

O:JA&L

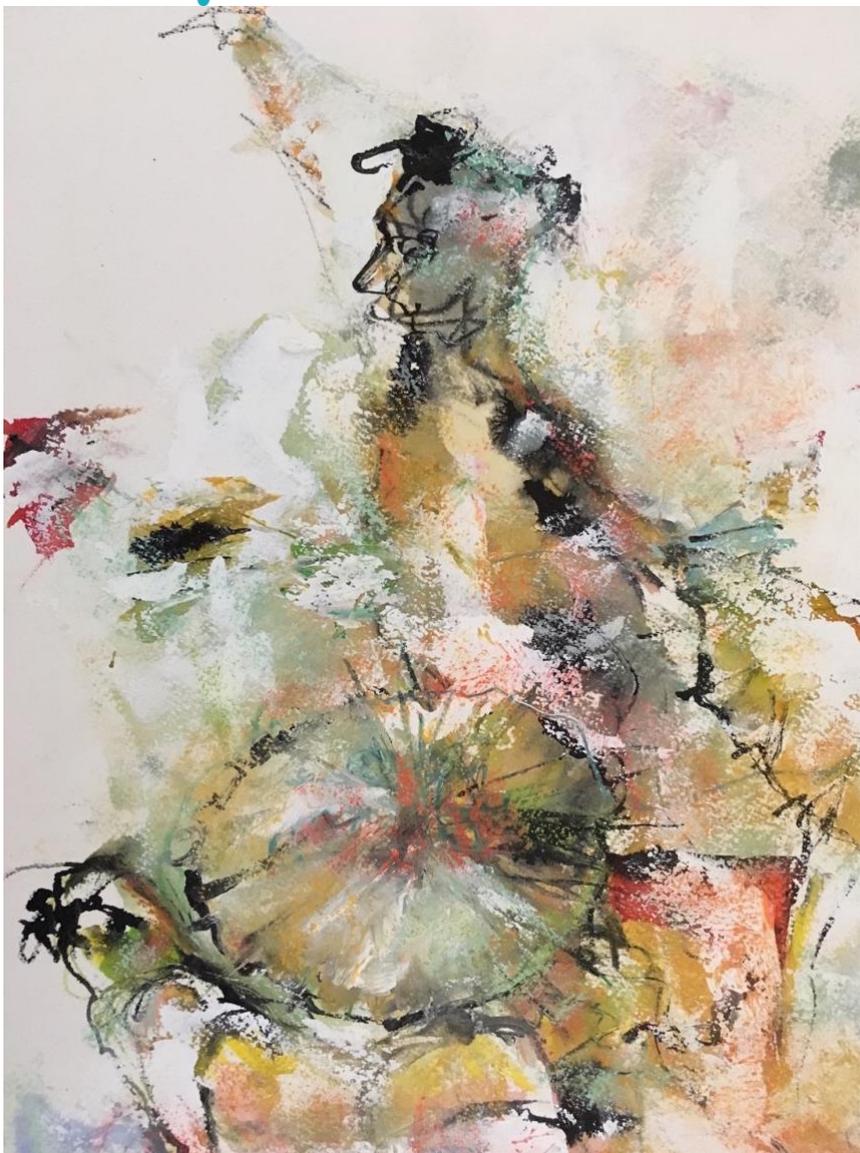
OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters



SUBSCRIBER PREMIUM

2018

PUSHCART NOMINEES



Pushcart Prize Nominees

2018

O:JA&L's

PUSHCART PRIZE
NOMINEES

2018

BUTTONHOOK PRESS
Great Falls, Montana

Pushcart Prize Nominees

© 2017-2018

Copyright for this Special Edition Chapbook is claimed by BUTTONHOLE PRESS,
the imprint of OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters, an LLC registered in Great Falls, Montana.
All rights reserved.



Published in the United States of America

Set in Garamond and CASTELLAR and printed in Michigan, USA

No part of this Special Edition Chapbook may be reproduced in any written, electronic, recording, or photocopying format without written permission of the publisher and the respective authors and/or artists. The exception would be in the case of brief quotations embodied in the critical articles or reviews and pages where permission is specifically granted by the publisher and author.

Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the author and publisher assume no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

Upon publication, copyrights of individual works revert to the respective authors and artists according to terms of publication in the Submission Guidelines for *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*.

Cover image: *Gong hay Fat choy* by Harriet Garfinkle, winner of O:JA&L's first cover art contest.

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION:

Welcome to ***OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*** and to our imprint Buttonhook Press, a small independent press located in Great Falls, Montana. We're glad you're here. You will find opportunities with us to enjoy an impressive array of new and established writers and artists that we bring to you from across the world. We search out the best of IG and other more traditional venues to bring you some of the most compelling writers and studio artists working today.

We hope your experience of our writers and artists is always a pleasant and rewarding one. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Google+, Pinterest, MeWe and VK. On behalf of our writers and artists, we hope you can share your favorite links to your own social networks.

Enjoy this Special Edition.

