

SECTION II: Literary New York



Edward Hopper, American, 1882–1967, *Nighthawks*, 1942, Oil on canvas, 84.1 × 152.4 cm (33 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 60 in.), Friends of American Art Collection, 1942.51, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago.

The city seen from the Queensborough Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (from *The Great Gatsby*)

Writing is the hardest work in the world not involving heavy lifting.

Pete Hamill

Literary New York

New York inspires great writing like no other city in the world. A quick perusal of some of the city's finest classics provides an outline of a place that is simultaneously real, glorified, and disparaged. From the poetry of Walt Whitman, to the down-and-out reportage of Stephen Crane in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, to the memorable vivisections of the upper crust in Henry James' *Washington Square*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to exciting exposés of the marginalized in Ann Petry's *The Street*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*, to the lyrical poetry of Langston Hughes, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Li-Young Lee, to modern classics like Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, New York has been, and still is, the unrivalled setting for fiction and poetry, a setting that entertains and instructs on both a personal and universal level. Indeed, the setting for enduring writers like Whitman has to be New York. Nowhere else, after all, can one find such energy, diversity, spectacle, tension, and movement as in this most "unruly, musical, self-sufficient city—My City!"

The selections collected here are but a microcosm of a much larger field, but they are representative of the types of themes and approaches New York fiction and poetry often contain. In them, we find moments of pure feeling; histories of desperation; songs of hope; musings on loneliness, connection, isolation, and joy. We have organized the fiction chronologically: from Victorian literature of the nineteenth century to Jazz Age modernism, and from Harlem Renaissance representations to postmodernism.

Although the poetry section is arranged chronologically, we also pursued themes that relate to the issues in the earlier chapters, with the idea that artistic reflection and imagination are never wholly separate from actual political, social, and economic concerns. For example, the pieces by Taiyo Na, Honest Abe, and GangStarr are spoken word and hip hop expressions, a musical and cultural form that speaks to the struggles and triumphs associated with the urban condition. The last three poems are what could be called "9/11 poems." The falling of the Twin Towers brought with it feelings of loss, mourning, and melancholy which permeate these poems. The literature of the place where we dwell forever surprises us, broadening our perspectives and changing who we are.

Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street

Herman Melville

Herman Melville (1819–1891) was born in New York City and spent close to twenty-five years working as a customs inspector at the port. In addition to writing one of the greatest novels in world literature, *Moby-Dick* (which begins in Manhattan), he is also author of what is arguably the greatest New York story of them all, “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” This enigmatic story explores the world of Wall Street as it was emerging in the 1850s and points to the effects of modern life on the human soul. It is a story that remains as relevant today as it was then.

Part I

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom, as yet, nothing that I know of has ever been written—I mean the law-copyists, or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and, if I pleased, could relate divers histories at which good-natured gentlemen might smile and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener, the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable. . . . 1

Ere introducing the scrivener as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my employees, my business, my chambers and general surroundings, because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented.

Imprimis: I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous even to turbulence at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade

Bartleby, the Scrivener by Herman Melville, 1853.

my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury or in any way draws down public applause, but, in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds. All who know me consider me an eminently *safe* man....

My chambers were upstairs at No. ____ Wall Street. At one end they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call "life." But, if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered at least a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction, my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade...pushed up to within ten feet of my windowpanes.

At the period just preceding the advent of Bartleby, I had two persons as copyists in my employment, and a promising lad as an office boy. First, Turkey; second, Nippers; third Ginger Nut. These may seem names the like of which are not usually found in the Directory. In truth, they were nicknames, mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks, and were deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters. Turkey was a short, pursy Englishman, of about my own age—that is, somewhere not far from sixty. In the morning, one might say, his face was of a fine florid hue, but after twelve o'clock—his dinner hour—it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; and continued blazing till six o'clock, P.M. There are many singular coincidences I have known in the course of my life, not the least among which was the fact, that, exactly when Turkey displayed his fullest beams from his red and radiant countenance, just then, too, at that critical moment, began the daily period when I considered his business capacities as seriously disturbed for the remainder of the twenty-four hours. Not that he was absolutely idle or averse to business then; far from it. The difficulty was, he was apt to be altogether too energetic. There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him. He would be incautious in dipping his pen into his inkstand. All his blots upon my documents were dropped there after twelve o'clock. Indeed, not only would he be reckless and sadly given to making blots in the afternoon, but some days he went further and was rather noisy....He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner, very sad to behold in an elderly man like him. Nevertheless, as he was in many ways a most valuable person to me, and all the time before twelve o'clock was the quickest, steadiest creature, too, accomplishing a great deal of work in a style not easily to be matched—for these reasons I was willing to overlook his eccentricities, though indeed, occasionally, I remonstrated with him....

