early memory by never speaking of it and saying so little at all about my father. She created a hole in my life to protect me.



ROBERTA TEWES

"I guess I just wanted to see if I could remember."

"Remember?" asks Eddie.

"Yeah, you know, the street. The neighborhood."

They look a little puzzled and they are clearly startled when I go on to explain, "You know, I was very young when my father had his heart attack."

"You don't remember," says Eddie's mother. It's a statement, a realization, not a question.

"What?" I ask. "What are you talking about?"

Neither of them says anything. "You have to tell me," I say. "Tell me. Please."

Eddie says, "Your father didn't have a heart attack. There was an accident. Your father was hit by a car."

"He had a heart attack," I say.

"It happened right out there," says Eddie. He's pointing to the end of the block, to the apartment building where our house stood. "You had a dog, a little dog. It got out and he was chasing it, and a car came barreling down the hill, and that was it."

"Are you sure?" I ask. "Are you sure?"

He nods and his mother says nothing. I feel like I've been punched.

"Was I there?" I ask.

"I don't think so. I don't know."

I really don't want to ask him the next question that's come to mind but of course I have to. "Did you see it, Eddie?"

"No," he says. "It happened just after I came in. It was getting dark. It was time for dinner. We heard the brakes, we heard it, we heard the commotion. We ran outside. Mom and Dad made me go right back in, so I didn't see much."

Eddie's mother speaks up, "It was terrible. Terrible. Don't talk about it." She starts back toward the house.

Eddie stands silently with me, for a few moments, then he says, "I'm sorry," and turns and follows his mother. He's almost in the house when I call out to him about a nagging detail of the story.

"Eddie . . ."

"Yeah?"

"What happened to the dog? The dog my father was chasing."

"Never saw him again," says Eddie. "You and your mom left the neighborhood pretty soon after. I never saw your dog again."

I start back to my car, in a kind of stupor, but the story of what happened, it turns out, is not quite finished. Eddie has come after me. "Wait a minute," he says. "There's something I have to tell you. It's been on my mind all my damn life. Kids do such goddamn stupid things. I was at your house. We were in the front, there was a fence around it and a little gate and we were having a lemon fight."

"A lemon fight?"

"You had a lemon tree. We were pulling the lemons off and throwing them at each other. Your father told us to stop and he told me to go home. Sometimes, when I think about it, I think I might not have closed the gate all the way."

It takes a few seconds for what he's talking about to sink in. Then I say, "You think that's how the dog got out?"

He nods.

"And my father went after it?"

"Yeah."

I suddenly feel terribly sorry for this man. "Oh, shit," I say, "We were just little kids. I might have left it open, you might have. It might have just been broken."

"Yeah. Maybe." And then, after a few seconds, "Thanks for that." He turns back toward his house and I head for my car. Now my mind is racing. Did I leave the gate open? Did I see the accident? Did I see my father die? Was he killed instantly or did he lie in the street, writhing in final agony? Whatever happened, whatever I saw or heard, my mother certainly succeeded in erasing that early memory by never speaking of it and saying so little at all about my father. She created a hole in my life to protect me. I suppose with therapy I might recover the memory, but I would never know for sure if it was real or a kind of dream.

Across the street, the children on the swings, their energy spent for the moment, twist idly in their bucket seats. I wonder if in years to come they will dream of their old neighborhood and the odd, searching figure who passed through it. And then I am back, just opposite our old address, and as I cross to my car, I realize that this is where it happened, that any point here in the middle of the street might be the very spot where my father was killed. I have to sit when I get to the curb and catch my breath.

The moment passes and I break out in a sweat, a cooling sweat, the kind that sometimes comes when a fever breaks. As I get to my feet, I see the street, the whole block, now transformed, though not as in my dreams. There's the brightness, the shimmering vitality but not the distortion, the expansion, the suggestion of hidden meaning. The wonder of it is the wonder of the here and now—the shabby apartment building, the rosebushes outside Eddie's house, the children on their swing set.

Thomas Fuchs is a writer residing in West Hollywood.

OPERA

The Pasha's Music

Jane Merryman

The Pasha loves Konstanze and wants to add her to his Turkish harem, but not by force, only if she can return his love. She, a shipwrecked Spanish noblewoman stranded on an alien shore, has already given her heart to another and resolves to be faithful to her Belmonte, even though the sea has probably claimed him. Her intransigence saddens the Pasha, but he continues to implore her to be his.

Such is the main conflict of Mozart's opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, which I find so difficult to fit into my mouth that I just use the English translation: *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

Although I hum to myself Belmonte's hyper-romantic third-act aria, Blondchen's perky tunes, and Osmin's hilarious ravings, my thoughts keep returning to the Pasha, and he has no music at all. His is purely a speaking part. *Abduction* is in the German style called *singspiel*, similar to our musical comedy theater, where the characters speak lines as well as sing. In this opera the Pasha alone has only spoken dialogue.

To compress three hours into twenty seconds: Belmonte shows up and rescues Konstanze from the seraglio, the Pasha's harem. Everyone rejoices—except the Pasha, who remains alone on the stage, head in his hands. Fade to black, curtain down.

Even so, I love *Abduction*, a treasure chest of the youthful composer's best melodies. It was Mozart's most popular opera during his lifetime, enjoyed by the upper classes and common folk alike. The fresh and lively music conveys enough romance, slapstick, exoticism, wit, and deeply-felt emotion to please every high- and low-brow in the house. My friend, on seeing it for the first time, exclaimed that she didn't realize Mozart had written such humorous music. And the Turkish theme provides the



AUGUSTE COUDER

perfect excuse for noisy marches with loads of brass and percussion (after all, the Turks invented the military band). Fifty years before, the real Turks had been at the gates of Vienna, where this opera premiered, and had almost conquered the city. In Mozart's time, all things Turkish were the rage in the cafés, salons, and music halls—the enemy had become fashionable.