O:JA&L Editorial Team

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The titles included in this chapbook were originally published in *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*, LLC's online journal in 2017.

CONTENTS:

POETRY:

- Louise Robertson
“Diminuendo al Niente” 10

HAIBUN:

- Paresh Tiwari
“Rag Dolls” 11

FLASH FICTION:

- C.R. Resetarits
“The Ghost Lover” 12

SHORT FICTION:

- Kent Dixon
“Something Else About Mary”

PERSONAL ESSAY/MEMOIR:

- Peter Brown Hoffmeister
“When a Traumatic Brain Injury
Has Sex with an Arrogant Mind” 20

CNF (CREATIVE NONFICTION):

- Nicolas Ridley
“At the House of Anton Pavlovich” 27

LOUISE ROBERTSON

DIMINUENDO AL NIENTE

For years, my religious brother has stuffed his depression diagnoses into his pockets. Now he starves himself, becomes gaunt as a plank.

“I weigh 107 pounds,” he says.
My brother likes the ceremony of the church
as if it were both a hot wire puncture

and the white dressing around it. Even so,
no holy oil spread on his face seems to help.
He ignores the doctors, too.

What can I say to him? As soon as a priest laid hands
on me, I went and knelt before the altar
of the written word. I text him mornings trying to avoid the sin
of telling him how much I enjoy the salt and fish of the world.
Otherwise, he'll say how he wishes he could have that.
The only answer I have is no answer:

Look, brother, look at the blocked bodies
of the concrete river locks soaking in the water.
You could make a nave of those repeating forms

fading into the fog and make incense
of their murk and mark the high tide lines.
You could make a prayer of that. You could.

PARESH TIWARI

RAG DOLLS

All day long, we sit on the crumbling wall of the cemetery. Our feet, clad in mud-crusted Mary Janes, dangle inches above the wild grass.

There is silence . . . a blanket of windless heat punctuated by the caw of crows and the chatter of squirrels, until the first fat bullets of rain lodge themselves on our necks.

We shoulder the bags, put on our rain capes and begin the long walk back. We must have looked hunchbacked, the rain capes bulging over our oversized school bags. Once this would have been reason enough for ceaseless bouts of laughter, we may even have splashed about in the muddy puddles or tried to catch the raindrops on our tongue.

But not today.

*roar of rain . . .
knowing what she means
by 'he touches me'*

C. R. RESETARITS

THE GHOST LOVER

Nathan leaves tomorrow to cover a coup in Africa. How I admire his fearlessness. I want to become fearless too, for him. I want him to feel . . .

"Feel?" Morgan asked in his low voice. He pulled at the sheets, nestled against Emma's arm, his eyes peering over her journal.

"Can't decide."

"Then stay in bed and contemplate. You have your way with me and then you're gone."

"Silly man."

"Taking advantage of my physical gifts, tossing me aside."

Morgan sighed. Emma eyed him suspiciously.

"Physical gifts? Oh yes, you have excellent eye sight for a man your age."

Morgan grabbed at his heart, but when she leaned in to tease him, he swung her effortlessly, swaddled in bed sheets, on top of him.

"It's my ears, you know, that you are really after."

"Funny ears."

"All ears and lucky for you because I doubt your Nathan ever hears your journals. Maybe in the dead of night, maybe when he is sound asleep. Hence, your need of me. But I don't mind because I admire you as much as you admire Nathan. Of course, we all admire Nathan."

"Is that irony or sincerity in your voice? I find your true feelings quite ghostly. I could put my hand right through the fog of your intent."

"Nicely put, my love. Ghostly."

"I mean it in the best possible way."

"You are capable of nothing else."

"I find your ghosthood a comfort."

"Comfortable, old, ghostly Morgan."

"You, this, our . . . "

"Adultery?"

"Purposefully shocking, ghostly that you are. No. What I mean is that we are less real than my marriage . . . "

"Less sanctioned."

"Exactly. Less defined, more spectral. And still I often think that we are more knowable because of it, more re-creatable. Like many a ghost. We can always conjure us up."

"Indeed?"

"Unlike the Nathans, the marriages, the institutes, the bloodlines. Do you see?"

"Rather Platonic."

"Platonic! This?"

"Larger view of Platonic, my dear. Nathan, the ideal, versus Morgan, the ghostly copy."

"Yes. That's it. We can't recreate the specific carrot but the idea, the ghost, the spirit of the carrot . . . you know?"

"Thank god that I do. As a biographer I suppose I chase the spirit of carrots for a living."

"And so well too."

"So, the people I write about are . . . "

"More tangible, more graspable in print than in life. Extraordinary people, like Nathan, are like that, don't you think? Utterly unknowable."

"Or unutterably knowable and so we needn't speak of it again. Sweet, deep Emma."

Emma found her journal and patted it gently.

"And there was really nothing to write of before Nathan?" Morgan asked.

"Nothing beyond me. I'm not very interested in me."

"I am."

"Interested in me or yourself."

"Both at once."

"Wicked man."