Nippers, the second on my list, was a whiskered, sallow, and upon the whole rather piratical-looking young man of about five and twenty. I always deemed him the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion. The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist, an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents. The indigestion seemed betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes committed in copying; unnecessary maledictions, hissed rather than spoken, in the heat of business; and especially by a continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked. . . .

Ginger Nut, the third on my list, was a lad some twelve years old. His father was a carman, ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart before he died. So he sent him to my office, as student at law, errand boy, cleaner and sweeper, at the rate of one dollar a week. . . . Copying law papers being proverbially a dry, husky sort of business, my two scriveners . . . sent Ginger Nut very frequently for that peculiar cake—small, flat, round, and very spicy—after which he had been named by them.

There was now great work for scriveners. Not only must I push the clerks already with me, but I must have additional help. In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now—pallidly neat pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby.

After a few words touching his qualifications, I engaged him, glad to have among my corps of copyists a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey and the fiery one of Nippers.

I should have stated before that ground-glass folding doors divided my premises into two parts, one of which was occupied by my scriveners, the other by myself. According to my humor, I threw open these doors or closed them. I resolved to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding doors, but on my side of them so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done. I placed his desk close up to a small side window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined.

At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candlelight. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically.

It is, of course, an indispensable part of a scrivener's business to verify the accuracy of his copy, word by word. Where there are two or more scribes in an office, they assist each other in this examination, one reading from the copy, the other holding the original. It is a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair. I can readily imagine that, to some sanguine temperaments, it would be altogether intolerable. . . .

Now and then, in the haste of business, it had been my habit to assist in comparing some brief document myself, calling Turkey or Nippers for this purpose. One object I had in placing Bartleby so handy to me behind the screen was to avail myself of his services on such trivial occasions. It was on the third day, I think, of his being with me, and before any necessity had arisen for having his own writing examined, that, being much hurried to complete a small affair I had in hand, I abruptly called to Bartleby. In my haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance, I sat with my head bent over the original on my desk, and my right hand sideways, and somewhat nervously extended with the copy, so that, immediately upon emerging from his retreat, Bartleby might snatch it and proceed to business without the least delay.

In this very attitude did I sit when I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, "I would prefer not to."

I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume; but in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, "I would prefer not to."

"Prefer not to," echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. "What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it," and I thrust it towards him.

"I would prefer not to," said he.

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eyes dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. I stood gazing at

him awhile, as he went on with his own writing, and then reseated myself at my desk. This is very strange, thought I. What had one best do? But my business hurried me. I concluded to forget the matter for the present, reserving it for my future leisure. So calling Nippers from the other room, the paper was speedily examined.

A few days after this, Bartleby concluded four lengthy documents, being quadruplicates of a week's testimony taken before me in my High Court of Chancery. It became necessary to examine them. It was an important suit, and great accuracy was imperative. Having all things arranged, I called Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, from the next room, meaning to place the four copies in the hands of my four clerks, while I should read from the original. Accordingly, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut had taken their seats in a row, each with his document in his hand, when I called to Bartleby to join this interesting group.

"Bartleby! quick, I am waiting."

20

I heard a slow scrape of his chair legs on the uncarpeted floor, and soon he appeared standing at the entrance of his hermitage.

"What is wanted?" said he, mildly.