Mozart was a genius at setting up the emotional biases of his listeners. We know from Konstanze's music that she is broken-hearted yet defiant and brave. Belmonte's arias reveal him to be a romantic idiot, foolhardy and otherwise useless. The music of Osmin the guard is so angry, vengeful, and bloodthirsty that we laugh at his over-the-top bullying. The lighthearted arias of the servants Pedrillo and Blondchen tell us

While the other cast members are acting silly, the Pasha is an ascetic, radiating a severe personal and spiritual discipline.

they live in the moment and by their wits.

So what do I know of the Pasha since he has no notes? Not even entrance and exit music. Why do I not regard him as a hateful barbarian who collects women and throws around cruel threats? Why is he not the villain of the piece?

In the several productions I have seen, this role has been given to an actor who is tall and thin, austere and controlled. While the other cast members are either rhapsodizing about Love or acting just plain silly, the Pasha is portrayed as an ascetic, radiating a severe personal and spiritual discipline. He speaks few words and all are to the point, none are wasted. He is the only person on the stage who behaves in a manner that is rational, normal, sane.

And he is wise. When he catches the others in the act of sneaking out of the seraglio, he threatens them with torture and death. Belmonte pleads for mercy, promising that his wealthy father will pay a hefty ransom. It is here that we learn it was Belmonte's father who, many years ago, robbed the Pasha of his rightful kingdom and his beloved and drove him into exile. Things haven't turned out too badly for our Pasha because he now has another kingdom, a new harem, ships, an army of janissaries, and a chorus of faithful retainers who sing his praises. However, he still suffers the pain of the wrong done to him. The Pasha has it in his power to

destroy his captives, but no. He states that he despises Belmonte's father too much to behave in the same manner as his foe. He will not answer evil with more evil—at this point the San Francisco audience broke into spontaneous clapping and cheering—and he pardons his adored Konstanze and her lover, as well as their two servants. Now I have a reason to applaud the Pasha, but long before the third act I believed in his suffering and loneliness, in his humanity.

I keep wondering: why didn't Mozart give the Pasha any music? One article I read suggested that there were already so many arias in the opera that there wasn't room for the Pasha's. This critic must have been jesting. I find it hard to credit such an argument—too many notes never stopped Mozart. He must have had a reason related to the drama itself. The Pasha's speaking role sets him apart from the other characters. He is the adult who regulates their silly games before they get completely out of control. Mozart could have made the Pasha a Turkish caricature, much like the fat and crude Osmin, and this is in keeping with how his audience would have viewed someone from the barbaric East. Perhaps the composer's strategy had to do with the symmetry of the drama: the two servants contrast with the two noble persons, and so the terse Pasha balances the blustery Osmin. But, still, why no music? I'm no closer to an answer.

If my reaction is any evidence, Mozart succeeds as a dramatist—he captures my heart and mind and creates a character I will not soon forget. The Pasha remains a mystery and has become one of my favorite roles in opera—a role that has no music.

Jane Merryman is a retired librarian residing in Petaluma.

BIBLIOTECA

News, Views, Notes, Reviews, Reports and Exhortations from Friends of Coast Community Library

PRESIDENT'S DESK

Holding Our Own

Alix Levine

About two years ago, Mendocino County notified Friends of Coast Community Library that it wanted to make revisions to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) by which the library operates as part of the County Library system. After negotiations, and with some reservations, FoCCL signed the revision presented and sent it to be signed by the County. A few months later, our Board was told that a few problems had arisen with some elements of the MOU that the County had recently become concerned with, and that we would have to wait to see how County wished these to be resolved before signing a revision.

While we were waiting, our longtime Library Associate, Terra Black, resigned. Since County was obliged by the MOU still in operation to supply 32 hours per week of professional staff, a replacement was needed. In October when the County Librarian met with FoCCL's Board of Directors she informed us that in one week she would be recommending to the Board of Supervisors that the MOU with FoCCL be terminated, and that she could not hire a permanent staff person for Coast Community Library because expected budget shortfalls in the coming fiscal years meant that there could be no funding for that position.

Thanks to a massive show of support by our community and coverage of the issue by local media, the Board of Supervisors did not terminate our MOU and directed that funds already allocated for CCL's staff position for the remainder of the fiscal year be used to employ a replacement until the new fiscal year next July [see Library Lines, this page].

Members of our board met with county counsel and county librarian in November and discussed the feasibility of various approaches to solving the issues of liability, and assuring that Coast Community Library stays part of the system even in the case of being reduced to little or no staffing. Lack of staff would in effect terminate the MOU, since we cannot operate within the system without professional county staff.

What we can anticipate is that the Friends will be taking on new liability insurance costs, continuing to pay for certain supplies and new materials previously covered by the County in richer days, and very likely assuming other new expense in an effort to keep ourselves part of our County's library system. It seems likely we will suffer a reduction in operating hours from the 41 hours a week we are now open.

At this critical time in Coast Community Library's continuing operation as a branch of the Mendocino County Library we continue to rely on the kindness of our friends in supporting us with donations of time to do all the jobs that need doing in the library, money to fund our operation, and donating books and materials that become part of our collection or can be sold to bring in funds. Our library is truly a labor of love. Thanks to all for making it happen and keeping it going.

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Robin Black

Prisms of Life

Pamela Malone

IF I LOVED YOU, I WOULD TELL YOU THIS
by Robin Black
Random House (2010), 288 pages

What a find! I had never heard of Robin Black. I happened upon this collection in a serendipitous way. Too many of my favorite contemporary short-story writers have died. Writers who dealt with the most intimate intricacies of the human heart, rendered the sorrow and sweetness of ordinary days, and created utterly believable characters, whose vulnerabilities were subtly and skillfully revealed. I'm talking about John Updike, John Cheever, and Alice Adams. So I was delighted to find a writer of their caliber. These ten stories are all perfect portraits that deal with people who in the course of their lives have to face death, divorce and tragedy. Each story is written with compassion, breadth, and grace.