"No. Wicked would be me not adoring you enough."

Emma gave Morgan a dubious look, which turned into a smile under the crook of his grin.

She blushed, gasped a little for air.

"What I mean is your wit is wicked."

"You are so kind. And so I am wicked, but perhaps you mean well-wicked, as a candle, burning bright, waiting to be extinguished by your tongue upon my flame. A sizzle, flesh on flesh, my wit and wick sanguine, my sarcasms all honey-hued."

Morgan held Emma's hand to his lips. Her eyes stared blankly, her forehead softly furrowed, eyelids caught in an extended flutter.

She regained herself and pulled free. He laughed and tightened his grip about her waist.

"You said you wanted to know variations on a theme. Do I, in general and on the specifics still instruct? Is this not what you wanted?"

Emma nodded, her hand falling limply upon Morgan's chest.

"Do you want it to end?"

She nodded, fighting back tears, trying to smile kindly.

"I don't please you then?"

"Yes and no. I'm here to become more desirable. You said you sympathized, but I'm afraid of losing my way."

"Nathan."

"I thought it, you, this, wouldn't matter to my world of Nathan."

"The ideal to my ghostly rendition."

"Or, I thought, it would help. Although, admittedly my Nathan-world may be more of my creation than I suppose, but it's what I've always wanted, known. I find the surety of that world slipping. I think too easily of you."

"Oh well, that won't do."

"Because I'm not in love with you. This makes me doubt, sometimes, whether I am with him."

"Oh, Ems, I'm not Nathan, true enough. We needn't carry on if you don't want. But my counsel and your befriending, well, I must beg your continued indulgence. Don't forsake me completely. We can go to the theater, visit friends. As always. As before. You can continue to read yourself, your Nathan, your romance, into ghosthood for me."

Emma tried to study Morgan's face, to read the pathos in his eyes, in the heavy timbre of his voice, but it was all as she had said, ghostly. Still, he drew her in.

Morgan reached for the journal, caught in the tangle of their legs.

"Perhaps we could work on this together, in celebration of our new relationship. Your voice, my wicked wit. First, however, I should read it myself cause knowing you, you and your shadowy ways, you've probably been throwing old Morgan a bone or two but saving all the meaty sections for yourself."

She laughed and reached for her journal, but Morgan moved ever so slightly, forcing her to lean against him as she reclaimed it. He moved again, pressing her body against his. Her confusion, a sudden calculation of defenses, made her struggle, and so she made the mistake of meeting his gaze. Her heart beat wildly and her resolve to disentangle, so real and sure earlier, quivered for a moment in the space between and vanished into thin air.

KENT H. DIXON

SOMETHING ELSE ABOUT MARY
(CHARTRES, JULY 2002)

You are fourteen, certainly old enough to marry but still innocent of men; more or less ignorant of the facts of life, more naïve than righteous really. And so, strange things may come, passing strange: in the middle of one ordinary morning, for instance, the sun warming the kitchen stones after everyone has left, you have a vision: a blinding angel in flame-blue robes appears out of nowhere telling you not to be afraid but, you are going to have a baby. An important baby. You'll be important, too.

Now there was the calf, and the one-eyed ewe with all her lambs every year—you know something about such things, and this is not the way it usually happens. But, only a month after the angel, you begin to feel it—which is also not the way it happens, at least according to all the women, but it seems to be so, an early quickening, and as your belly grows, and your bosoms... they are fair even if a little tender, and your family quickly marries you off to nice-ish older man, who seems willing to accept the circumstances.

He's a bit distant, hard to measure really, but he accepts the preposterous. You think he's a bit daft, in fact, but he is a widower with children and from a good family (even if he is adopted, O, those envious whispers), and he wants a wife, and there's all this rumor of being honored among men which has him beaming with pride for another's child. He must have been a failure in his first life, or at least he was not ambitious. And now he's to be honored with an important son. Everybody have their shekel, as Gamma says, pumping an invisible balance with her spotted hands.

The last word is: he is nice, and it's a roof, and you won't be stoned to death.

But that, as we all know, is not the last word. There is, for example, strong sickness for several months, so that you wish it would go away, it was nothing you asked for; and there are his children—you are not their mother, though two of them can't even remember her, but you are flung among them more as a sister, and it is hard to keep playing with them and out-smarting the older boys when you're as big as two melons and hungry as a pig. And then, my god, comes the forced tax registry and you have to go, the younger children

spread around among even your relatives, and the dreadful donkey ride brings on early labor, and the capital is so loud, so swarming with so many people, immense soldiers with arms with silver linings, and inhuman metal faces, no one nodding hello, no one to help, and Joseph can find shelter only in a moldy stable.

And then, maidenhead still in tact, you learn the truth about having babies, in a bed of hay, so smoky it's hard to breathe—with long-faced cattle mooing in answer to your cries—! a beautiful baby, a boy as everyone seemed to know at the outset. That was not a discrete angel.