"The copies, the copies," said I, hurriedly. "We are going to examine them. There"—and I held towards him the fourth quadruplicate.

"I would prefer not to," he said, and gently disappeared behind the screen.

For a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt, standing at the head of my seated column of clerks. Recovering myself, I advanced towards the screen and demanded the reason for such extraordinary conduct.

25

"*Why* do you refuse?"

"I would prefer not to."

With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him.

"These are your own copies we are about to examine. It is labor saving to you, because one examination will answer for your four papers. It is common usage. Every copyist is bound to help examine his copy. Is it not so? Will you not speak? Answer!"

"I prefer not to," he replied in a flutelike tone. It seemed to me that, while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did.

30

"You are decided, then, not to comply with my request—a request made according to common usage and common sense?"

He briefly gave me to understand that on that point my judgment was sound. Yes: his decision was irreversible.

It is seldom the case that, when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side. Accordingly, if any disinterested persons are present, he turns to them for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind.

"Turkey," said I, "what do you think of this? Am I not right?"

"With submission, sir," said Turkey, in his blandest tone, "I think that you are." 35

"Nippers," said I, "what do *you* think of it?"

"I think I should kick him out of the office."

"Ginger Nut," said I, willing to enlist the smallest suffrage in my behalf, "what do *you* think of it?"

"I think, sir, he's a little *lunny*," replied Ginger Nut, with a grin.

"You hear what they say," said I, turning towards the screen, "come forth and do your duty." 40

But he vouchsafed no reply. I pondered a moment in sore perplexity. But once more business hurried me. I determined again to postpone the consideration of this dilemma to my future leisure. . . . Meanwhile Bartleby sat in his hermitage, oblivious to everything but his own peculiar business there.

Part II

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. . . . Even so, for the most part, I regarded Bartleby and his ways. Poor fellow! thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary. He is useful to me. I can get along with him. . . . But one afternoon the evil impulse in me mastered me, and the following little scene ensued:

"Bartleby," said I, "when those papers are all copied, I will compare them with you."

"I would prefer not to."

"How? Surely you do not mean to persist in that mulish vagary?" 45

No answer.

"Bartleby," said I, "Ginger Nut is away; just step around to the Post Office, won't you? (it was but a three minutes' walk), and see if there is anything for me."

"I would prefer not to."

"You *will* not?"

"I *prefer* not." 50

I staggered to my desk and sat there in a deep study. My blind inveteracy returned. Was there any other thing in which I could procure myself to be ignominiously repulsed by this lean, penniless wight?—my hired clerk? What added thing is there, perfectly reasonable, that he will be sure to refuse to do? “Bartleby!”

No answer.

“Bartleby,” in a louder tone.

No answer.

“Bartleby,” I roared.

55

Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation, at the third summons he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage.

“Go to the next room, and tell Nippers to come to me.”

“I prefer not to,” he respectfully and slowly said, and mildly disappeared.

“Very good, Bartleby,” said I, in a quiet sort of serenely severe self-possessed tone, intimating the unalterable purpose of some terrible retribution very close at hand. At the moment I half intended something of the kind. But upon the whole, as it was drawing towards my dinner hour, I thought it best to put on my hat and walk home for the day, suffering much from perplexity and distress of mind. . .

Now, one Sunday morning I happened to go to Trinity Church, to hear a celebrated preacher, and finding myself rather early on the ground I thought I would walk round to my chambers for a while. Luckily I had my key with me, but upon applying it to the lock, I found it resisted by something inserted from the inside. Quite surprised, I called out, when to my consternation a key was turned from within, and, thrusting his lean visage at me, and holding the door ajar, the apparition of Bartleby appeared, in his shirt sleeves. . . saying quietly that he was sorry but he was deeply engaged just then, and—preferred not admitting me at present. In a brief word or two, he moreover added, that perhaps I had better walk about the block two or three times, and by that time he would probably have concluded his affairs. . .