"The Guide" is about a father who takes his high-school-age daughter to the house of a dog trainer, to get a guide dog. The daughter suffered a senseless accident at age four, when a neighbor boy got her to shake an aerosol can, which exploded in her face and blinded her. She is the one character in the story who remains intact. It is her parents who have been shattered by that aerosol spray. I was amazed by the turn the story

took which caused the reader a startling shift of empathy.

The title story, "If I Loved You, I Would Tell You This," is also a masterpiece of shifting perspective. A woman, who has cancer, a husband out of work and a brain-damaged son, has a heartless neighbor who puts up a fence that blocks the woman's access to her own driveway. She says of the neighbor, "No one can care so little about other people unless they've been very badly hurt." "Not necessarily," Sam tells me. "Maybe the problem is he's never been hurt. He can't imagine real pain because he's never experienced it."

Real pain in families is the common denominator in all these stories. The mother of the brain-damaged son who suffers from violent rages, says, "It used to seem so simple: you're young, you go through school, you fall in love, you marry, you get pregnant. And then the road takes a certain kind of curve. Your sense of self can disappear."

One of the most tender stories is "Immortalizing John Parker," and here there are multiple losses and harmonies being played at once. Clara paints portraits and she's asked by an older man's wife to paint his portrait. Initially she wonders how she will do it as his facial expression is dull. But as the story unfolds, Clara realizes John Parker is at the brink of Alzheimer's. "John Parker knows. He sees himself leaving, understands about time—as she does. What it is doing to him. And he is grieving, for himself." John Parker's wife wants one gift for herself, a portrait that captures her husband of fifty-one years, before he falls into the pit of memory loss. Clara will do this, though she believes "time makes fools of us all," particularly as it applies to herself, her lover and her ex-husband. This deft unraveling of interlocking relationships reminds me of Alice Adams.

Most of the stories are about time, how it can ease or intensify pain. "Tableau Vivant" is about a long marriage, and the torments of aging. A wife, who hides her own stroke to protect her husband, must readjust as she watches him slip away, mentally and physically. "So what choice did she have but to unbraid the different strands of love and learn devotion without desire again?"

According to the writer's acknowledgements page, these ten stories took eight years to write. I hope we don't have to wait another eight years for the next collection. The short story, that perfect dollhouse-size prism of life, is a difficult art form to get right. Robin Black definitely gets it right.

Pamela Malone lives in New Jersey and writes from time to time for the RCR.

THEOGNIS

Elegies 783-9

RETIREMENT

To hell with the Hobby Shop and the Wellness Center.

My only "interests" are excellence,

And learning,

Same as they always were, from early on.

And well-earned pleasure in the lyre, the dance;

A few old-timey hymns, as well,

To keep my heart in harmony with noble friends.

—WALTER MARTIN

Walter Martin is the translator of The Complete Poems of Charles Baudelaire (Carcenet). He lives in Fredericksburg, Texas.

LIBRARY LINES

Julia Arrives

Lori Hubbard

Coast Community Library found itself without a branch manager at a time when Mendocino County was experiencing a financial crisis [see President's Desk, this page].

Patrons and volunteers were despondent after losing Terra Black, who served as the branch manager for seven years. Terra set a tone of graciousness and helpfulness that fostered a happy, welcoming library culture.

When Julia Larke was dispatched from the Fort Bragg Library to fill the position, she turned out to be just our sort of librarian. Julia loves reading and libraries, as well as working in service to her fellow humans and to the ideal of learning.

Julia holds Master's degrees in both botany and library science, which makes perfect sense for someone who seeks adventures of the mind. Following her muse, she earned her Master's in library science at the University of Texas. While working in that university's science library, she met botanists who seemed to lead enchanted lives doing field work.

Studies indicate that people doing field work in disciplines like botany, geology and paleontology tend to be very satisfied with their lives. The University of Texas happened to have a botany department that stressed outdoor work.

Lured by the wonders of the great outdoors, Julia pursued a Master's in botany and worked for natural resources agencies in Texas and Louisiana. Her life was rich with adventure and discovery among wild plants and places. In addition to tramping through pocosin wetland habitats, Julia also found the time to become an accomplished botanical illustrator.



Julia Larke

When she moved to Northern California, Julia decided to focus on our indigenous plants for fun, rather than professionally. The science of botany was also becoming more centered on laboratory work, so she decided to return

to librarianship. She has worked at the Fort Bragg Library since 2001.

Julia's many interests have informed her work, and Fort Bragg Library has been treated to programs and displays on rocks and minerals—another of Julia's passions. She takes up new specialties with gusto, like making videos of local events and doing Tai Chi.

As might be expected from someone with her natural sciences background, Julia is active with the California Native Plant Society. She has edited the local chapter's newsletter and written articles on invasive weeds for local newspapers.

Sharing her life with two dogs, a cat and a passel of chickens gives scope to her interest in animal behavior. If she were to take up beekeeping her friends would not be surprised. Our library can expect some interesting special displays and maybe programs from the new branch manager.

Coast Community has a high level of volunteer involvement, out of necessity. Not intimidated by this, Julia is delighted to get to know our diverse crew of workers, saying, "It's a pleasure to work with such helpful and dedicated volunteers."

Our Friends' board of directors welcomes Julia's help with additional volunteer training. We are very lucky to have Julia here, and look forward to a working partnership of mutual benefit and joy.

HERON from page 1

process learn to shed myself of prejudices, stereotypes, and blockages.

Just last week my daughter Erica and granddaughter, Emilia, were staying with us for a weekend. Friends of theirs, including Emi's best friend from preschool, Zunia, and two of her grandparents were also vacationing near Point Arena and she invited them to visit our home and later on to have pizza down at the wharf.