And of course the second time you wake up there are these three weird old mages, star gazers each from a different far-off land, with their babble of a wandering star and an important baby...guess who. At this point, swirling along in the flood of events, on the one hand not likely any of you will get home even, while on the other you're starting to believe it yourself, starting to trust the crush and confusion that keeps falling piece by piece into place, this chaos, maybe it's your friend. There was no father to this child, you are still a girl, why should anything else make sense either.

And this one—his eyes, and he's so quiet, almost smiling, sometimes when he is batted on you feel you are the baby and he's the nurse. You think maybe you could do it again; you could have lots of important babies.

But then it's terror again. Now they are killing babies and you have to flee. It's the cumbersome gifts you worry about, from the old sages. There are plenty of man-with-woman-and-child combinations milling about the country side, but how many are carrying a pyx of myrrh, Frankincense stronger than the donkey stench? So much gold weighing down poor Solomon that only the baby can ride on his back. You are like a fable.

But, you all make it home, and months slip by. You're getting used to all the women telling you this is no normal baby, with his wise eyes and considerate demands. Most babies cry, they say. And you think, most babies don't have me for a mother. For you love him, feed and wash and serve and teach him, and Joseph is getting more work because of him—people come to see the baby, and then see the wrought yokes and sleek ploughs and want to take something away, so they bring stools and cabinets to be fixed—one man ordered a bed—and at night, this kind man smelling of his cedar shavings...you rub his brow and he falls asleep and then the children one by one drop off and finally it is just you and the baby, with the curious family name from Aramea, Jezu—you would not have called him Jezu—Jezu who coos when you sing softly, and lean close to smell his skin, and he tugs at your

hair and you can't take your eyes from his: they seem to talk to you, but you don't know the language. They tell a story, you sense the movement but you can't yet see the people or places. It must be the story of his importance, but you will have to wait.

And then, the time comes to present this son of yours at the temple, and there is much ado, and a beautiful hyacinth-blue gown, and beards trimmed and everyone washed—the whole family shines.

And you see him coming before anyone, because you watch the periphery now, people are always rushing up and you don't want the baby startled, comes this man with thin white hair floating like smoke over his pink scalp, dragging his staff—you've seen him before, he is Simon—and he reaches right into your arms and pulls the blanket aside—the baby's asleep—then drops to his knees before you and says, almost into your lap, “I have seen the Christ.”

And then he looks up into your face like a suppliant and says, “And your soul, too, Mary, will be pierced with a sword.”

And Jesus wakes and you look into his face and know that you have just heard his story, the whole story, and you almost die.

PETER BROWN HOFFMEISTER

WHEN A TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY HAS SEX WITH AN ARROGANT MIND

I

What's the square root of invisible?

If it's 38 degrees and dark, early morning and raining on December 4th, 2014, and you're biking south through Eugene, Oregon, and a car comes directly from the west (alley to alley, across traffic) you won't see the car until it is about to hit you. How much time will you have? Half a second? An eighth of a second?

The car will appear in the peripheral vision of your right eye, and the left side of your brain will light up, sending warning messages from your thalamus to your amygdala. This is what scientists call "the low road response," fight or flight. Your brain wants you to kill, to run away, or to mate quickly before you die.

Your sensory cortex will try to engage but there will be no time for its signals to travel to the hippocampus. You will flip over the back of the car and be on the ground before your brain can put the fear stimulus into context. There will be no correlations, no similar memories to associate, no measured neural response. Just metal and asphalt.

Your conscious brain will turn off as if someone has flipped the breaker in the garage, and you will enter into a lucid dreaming state. There will be something about your childhood:

**Car Accident = Traumatic Brain Injury = That One Summer
Afternoon, Swimming At Dark Lake In Central Oregon, The
Salamanders Writhing On The Wet Slick Of A Log.**

I signed a two-book novel deal with Knopf, Random House in November, 2014. On December 4th, 2014, I was hit by the car.

II

My helmet was broken. I was knocked out and I lay on the ground. This is not something I remember, but people told me that it was true, and I will have to believe them. I remember standing afterward. I kept begging to go to work. I said, "I have a class to teach. Take me to school."

The driver who hit me gave me a ride to the school where I teach. But I didn't teach my classes. I collapsed in the office and the office manager called medical transport. I was taken to the emergency room.

III

The rest of December is fuzzy. Migraines like funnel clouds over Kansas in July. I took Oxycodone and didn't watch any TV or movies for two weeks, letting my brain heal. Reading is perhaps not good for a healing brain but I read Lorie Moore's *Bark*, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, and Alice Munro's *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. I could only read for half an hour at a time. I trudged slowly through the hip-deep snow of books. Took naps in between reading sessions. Drank a lot of water. Drank a lot of coffee. Ate caramel. Arbitrary decisions.

IV

I used to have faith in my mind. I believed strongly in my memory. I was so arrogant in my belief that I wrote a memoir. Wrote thirteen drafts. Perfected my memories. Acquired an agent. Then published my memoir in 2011 with Soft Skull Press, New York.