60

Full of a restless curiosity, at last I returned to the door. Without hindrance I inserted my key, opened it, and entered. Bartleby was not to be seen. I looked round anxiously, peeped behind his screen; but it was very plain that he was gone. Upon more closely examining the place, I surmised that for an indefinite period Bartleby must have ate, dressed, and slept in my office, and that too without plate, mirror, or bed. The cushioned seat of a ricketty old sofa in one corner bore the faint impress of a lean, reclining form. Rolled away under his desk, I found a blanket; under the empty grate, a blacking box and brush; on a chair, a tin basin, with soap and a ragged towel; in a newspaper a few crumbs of ginger-nuts and a morsel of

cheese. Yet, thought I, it is evident enough that Bartleby has been making his home here, keeping bachelor's hall all by himself. Immediately then the thought came sweeping across me, What miserable friendliness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!

That morning... I walked homeward, thinking what I would do with Bartleby. Finally, I resolved upon this—I would put certain calm questions to him the next morning touching his history, etc., and if he declined to answer them openly and unreservedly (and I supposed he would prefer not) then to give him a twenty-dollar bill over and above whatever I might owe him, and tell him his services were no longer required; but that if in any other way I could assist him, I would be happy to do so, especially if he desired to return to his native place, wherever that might be, I would willingly help to defray the expenses. Moreover, if, after reaching home, he found himself at any time in want of aid, a letter from him would be sure of a reply. The next morning came. "Bartleby," said I, gently calling to him behind his screen. No reply.

"Bartleby," said I, in a still gentler tone, "come here—I am not going to ask you to do anything you would prefer not to do—I simply wish to speak to you."

Upon this he noiselessly slid into view.

"Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?"

65

"I would prefer not to."

"Will you tell me *anything* about yourself?"

"I would prefer not to."

"But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you."

He did not look at me while I spoke, but kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero, which, as I then sat, was directly behind me, some six inches above my head.

"What is your answer, Bartleby," said I.

"At present I prefer to give no answer," he said, and retired into his hermitage.

It was rather weak in me I confess, but his manner, on this occasion, nettled me. Not only did there seem to lurk in it a certain calm disdain, but his perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me.

Again I sat ruminating what I should do. Mortified as I was at his behavior, and resolved as I had been to dismiss him when I entered my office, nevertheless I strangely felt something superstitious knocking at my heart, and forbidding me to carry out my purpose, and denouncing me for a villain if I dared to breathe one bitter word against this forlornest of mankind. At last, familiarly drawing my chair behind his screen, I sat down and

said: "Bartleby, never mind, then, about revealing your history; but let me entreat you, as a friend, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office. Say now, you will help to examine papers tomorrow or next day: in short, say now, that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable:—say so, Bartleby."

"At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable," was his mildly cadaverous reply 75

The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall reverie. Upon asking him why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing no more writing.

"Why, how now? what next?" exclaimed I, "do no more writing?"

"No more."

"And what is the reason?"

"Do you not see the reason for yourself?" he indifferently replied. 80

I looked steadfastly at him, and perceived that his eyes looked dull and glazed. Instantly it occurred to me that his unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have temporarily impaired his vision.

I was touched. I said something in condolence with him, I hinted that of course he did wisely in abstaining from writing for a while; and urged him to embrace that opportunity of taking wholesome exercise in the open air. This, however, he did not do. A few days after this, my other clerks being absent, and being in a great hurry to dispatch certain letters by the mail, I thought that, having nothing else earthly to do, Bartleby would surely be less inflexible than usual, and carry these letters to the Post Office. But he blankly declined. So, much to my inconvenience, I went myself.

Still added days went by. Whether Bartleby's eyes improved or not, I could not say. To all appearance, I thought they did. But when I asked him if they did, he vouchsafed no answer. At all events, he would do no copying. At last, in reply to my urgings, he informed me that he had permanently given up copying.

"What!" exclaimed I; "suppose your eyes should get entirely well—better than ever before—would you not copy then?"

"I have given up copying," he answered, and slid aside. 85

He remained as ever, a fixture in my chamber. Nay—if that were possible—he became still more of a fixture than before. What was to be done?

Part III

Since he will not quit me, I must quit him. I will change my offices; I will move elsewhere, and give him fair notice that if I find him on my new premises I will then proceed against him as a common trespasser.