Zunia's grandfather initially struck me as someone I would have trouble getting close to. I've been able to catch myself having false first impressions, but the impulse is always there. He is a big man and looks like he has a sandbag underneath his shirt. We went out to visit my study. It was just after a heavy rain and there were muddy tire tracks in front of the door.

While everyone else came into the study he called me aside and pointed into the mud. "A bobcat was here last night—look at the tracks." I looked at the mud earlier in the day and all I saw was tire tracks. He saw bobcats, raccoon scat, and many other creatures of the night in the mud. I wanted to know more about him, how he knew all of that and at dinner I found out that he was an environmental biologist, recently retired from the Army Corps of Engineers, who had worked on marsh restoration after Hurricane Katrina.

At dinner we talked and I got to know his wife as well. She worked for FEMA after natural disasters. There was a nobility to these people I would not have seen if it weren't for that hungry bobcat and my desire to ask questions beyond stereotypes. When we parted after pizza at the wharf that night they invited us to join us at their time-share condo in Branson, Missouri, some day.

Branson's web site describes the environment there in the following way:

Known as the "Live Music Show Capital of the World," Branson, MO, is truly a one-of-a-kind family vacation destination—and



an incredible value—with more than 50 live performance theaters, three pristine lakes, 12 championship golf courses, an international award-winning theme park, dozens of attractions and museums, an Historic Downtown district, shopping galore, a full range of dining options, and a host of hotels, motels, resorts, RV parks, campgrounds and meeting and conference facilities.

What this masks is that it is also a white haven, supporting conservative family values, and manifests covert racism—but why not go? The music can be extraordinary, white people can relax and enjoy themselves without the pressure of worrying about race and immigration. There are always strange and hostile worlds that have their pleasures, and I'm tempted to spend a weekend there with them. My wife, Judy, and I will never

While everyone else came into the study he called me aside and pointed into the mud. "A bobcat was here last night—look at the tracks."

do it, but there are invitations you have to be grateful for even if it is against the moral grain of your life. You never can tell what you might learn.

But back to the lessons of the night. Respect for the night is respect for the invisible world that surrounds us, influences us, humbles us, and opens passages to the not yet known.

I saw the heron flash by as I'm writing this, couldn't tell if a goldfish was involved. But as the sun came up this morning I saw the most beautiful ballet I have been privileged to witness. There was rustling about sixty feet up in a fir tree at the far end of the pond. Then there was another one in a redwood. Then the ballet began. Two squirrels in the dawn, the sun gilding them, scurried from branch to branch, chased each other, and every once in a while leaped into the sky, landing without a break with the grace of trapeze artists, the danger of a tight-rope walker, and the natural, untroubled sense of just being at home in the dance of what looked like a twig, from which they launched themselves again.

When I write well I feel at home in the dance, but in the dark I love being a witness to the dance that is about to be.

Herbert Kohl is the author of many books and the recent recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. He lives in Point Arena.

Some Recent Arrivals @ Coast Community Library

Fiction

Adams, Ellery. *A killer plot: a books by the bay mystery*
 Andrews, Donna. *Stork raving mad: a Meg Langslow mystery*
 Barr, Nevada. *Burn*
 Cameron, Peter. *City of your final destination*
 Childs, Laura. *Death swatch: a scrapbooking mystery*
 Colwin, Laurie. *Shine on, bright and dangerous object*
 DeMille, Nelson. *The lion*
 Flaming, Mathew. *The kingdom of Ohio*
 Fortier, Anne. *Juliet*
 Furst, Alan. *Spies of the Balkan*
 George, Elizabeth. *This body of death*
 Hiasen, Carl. *Star island*
 Larsson, Stieg. *The girl who kicked the hornet's nest*
 McCann, Colum. *Let the great world spin*
 Miller, Linda L. *Tate*
 Patterson, James. *The 9th judgment*
 Peters, Elizabeth. *A river in the sky*
 Roberts, Nora. *Happy ever after*

Rosenblatt, Roger. *Making toast: a family story*
 Sanford, John. *Bad blood*
 Slaughter, Karin. *Broken*
 Unger, Lisa. *Fragile*
 Urrea, Luis A. *La hija de la chuparrosa*

Nonfiction

Bass, William. *Death's acre: inside the legendary forensic lab the Body Farm where the dead do tell tales*
 Barrett, Samuel A. *Ceremonies of the Pomo Indians*
 Bastianich, Lidia. *Lidia's Italian-American kitchen*
 Bennett, Noel. *Navajo weaving way: the path from fleece to rug*
 Chopra, Deepak. *The seven spiritual laws for parents*
 Gach, Michael Reed. *Acu-yoga: self help techniques to relieve tension*
 Goldstein, Sid. *The wine lover's cookbook: great recipes for the perfect glass of wine*
 Kelly, Marjorie. *The Divine right of capital: dethroning the corporate aristocracy*
 Linn, Denise. *Sacred space: clearing and enhancing the energy of your home*
 O'Donohue, John. *Anam cara: a book of celtic wisdom*
 Pleasant, Barbara. *Container gardens*
 Rando, Caterina. *Learn to power think: a practical guide to positive and effective decision-making*
 Royte, Elizabeth. *Garbage land: on the secret trail of trash*
 Shannon, Naomi. *The raw gourmet*
 Singer, Michael A. *The untethered soul: the journey beyond yourself*
 Starr, Kevin. *Golden Gate: the life and times of America's greatest bridge*
 Taylor, Jeff. *Tools of the earth: the practice and pleasure of gardening*
 Thomas, Elizabeth. *The social lives of dogs: the grace of canine company*
 Tidwell, Mike. *The ravaging tide: strange weather, future Katrinas, and the coming*

death of America's coastal cities
 Zinczenko, David. *Cook this, not that: kitchen survival guide*