Question: If memories are printed in a book, are those memories any more true? A prideful man will always answer yes.

My mind was infallible.

But my first moment of doubt came long before the car accident. Fall of 2011. I read as part of a two-author book series with the Portland writer Lidia Yuknavitch. We read back and forth, one chapter at a time, Lidia reading from *The Chronology of Water*, me from my memoir. It was wonderful. I was enraptured. Lidia's book was sharp, poignant, sad, and brutal, and I was listening to her tell stories, read aloud, laugh and cry with the audience and me.

Then, before reading her third selected chapter, Lidia said, "I don't believe in true memory anymore."

I looked up.

She said, “The more I’ve studied, the more I’ve learned that memories are not real, or not fully real, but rather somewhat real, beginning as real and changing a little bit with each telling.” She went on to explain that the telling of the memory then becomes the version that we believe as true, that we move forward remembering the told version of the memory rather than the original memory itself.

I began to research, and this is what I found: Memories are layered compositions, amalgams of true and untrue, made less virginal by each telling as the emotions of the storytelling moment interfere with the veracity of the original events’ emotions. It’s as if every time we take the apple pie out of the refrigerator, we add another crust over the top. Soon there are so many layers of crust that we would have to dig to find the original pie. And now it’s one thick pie.

What does this tell about a nation that’s obsessed with truth? Obsessed with people “telling the truth”?

V

In high school, my brother and I used to take LSD and shrooms to alter our own mental states as if our mental states were fixed points on two straight lines. Now I see my mind is an expanding universe, the clarity of the constellation Orion burning brightly over the Equator in the southern sky and a black hole growing in my injured northeastern frontal lobe.

VI

On May 10th, 2015, I collapsed in the middle of the night and had a grand mal seizure. My wife found me and thought I was dead. I didn’t breathe for three minutes. My daughter called the ambulance. I was not allowed to return to teaching for the rest of the school year. My doctors wouldn’t allow me to drive anymore.

VII

The neurologist explains coup and contra-coup, the forward backward sloshing of a jelly-like brain enclosed in a bone-hard case. My CT scan shows asymmetry, swelling, too much dark fluid in the right hemisphere. The neurologist points to the scan on the screen and taps a pencil against the dark C-shape of my injury.

If I did an exercise like jumping jacks in the six months after the accident, the jarring motion would exacerbate the swelling in my right frontal lobe. The injury’s hips moved in and out, in motion now, thumping, pumping until an orgasm of migraine washed over the remainder of my brain.

VIII

Go back further.

Earlier doubts.

In my undergraduate poetry workshop with a poet-professor named Dorianne Laux, I was the worst poet in the room. This is not false modesty. Each week, we were required to bring a single new poem to workshop. I dreaded my turn because the disparity in natural talent was evident. Other people in the room might become future poets. I would not.

Did I say talent? I used to believe in the theory of talent.

The hypothesis of talent?

I was taught that talent was real. I was brought up to believe in it.

But now I've read the work of Angela Duckworth and Carol Dweck. The grit studies, grit as a psychological trait. The renaming of educational possibility and determinations of success. There are key words associated with grit, words like curiosity, zeal, character, resilience, and wonder. And these have proven more effective as determining factors of future success than SAT scores, physical aptitude, or IQ.

But when I was young, my mother and father talked a lot about my IQ score. They told me about Ivy League schools starting when I was in first grade, or about my father's alma mater, Stanford. But I have to think – post injury – what would my IQ score be now as I sit in a dark room, with blurred vision in my left eye. If I pull up the shade to let in light, I can close my left eye and read. If I open my left eye, I can't read.

And yesterday, I forgot the word for...

You know that stuff you pour into a bowl? Then you pour milk over the top? You eat it with a spoon? It's crunchy and cold and...

When I remembered the word "cereal," I was able to breathe again, able to relax. Lay my palms flat on the table. Nod and smile.

IX

I also forgot the noun for door in Spanish. It's something with a P.

My great-grandmother, Iza Alvarado Chaves, pretended not to be Mexican in Los Angeles in the 1920s, and lied on two census forms. She didn't want to be discriminated against or deported. Social commentary: The United States of America has changed *SO* much since 1920.

Discrimination. Maybe my mind is discriminating against simple vocabulary. Maybe someone is deporting my memories. Where do I have to travel to find my fully functioning brain, a brain that I can trust once again? Is there such a thing as a brain that is infallible?

X

A brain test:

If you still believe in biology, in natural talent, in nature versus nurture, try this: Find a bright, young, two-year-old. See her natural wonder, her natural curiosity, her zeal. And remember that these are grit words. Then give her an iPhone to play with for six months. Every day. Hours every day.

I've seen this. I've watched her addiction develop. Watched her jaw become slack. Watched her brain boil down to hardened remnants on the bottom of a pan. Watched her lack of wonder, her lack of curiosity, her lack of zeal. Watched her patience dissipate. Watched frustration become her preeminent neural response, her first reaction. And that is only the effect of one, regular small screen in the hands of a bright young toddler. Now think of the myriad more sinister addictions available to us. What will our choices do to our brains as we age?

Or an injured brain?

How fragile is that?

I've spent a decade believing in choices rather than talent. Believing in work. Work ethic. A writer should be like a professional skateboarder, failing a thousand times before he succeeds on a single, difficult trick. One sentence. A paragraph. A page. Is there any other way to write? Or at least to write well? A writer must write for hours every day. Draft, draft, and draft again. Then revise.

But this writer needs a brain to do the work, to make the connections, to sift through the sand box of options, of diction, of rhetorical devices, of plot arc.

In the poem "A Hundred Bolts Of Satin," Kay Ryan writes:

All you
have to lose
is one
connection
and the mind
uncouples
all the way back.

So has my mind uncoupled? And if uncoupled, has my train crashed? Is it now a pile of mangled iron fragments, too large to be pulled together by a magnet? Too large to organize, too large to place in some kind of ordered pile, to form a common direction? Is there anything as ordered as destiny?

I remember the time when I believed in destiny. Faith in a prescribed future.

XI

When my third book, a novel, earned starred reviews from Booklist and School Library Journal, I believed in my future. Then my fourth book earned starred reviews from Kirkus and Publishers Weekly, and with those two books, I became a mid-list novelist. This is the beginning of something solid, right? I took time off from teaching to write more. I've considered quitting teaching altogether.

When I *can* teach.

If I can teach.

But this is what I'm thinking today. This is what I'm considering: Should I tell my publisher that I've suffered a traumatic brain injury? And if I tell the team at Knopf, tell my editor, my publicist, my publisher, will they still pick up the option for my sixth book? Will they gamble on the future of my brain, on the future of my productivity?

Will honesty be the end of my _____?

What's the word for that? For whatever this thing is that I'm trying to attain?

XII

Maybe humility is the virtue that I gain through this experience. Maybe I learn my place on this earth as 1 in 7.5 billion people.

So would the loss of my voice be a significant loss? Does the world really need one more writer?

Do you have any idea how many writers there are in this world? Or just in this country alone?

Here's a bio that's not rare at all:

A writer with 1044 followers on Twitter and 653 fans on Facebook. A writer who freelances for the Huffington Post and sometimes guest writes for VICE.com.

Would the loss of me be a great loss?

Most certainly not.

Yet I write. Every day.

I can write. I think I can.

I think I can think that I can write. Or that I *can* write. I think. I think I can I think I can I think I can. Think.

But does any of this matter?

NICOLAS RIDLEY

AT THE HOUSE OF ANTON PAVLOVICH
THREE STUDIES IN AUTHENTICITY

I

Konstantin Stanislavski, the theatrical theorist and practitioner, author of *An Actor Prepares*, *Building A Character*, *Creating A Role* and *My Life in Art*, co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, where he directed the first Moscow production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

It was Stanislavski who developed 'The System' (occasionally confused with 'The Method') which requires the actor to locate an 'Emotion Memory' and employ the 'Magic If' so that the correct feelings can be retrieved from the actor's life and replayed in his or her performance.

A particular play being staged at the Moscow Art Theatre included several scenes that were set out-of-doors. Stanislavski, a fierce advocate of authenticity, directed his actors to swat at imaginary mosquitoes at regular intervals.

On hearing this, Chekhov is said to have resolved at once to write a play in which the characters explicitly remark how very fortunate they are to live in a place where there are no mosquitoes to be found.

There is, I believe, virtually no documentary proof to support either of these stories.

II

1970. These are Cold War days and Moscow has little to offer the visitor from overseas.

I came here first in the spring. Three days by train from the Hook of Holland. The next day I sat — still queasy and rail-shaken — on a collapsed bench in *The Park of Culture & Rest*, surveying a sad landscape of rusting ironwork and cracked concrete. Later, I rode the incongruously ornate Moscow subway, walked between the empty shelves of the GUM department store, watched the lines of patient, patriotic comrades in Red Square, queuing to view the embalmed body of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov in the Lenin Mausoleum. After

three nights eating *borscht* in the Hotel Metropol, I was pleased to be leaving for Tokyo.

Now, in the autumn, I am back again in Moscow. I am returning from Japan, where I have been teaching English to businessmen, housewives and television starlets. I have sailed from Yokohama to Nakhodka, taken a train from Nakhodka to Khabarovsk and flown across the shifting time zones from Khabarovsk to Moscow. I have no wish to stay here but my train will not leave until tomorrow morning.

I sit in my barely furnished hotel room, transitional and drifting. My eyes rest briefly on the dented tin suitcase that stands by the bedroom door but there is no need to unpack it. Soon I will be home. Very soon. Unless, that is, I am delayed in East Berlin. I lie down on the narrow bed — a brown blanket, a stained yellow pillow — and close my eyes.

I am dreaming. Half-dreaming ...