Biography

Castro, Fidel. *Fidel Castro: my life: a spoken autobiography*
 Fisher, Carrie. *Wishful drinking*
 Kendall, Joshua. *The man who made lists: love, death, madness and the creation of Roget's Thesaurus.*
 Sarton, May. *Journal of a solitude*

DVD

All creatures great and small (complete series 1, 2, 3)
Chocolat
Clear and present danger
Complete walking with dinosaurs collection
Everybody loves Raymond (complete 1st season)
 Empire Falls
 Jane Austen Book Club
Rivers of a lost coast – narrated by Tom Skerritt
Son of Rambow
The thing from another world

Books on CD

Freedman, Richard. *More than Mozart*
 Grafton, Sue. *T is for Trespass*
 Hillerman, Tony. *The first eagle*
 Meyer, Stephenie. *Breaking dawn*

Young Adult

Clare, Cassandra. *City of glass*
 Collins, Suzanne. *The hunger games*
 Dashner, James. *The maze runner*
 Evanovich, Janet. *Troublemaker book one: a Barnaby and Hooker graphic novel*
 Fleischman, Paul. *Breakout*
 Jones, Sabrina. *Isadora Duncan: a graphic biography*
 Mieville, China. *Un Lun Dun*
 Meyer, Stephanie. *Breaking dawn*

Otomo, Katsuhiko. *Akira. Book three*
 Paolini, Christopher. *Brisinger*
 Pratchett, Terry. *Only you can save mankind*
 Reef, Catherine. *Ernest Hemingway: a writer's life*
 Westerfeld, Scott. *Extras*

Juvenile Items

Amato, Mary. *The chicken of the family*
 Barrows, Annie. *Ivy + Bean bound to be bad*
 Capeci, Anne. *The giant germ*
 DiCamillo, Kate. *Bink & Gollie*
 DiTerlizzi, Tony. *The seeing stone*
 Flanagan, John. *The kings of Clonmel*
 Henkes, Kevin. *El gran día de Lily*
 Hills, Tad. *How rocket learned to read*
 Hunter, Erin. *Into the wild*
 Juster, Nortin. *The odious ogre*
 Kenney, Jeff. *Diary of a wimpy kid: dog days*
 Hakoff, Juliana, et al. *Knut, how one little polar bear captivated the world*
 Law, Ingrid. *Scumble*
 Levy, Matthys. *Earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis*
 Lisle, Janet. *Black duck*
 Napoli, Donna. *Sly the sleuth and the pet mysteries*
 Nardo, Don. *Storm surge: the science of hurricanes*
 Paratore, Colleen. *The wedding planner's daughter*
 Riordan, Rick. *The maze of bones*
 Root, Phyllis. *Creak! said the bed*
 Sachar, Louis. *Sixth grade secrets*
 Schreiber, Anne. *Sharks!*
 Scott, Ann. *Someday rider*
 Smith, E. B. *The farm book: story and pictures*
 Spier, Peter. *We the people: the constitution of the United States*
 Stein, David Ezra. *Interrupting chicken*
 Williams, Mo. *City dog, country frog*
 Wilson, Karma. *The cow loves cookies*

LIBRARY HOURS

MONDAY 12 noon - 6 pm
TUESDAY 10am - 6 pm
WEDNESDAY 10am - 8 pm
THURSDAY 12 noon - 8 pm
FRIDAY 12 noon - 6 pm
SATURDAY 12 noon - 3 pm

Coast Community Library
 is located at
 225 Main Street
 Point Arena
 (707) 882-3114

BOOKS

Georgie Borges, Mischief Maker

Jonah Raskin

ON MYSTICISM

by Jorge Luis Borges
edited by María Kodama
Penguin Classics (2010), 108 pages

ON WRITING

by Jorge Luis Borges
edited by Suzanne Jill Levine
Penguin Classics (2010), 167 pages

ON ARGENTINA

by Jorge Luis Borges
edited by Alfred MacAdam
Penguin Classics (2010), 167 pages

Each in his own way imagines Paradise; since childhood I have envisioned it as a library.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

In the drone of computers and Kindles, and in the cultural anxiety spawned of aliteracy and illiteracy, it helps to have an ally and a hefty dose of literary history. Enter Jorge Luis Borges, the prolific Argentinian writer about whom it might be said that the more we know about him, the less we know. A poet, a translator, and a citizen of the Americas with a longing for global connections, he defies easy description; even his attempts to define himself never met the mark—though they are fascinating to read.

Borges was a modernist—an Argentinian modernist at that—and reading and writing seemed as natural to him as breathing. No doubt, Borges the reader, the writer, and the librarian would be fascinated by the technological transformations of our own age that threaten to undermine the universe ushered in by Gutenberg and his printing press.

Born in 1899 in Buenos Aires, educated in Europe, and cast under the spell of European culture, Borges wrote in almost every genre and category: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, literary theory, and history. From 1955 to 1973 he served as the Director of the Argentine National Library. The position was both honorific and symbolic. By 1955, he had written much of his best work. Moreover, by middle age he had lost much of his sight, and by the late 1950s he was unable to read after nearly half-a-century of reading doggedly. He soon needed help to cross a street. Wounded by his own blindness, he was still able to write about it with detachment:

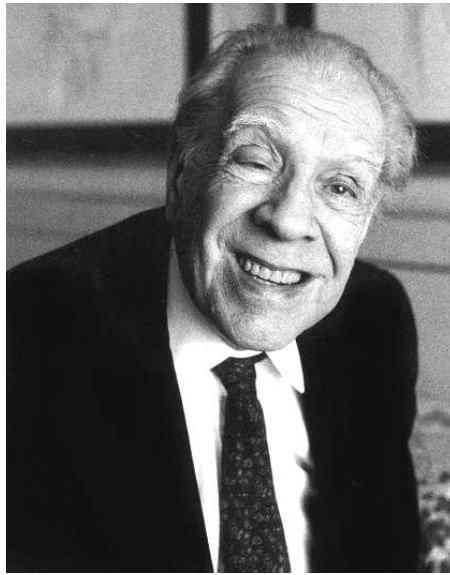
Let neither tear nor reproach besmirch this declaration of the mastery of God who, with magnificent irony, granted me both the gift of books and the night.