Steep stone steps leading to a damp wooden temple. Ranks of fir trees climbing up a mountainside. Tiled village roofs in the mist. And now Miss Hamamura — her figure an elegantly bending branch — leans down to lock the office door. She sees that I am watching her. She smiles sweetly, not lowering her eyes. Instead I lower mine. Both of us knowing that she is gently — oh so gently — teasing me. Late afternoon and we have reached the summit of Mount Asama. We look down into the crater below us. Soon we will have to descend. A last look back. A thought that takes me by surprise. I will never stand here again. Can it be true? I am still young enough not quite to believe in ‘never’. Hampstead Heath in the sunshine. But she has turned away and will not look back at me. A girl with auburn hair. What colour are her eyes? What colour were her tears? I throw back the blanket. Sit up and stretch experimentally. Time to leave this room. Time to see more of Moscow. It seems likely that I will never come back.

In the lobby of the hotel, I find an Intourist leaflet from which I learn that Chekhov’s house is situated at *Ulitsa Sadovaya-Kurdinskaya, 6*. I am an admirer of Anton Chekhov’s plays and decide I will visit his Moscow home. Although I am realistic enough not to expect very much.

I walk past it three times before I locate the house. It is charmingly unimposing. I am asked to sign the visitors book which I do. I see that there have been no other visitors in the last six months. This does not surprise me.

The rooms are small. They have no life remaining in them. The exhibits are almost touchingly inauthentic.

*A pen of the type that might have been used
by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*
*A desk of the type that might have been used
by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*
*A bed of the type that might have been used
by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*

They are reverently displayed but there are no false claims. Nothing here has ever belonged to Chekhov. I feel certain that this would have amused him.

I am joined beside the bed by the concierge, a formidable figure in her middle years who takes great pride in welcoming me warmly. We converse in French although her grasp of the language is even less certain than mine. She has, however, one phrase of English, which she puts to frequent use.

—Anton Pavlovich, she says. He *love* the people ...

She leads me back to the first exhibit.

*A pen of the type that might have been used
by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*

—Anton Pavlovich, she says. He *love* the people ...

We move on.

*A desk of the type that might have been used
by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*

—Anton Pavlovich, she says. He *love* the people ...

Now here we are at the bed again.

*A bed of the type that might have been used
by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*

—Anton Pavlovich, she says. He *love* the people ...

My guide is claiming Anton Chekhov for the cause of Socialism and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; it would be uncivil to dispute this with her.

We continue together amiably enough until we come to a room where a wall of photographs is on display. Celebrated actors and actresses in costume, scenes from famous past productions. We gaze at them solemnly. Then I see a scene I recognise: *Uncle Vanya*, the climax of Act Three when Vanya tries to shoot Serebryakov. I am excited to be able to make the connection. I begin to explain that recently I played the part of Serebryakov in a university production of *Uncle Vanya* and ... But the concierge doesn't understand me. I try again. She stares at me disapprovingly.

—Anton Pavlovich! she says harshly. He *love* the people!

Does she believe that I am claiming some kind of kinship with the actor playing Serebryakov? Or — still more impiously — that I am attempting to wrest Anton Pavlovich from his proper place in the Soviet pantheon? I try again, pointing to Serebryakov and then to myself. She becomes more incensed. I mime the scene for her but it's futile and I abandon my attempt. Instead I nod and smile but it is now too late. The concierge is rigid, unmoved; she will not be appeased. She stands with her hand on the visitors book as if protecting it from me. We part frostily and I am back on the street.

The afternoon is spoiled. My mood has soured. I am feeling dislocated, melancholic, homesick. I return to the Hotel Leningradskaya, the smallest of Stalin's gothic skyscrapers, where the *babushka*, who sits in the shadows at the end of the corridor and guards the brass samovar, regards me with that mix of suspicion and contempt which the period and the part she plays dictate.

III

My father — like most actors — has a fund of favourite theatre stories which he tells well; and tells often. A year ago, hearing these stories repeated might have irritated me but this afternoon, sitting with him in the winter sunshine outside The Duke of St Albans, by Parliament Hill Fields, it pleases me to hear them again. The Duke of St Alban's is his local pub where he drinks most evenings, until recently in the company of an agreeable Russian gentleman who is attached to the Russian Trade Delegation half-way up Highgate West Hill. It's regrettable that, after ninety Soviet 'diplomats' are expelled from London, the Russian gentleman makes no further appearances at The Duke of St Albans.

—There's the story of Arthur Bouchier and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, says my father. Renowned actor managers, both of them. Fierce rivals, too. Tree's productions were notable for their extravagant realism and frequently featured live animals: flocks of sheep, camels, donkeys and the rest. An

aspiring actor, hoping to curry favour, gleefully tells Bouchier about an incident that has recently occurred when a horse performed indecorously on stage at a crucial moment in one of Tree's dramatic orations. "Wasn't that a terrible thing for the horse to do," says the young man. "Shocking," says Bouchier. "But what a critic!"

A pause. We drink our beer.

—Then of course there's the famous story about the legendary actor, Sir Charles Henry Hawtrey, says my father. Hawtrey frequently found himself in a state of 'financial distress' and had the habit of cashing cheques at the box office. Cheques that frequently bounced. This infuriated the theatre manager so much that he finally gave the order that Hawtrey's cheques should no longer be honoured. The next day, Hawtrey — accompanied by the lady he'd invited to lunch — arrives at the box office to cash a cheque for ten pounds. "I'm sorry, Mr Hawtrey," says the box office clerk, "but I've been told not to cash any more of your cheques." Whereupon Hawtrey crosses the road to the local pawnbroker and arranges to pawn himself for ten pounds. After lunching his lady friend on the proceeds, he returns to the pawnbroker, seats himself in a comfortable armchair, lights a large cigar and says to the assistant: "Take this cheque to the box office and ask for it to be cashed. Tell them that I've pawned myself and that, if I'm not redeemed shortly, I shall be unable to play Serebryakov at the matinée."

No, I think, that can't be right. Hawtrey could never have played in 'Uncle Vanya'. But a tedious fact mustn't be allowed to interfere with an entertaining anecdote. I go to the bar to return with two more pints.

—It's an old story but I think it's worth repeating, says my father. An actor approaches the Stage Manager and asks, a little loftily if, at the beginning of Act One, he could please be supplied with real whisky instead of the customary cold tea. "But of course," says the Stage Manager, "on condition that, at the end of Act Three, you don't mind drinking real poison."

It will soon be closing time. My father and I finish our beer and go home.

CONTRIBUTORS:

KENT DIXON is a prize-winning writer with three Pushcart nominations and three Ohio Arts Council awards to his credit. His fiction and poetry have appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *The Iowa Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Antioch Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Georgia Review* and others. His nonfiction has appeared in *The American Prospect*, *Florida Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Energy Review*, and others. He is recently retired from teaching Literature and Creative Writing at Wittenberg University. His graphic novel *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, co-authored with his son Kevin Dixon, is forthcoming from Seven Stories Press.

PETER BROWN HOFFMEISTER is the author of five books, his last two novels released by Knopf, Random House. His novels have earned starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *VOYA*, and *The Bulletin*. His last novel was an American Library Association “Best of 2016” selection. He was also the 2015 Spring Writer-In-Residence of Joshua Tree National Park.

C. R. RESETARITS has had work recently in *Litro #159*, *Crannóg* (Pushcart nominated story), and *Stand*; out now in *Reed Review* and *Jelly Bucket*; out soon in *Columbia Review* and *Backlash #3*. Her poetry collection, *BROOD*, was published by Mongrel Empire Press in 2015. She lives in Faulkner-riddled Oxford, Mississippi.

NICOLAS RIDLEY has lived and worked in Tokyo, Casablanca, Barcelona, Hong Kong and Paris and now lives in London & Bath, where he writes fiction, non-fiction, scripts and stage plays under different names. *Godfrey's Ghost*, his biographical memoir, is published by *Mogzilla Life*. Selected short stories have been read at *Rattle Tales*, *Liars' League*, *The Speakeasy* and *The Story Tales*. Others have been published by *Arachne Press*, *Ariadne's Thread*, *Barbaric Yawp*, *Litro Magazine*, *The Summerset Review*, *Tears in the Fence* and *Wordland*.

LOUISE ROBERTSON is widely published in journals (e.g., *Crack the Spine*, *After the Pause*, and more) and has a full-length book of poetry, *The Naming Of* (2015, Brick Cave Media). She helps run the Writers' Block Poetry Night, gives writing workshops, and is co-founder of the Ohio MeatGrinder Slam.

PARESH TIWARI is a writer, poet and a cartoonist in the body of a Naval Officer. He has been widely published, especially in the sub-genre of Japanese poetry. The first collection of his haiku and haibun, *An Inch of Sky*,

was published in 2014. Currently the resident cartoonist for *Cattails*, a journal by United Haiku and Tanka Society, USA, he was also commissioned for thirty-five illustrations for the December 16 edition of *Frameless Sky*. His second book of haibun, titled *Raindrops chasing Raindrops* is in bookstores now.

HARRIET GARFINKLE, winner of O:JA&L's first cover art contest, in her own words: "I dance. I have danced all my life in one form or another. I dance when I paint or draw or when I write. I have choreographed many dances, sold many paintings, but never been a published author. I feel like I have something to say and am obsessed with saying it. Art alone is not complete enough: I also need the words. I let the page dance with me and I see what emerges. I let my inner voice speak as I quiet my outer voice. I try to enter a dream state and let the thoughts and images come to me. When I make art of any kind, you will find me listening and not talking. My art is therefore a challenge or a response to issues current in my life. My interest is in people and the mundane, in the pedestrian perspective and what keeps us going in our ordinary lives, in how lives can change in an instant or be changing over time without one's consent— like a piece of beach glass, worn at the edges, but still full of light and color."

Pushcart Prize Nominees

2020 SUBSCRIBER PREMIUM

OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters
EXPERIENCE/REFLECT/CELEBRATE