A consummate ironist and brilliant stylist, Borges never, oddly enough, won the Nobel Prize for literature, but he was awarded many of the highest literary prizes the world over including the Cervantes, the most prestigious literary accolade in the Spanish-speaking world. In the 1940s he became a well-known author with two dazzling collections: *Ficciones* and *The Aleph*; to this day, readers from Buenos Aires to Paris, New York to Madrid know him primarily as a short-story writer. The three volumes under review here show that Borges was a prolific writer of essays on a wide range of topics: from the tango and Buenos Aires—the city that shaped him when he was a young man—to detective stories and “the ethics of the reader.”

Borges began to experiment with fiction and nonfiction in the 1920s as a young anarchist and core member of the Argentinian avant garde that sought to topple the reigning monarchs of writing in the Spanish language. For another 60 years he wrote essays and reviews, and continued to do so until shortly before his death in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1986. In 1999, Eliot Weinberger edited and Viking published Borges’s *Selected Non-Fictions*, a 559-page volume in which the essays—more than 150—are arranged chronologically. For Borges aficionados, that hefty tome is essential reading; it includes the author’s trenchant

film criticism along with his “dictations” from 1956 to 1986.

The three new volumes—*On Mysticism*, *On Writing*, and *On Argentina*—reveal Borges’s diverse interests. Reading these anthologies one is amazed to see the author moving effortlessly from continent to continent, and from the culture of the gaucho to the culture of Franz Kafka’s Prague and to H. G. Wells’s culture of science fiction. With Borges, labels are necessary—or his work sprawls everywhere—but they are only an approximation. In her Introduction to *On Mysticism*, María Kodama, his widow, describes Borges as a man of many parts: an agnostic; a part-time Sufi; and “a pantheistic mystic.”



Jorge Luis Borges

Reading these anthologies one is amazed to see the author moving effortlessly from continent to continent, and from the culture of the gaucho to the culture of Franz Kafka’s Prague and to H. G. Wells’s culture of science fiction.

In his Introduction to *On Argentina*, editor Alfred MacAdam describes Borges’s heroic efforts to create a vital, living Argentinian culture. He also places Borges in the context of Argentina’s wars, civil wars, coups d’état, dictators and revolutions. That he survived at all is a testament to his ability to use the combination of weapons—“silence, exile, and cunning”—heralded by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, one of Borges’s all-time favorite writers.

In some of these essays, especially those about minor Argentinian authors, Borges can feel musty, but for the most part he seems extraordinarily contemporary, and well worth reading in the age of the Kindle and the blog. For Borges, reading was a kind of writing, and writing a kind of reading; his essays collapse the boundaries that are often used to divide the act of reading from the act of writing, and fiction from nonfiction. “My postulate is that all literature in the end is autobiographical,” Borges wrote in a 1926 essay, “A Profession of Literary Faith,” which came near the start of his career as a writer.

As though to prove the veracity of that remark, he crafted essays that were intensely personal; reading them is very much like diving into the autobiography of a reader who devoured books as a hungry man might devour a loaf of bread. “All poetry is the confession of an I, a personality, a human adventure,” Borges wrote near the conclusion of “A Profession of Literary Faith.” He went on writing autobiographically for

the rest of his life, as when he explained in a 1946 essay, “The Paradox of Apollinaire,” that “Of all the obligations that an author can impose upon himself, the most common and doubtless the most harmful is that of being a modern.” He knew whereof he spoke; knew also that to try to escape from modernism was for him an exercise in futility.

Borges read widely in the literature of his own country, of course, but he also read globally and not only in Spanish, but in French and English and especially in the literature of the United States. We might read him now because he wrote so affectionately and insightfully about our own authors. Borges revered Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, along with Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Works of experimental fiction and experimental poetry ranked high on his list of favorite books. He enjoyed detective stories and pulp fiction. Never a literary snob, he liked diving into the work of Ellery Queen, just as he liked to talk to streetcorner thugs in the barrio. On the street he found a compelling kind of bravado, and in pulp fiction he salvaged literary gold and offered insights into “the labyrinths of the detective story.”

Borges’s 1978 essay entitled “The Detective Story” shows that his intellectual sharpness had not dulled near the end of his life. “Do literary genres exist?” he asked in that essay, and went on to answer his own question. “Literary genres may depend less on texts than on the way texts are read,” he wrote. “The aesthetic event requires the conjunction of reader and text: only then does it exist.”

Of all the essays that reveal the author himself, one of the most satisfying is a 1927 piece entitled “Literary Pleasure,” in which Borges discusses his personal history as a young reader who—up to the mid-1920s—went through several distinct stages. First, he was what he calls a “hospitable reader” and a “polite explorer.” Next, he “discovered words” and “memorable readability.” Finally, “through ineffable leaps of taste,” he became “familiar with literature.” He would go on reading for several decades after 1927, and in many ways he repeated the stages that he had already gone through as a young reader. Some authors he seems to have explored out of politeness, and a sense of obligation. But even when he went along for the ride motivated by necessity and

not by love, he found something new and wonderful that delighted him, and wrote for example that Oscar Wilde’s “work was utter mischief.”

The volume *On Mysticism*—the thinnest in the series—includes a playful 1941 short story entitled “The Library of Babel,” in which the narrator describes his own slowly growing blindness that he takes as a kind of death. “Now that my eyes can hardly make out what I myself have written, I am preparing to die,” the narrator says.

The best essays in *On Argentina* are from the 1920s and capture the author’s youthful energy. In a 1921 piece entitled “Buenos Aires” Borges writes about dawn as “an infamous, dragged-out affair” that goes about “straightening streets, decapitating lights, and repainting colors.” No matter what the subject, he couldn’t help but write poetically.

His brief—just four-and-one-half-page—1969 essay on Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* pays homage to a “man of genius” who “carried out the most wide-ranging and audacious experiments that the history of literature records, and with happy results.”

Borges’s essays on writing, on Argentina, and on mysticism provide a record of his own bold experiments with language. The 1927 essay “An Investigation of the Word” is one of the most playful in his work. Beginning with the statement “that there is nothing more human than grammar,” he goes on to analyze in detail the opening sentence of *Don Quixote*, and then to define the word “word” in a “wordy” way. Borges’s concluding thoughts are as startling as they are autobiographical. “Language is nourished not by original intuitions,” he wrote. “But by variations, happenstance, mischief.” Few 20th century writers in any language were as mischievous as he, and very few authors made mischief with more of a sense of ethical responsibility to the readers of the world. Moreover, as a blind writer he joined the elite company of Homer and John Milton, and it’s not surprising to hear Borges say, “Being blind has its advantages.”

RCR contributing editor Jonah Raskin is the author of Field Days: A Year of Farming, Eating and Drinking Wine in California.

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COLOR from page 1

synesthesia is fun, but people who actually experience cross-sensory reactions report widely varying matches among sounds, colors, even textures, smells, and temperatures. Still, blue in most of its moods is perennially desirable for those times and places when we wish to be, or to project, calm, whether it is the calm of certainty or of repose. The blue and white bedroom, the blue and white beach house, are classics, and for good reason. Blue used in these settings is comforting, and thus, in a way, warm. So is the blue-green of turquoise and of aquamarine, at least by their associations with tropical seas. Finally, very few colors achieve the sheerness and delicacy of the palest blues, colors of the sky.

Eunice: What a pretty blue jacket.

Stella: It's lilac-colored.

Blanche: You're both mistaken. It's Della Robbia blue. The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures.

In that jacket the violated and broken heroine of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* prepares so calmly and daintily to go to the asylum. Of course the jacket has to be blue, however fragile and tenuous its claim to that hue.

PURPLE

Purple, in its deepest shades, is still sometimes remembered as the color of royalty. The ancient purple dye made from an extract of shellfish is known as Tyrian purple because of its association with that Phoenician city. It was known to the Minoans even earlier, around 2000 BC. The difficulty of the dyeing process and the rarity of the resulting cloth account for the association of the color with the status of its wearers. In fact, dyeing has always been a recondite process, and often a dangerous one, employing toxic substances like arsenic even into modern times. The word "drug" in English derives from dyeing: The dyers' guilds of the Middle Ages came to include pharmacists and doctors because of the special knowledge the two trades shared.

Although the manufacture of modern synthetic dyes still presents serious environmental problems, color has become cheap. *New York Times* style writer Guy Trebay, commenting on the wildly colorful costumes designed by Marina Draghici for the women of the musical *Fela*, using printed cloths imported from Africa and sold in Harlem, noted "a little-marked truth behind the lushness of fashion in much of Africa. Color is among the least costly elements of adornment; the more materially straitened a culture, the more color one tends to see." He further remarked that this fact "helps explain the persistent popularity of black in the wealthy industrialized West" (12/17/09).

In its darker tones, purple is an assertive color, indeed. It is variously very in and very out of fashion. It is never for the faint-hearted. But then there is the purple of lavender, which, antithetically to its associations with gay life, is also the color of *demi-deuil*, a color reserved for widows and for spinsters. The European and American practice of assigning this color to those who mourn or who must not live fully in polite society has a basis in physics. The light waves of purple are the longest, the bass note of the spectrum. Purple is closest to black, and it is, unlike so many colors, at its most beautiful when it is used in its lighter tints and its lowest saturations, very grayed, on the high, high walls of a Victorian parlor or in the sheer wool of a shawl.

BLACK AND WHITE

Black and white is most interesting when it is in fact all about the proverbial shades of gray. True black and white is stunning. That's the problem: it's all effect. It's all the beautiful, important black-and-white marble and ceramic (and, inevitably, linoleum tile and vinyl sheet) floors that are almost as iconic as red carpets. They announce important passages of important people. Black and white parties: stunning. Black and white rooms: stunning. We are, eventually, properly stunned, put off, chilled not so much by the high contrast as by the assurance, the daring—simplicity as arrogance.

Grays, however, are almost infinite. Grays are the colors in "black and white" photography. They do not stun but attract, seduce the eye, educate it to see variation and subtlety. I marvel at the photos of Ansel Adams, of Steichen and Stieglitz and Walker Evans, of Bresson and Cartier-Bresson and Imogen Cunningham. There are Cecil Beaton and Richard Avedon, too, who approach the true black-and-white, in feeling if not in actual tone, because their subjects were so often the assured and the downright arrogant, sitting for studio portraits. At the other end of black-and-white photography are the old faded photographs that aren't black at all, but brown, called sepia. Beautiful black dancers and actresses used to be styled "sepia" in the press, especially if they were light-skinned, which most of them had to be in those days. There used to be a tiny-format magazine for African-American readers called *Sepia*, along with one called *Jet*.

Watching the restored prints of black-and-white movies is revelatory. You finally see why, to some filmmakers, color is a distraction. My favorite example is *Another Sky*, made in 1954 by Gavin Lambert, the partner of Nicholas Ray and, after the movie, the friend of Paul Bowles and Tennessee Williams. I don't normally regard movies as purely visual experience; that claim is so often an excuse for poor writing. But watching this story filmed in the desert in Morocco is like walking through an exhibit of photographs and having them whisper to you, confide their secrets, move you along from one revelation to another, about the characters, the landscape, the culture of the desert people.

Finally, there are the subtle black-and-whites and grays of pencil drawings, that so often catch the essentials of the artist's vision, the work at the moment it is born, still tenta-



PT NUNN

tive. In painting, black and white is Whistler, whose command of all the shades and tints between those two extremes is so virtuosic that his occasional splashes of brightness, for example in the great paintings of the model in a Japanese kimono, come as marvelous shocks to the viewer's system: You didn't realize he'd ever *need* color, so complete is his mastery of pure gradation.

EARTH TONES

The ochre of Roman walls is endlessly beautiful. It is time that makes that color in its shadows and brightnesses, its rough and smooth, centuries of sun and rain and dust. Perhaps that is why so many of the "earth tones" do so badly in their adaptations for interior use. They are colors stolen from the outdoors, from the changing weather. Inside, they are mostly dull. I would call them "muddy" except that even mud is often beautiful outdoors, when a silvery spring sun shines on it. No, they are just dull. An exception: One of the printing paper companies, back in the early 1970s, asked a designer to come up with "earth toned" colors for a line of recycled paper, one of the first. They expected the usual mud and muck. Instead they were shown papers in a riot of brilliant color, the colors of parrots, orchids, birds of paradise, the Caribbean sea. "Those are natural, aren't they?" the designer challenged. I wish I knew who he was.

If you add green to the expanses of those Roman walls—the soft green of the tall Roman pines with their graceful canopies, the silver green of the underside of olive leaves when the wind blows through them—against those ochre walls, you have what designers like to call a color scheme. Designers will indeed *scheme* to make a room, even an outdoor room, imitate the glow and shadow of a Roman afternoon, ochre and green and silver. Alas, most of our scheming is in vain; but I sometimes think that as long as we keep our memories of real, outdoor colors in front of our inner eye, we will come closer.

GREEN

Another word about green, a different sort of green, not silvery gray but golden. "Nature's first green is gold, / Her hardest hue to hold." In his poem, Frost rightly takes the fresh green, the spring green tinged with yellow, in the light and mid-range tints and shades, as the color of innocence. I remember another designer, one who worked on fabric, who just a few years ago decided to create a line of printed designs on cloth that would be completely organic and sustainable. I first caught sight of her paper prototype designs at a large show in Chicago. The thing that caught my eye was the green she used, a fresh, clear, very slightly yellow green. There were some lines of pattern, minimal, suggesting the veining on leaves, and otherwise just that green, almost transparent. It was young, and innocent. In all the clamor and noise of that huge trade show, here was Frost's "early leaf." I would not, could not, have chosen it; I had long ago passed that hour that the poem gives to it: "Nothing gold can stay." That lovely green has, nevertheless, stayed in my memory as an expression of a sensibility that is much more hopeful than my own. For my part, the greens I love can best be evoked in alcohol: chartreuse, given its name by a liqueur, and sauterne, by a wine. With these yellow-greens, beautiful as they are, we veer back into the territory of the *Yellow Book*.

RED

Red is the complementary of green on the color wheel, but psychologically it lies in direct opposition to blue. If blue is cool, red is the hottest, except perhaps for its marvelous neighbor, orange. If blue is masculine, red is female. It is passionate and out of control. Red is the cat of colors, not just the red tabby cats, but all of Alastair Reid's cats, who, in his poem "Curiosity," "love too much, are irresponsible, are changeable . . . nine-lived and contradictory." Red is the color of blood, which is both life and death. Reid's cats remind us "that dying is what the living do, / that dying is what the loving do, . . . that dying is what, to live, each has to do."

I love red in most of its shades. There are the reds called Venetian, and they are the richest colors of all in some way, dark, mysterious, living and daring—those cats. They are perhaps best in velvet, whose cut pile allows them the most reflection. Move a little further into all the wine reds, probably at their best as—wine, in the glass, held up to the light. Capturing those reds in paint and fabric is very, very hard. Most of what passes for "burgundy" is as bad as the boxed wines that also masquerade under the name.

There are the lipstick reds, the "true" reds, that love only the smooth lips of young women. How cruelly fine is the line between alluring and pitiable in the life of a woman who loves red lipstick, and red shoes, and red satin dresses!

Then there is cerise, or cherry. Cerise is impossible to take seriously; that is its great virtue. It has a giddy brightness, with almost a hint of mockery, a touch of coolness imparted by the hint of blue in it. This is pure, selfish, careless beauty. How different from the ethereal beauty of the flower that precedes it, the sort of beauty we often call heartbreaking, nowhere captured more poignantly than in a movie called *Cherry Blossoms*, by the Zen-inspired German director Doris Dorrie. In this film, the celebratory time of the cherry blossoms in Tokyo is made to evoke the most terrible losses—of a wife, of a mother—in the lives of a middle-aged German man and a very young Japanese *butoh* dancer.

Nevertheless, pink is most often a color of easy delight: the purple pinks of raspberry and the orange pinks of strawberry, and the bright-bright pink called "shocking," after the package designed by the great Elsa Schiaparelli for a perfume of that name inspired by a huge pink diamond. Pink is a good color to bring indoors. It has its hazards, to be sure. Too bright and it's truly idiotic—bubble gum. Too pure and too pale and it's babyish. But get it right and it's the inspiration for everything delicate and elegant, the original shell, the *rocaille* of rococo. It's Mozart.

So, then, pick a color, any color. Start with a tree, or a patch of water, or a fruit, or a flower. Surround yourself with it, only it. Sit in the tree, bathe in the sea or the pond. Pile up the plums in a big bowl, or cut them up for jam. Indulge yourself in an enormous bouquet of one kind of flower. Spend some time.

Rebecca Taksel lives and teaches in Pittsburgh and contributes frequently to the RCR.