Acting accordingly, next day I thus addressed him: "I find these chambers too far from the City Hall; the air is unwholesome. In a word, I propose to remove my offices next week, and shall no longer require your services. I tell you this now, in order that you may seek another place."

He made no reply, and nothing more was said.

On the appointed day I engaged carts and men, proceeded to my chambers, and, having but little furniture, everything was removed in a few hours. Throughout, the scrivener remained standing behind the screen, which I directed to be removed the last thing. It was withdrawn; and, being folded up like a huge folio, left him the motionless occupant of a naked room. I stood in the entry watching him a moment, while something from within me upbraided me. 90

I re-entered, with my hand in my pocket and my heart in my mouth.

"Good-bye, Bartleby; I am going—good-bye; and God some way bless you; and take that," slipping something in his hand. But it dropped upon the floor, and then—strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of. . . .

Several days passed, and I heard nothing more; and, though I often felt a charitable prompting to call at the place and see poor Bartleby, yet a certain squeamishness, of I know not what, withheld me.

All is over with him, by this time, thought I at last, when, through another week, no further intelligence reached me. But, coming to my room the day after, I found several persons waiting at my door in a high state of nervous excitement.

"That's the man—here he comes," cried the foremost one, whom I recognized as the lawyer who had previously called upon me alone. 95

"You must take him away, sir, at once," cried a portly person among them, advancing upon me, and whom I knew to be the landlord of No. ____ Wall Street. "These gentlemen, my tenants, cannot stand it any longer. Mr. B____," pointing to the lawyer; "has turned him out of his room, and he now persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night. Everybody is concerned; clients are leaving the offices; some fears are entertained of a mob; something you must do, and that without delay."

Aghast at this torrent, I fell back before it, and would fain have locked myself in my new quarters. In vain I persisted that Bartleby was nothing to me—no more than to anyone else. In vain—I was the last person known to have anything to do with him, and they held me to the terrible account. Fearful, then of being exposed in the papers (as one person present obscurely threatened), I considered the matter, and at length said that if the lawyer would give me a confidential interview with the scrivener, in his

(the lawyer's) own room, I would, that afternoon, strive my best to rid them of the nuisance they complained of.

Going upstairs to my old haunt, there was Bartleby silently sitting upon the banister at the landing.

"What are you doing here, Bartleby?" said I.

"Sitting upon the banister," he mildly replied.

100

I motioned him into the lawyer's room, who then left us.

"Bartleby," said I, "are you aware that you are the cause of great tribulation to me, by persisting in occupying the entry after being dismissed from the office?"

No answer.

"Now one of two things must take place. Either you must do something, or something must be done to you. Now what sort of business would you like to engage in? Would you like to re-engage in copying for someone?"

"No; I would prefer not to make any change."

105

"Would you like a clerkship in a dry-goods store?"

"There is too much confinement about that. No, I would not like a clerkship; but I am not particular."

"Too much confinement," I cried; "why you keep yourself confined all the time!"

"I would prefer not to take a clerkship," he rejoined, as if to settle that little item at once.

"How would a bartender's business suit you? There is no trying of the eyesight in that."

110

"I would not like it at all; though, as I said before, I am not particular."

His unwonted wordiness inspirited me. I returned to the charge.

"Well, then, would you like to travel through the country collecting bills for the merchants? That would improve your health."

"No, I would prefer to be doing something else."

"How, then, would going as a companion to Europe to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation—how would that suit you?"

115

"Not at all. It does not strike me that there is anything definite about that. I like to be stationary. But I am not particular."

"Stationary you shall be, then," I cried, now losing all patience, and, for the first time in all my exasperating connection with him, fairly flying into a passion. "If you do not go away from these premises before night, I shall feel bound—indeed, I *am* bound—to—to—to quit the premises myself!" I rather absurdly concluded, knowing not with what possible threat to try to frighten his immobility into compliance.

"Bartleby," said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, "will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my

dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away.”

“No; at present I would prefer not to make any change at all.”

I answered nothing, but, effectually dodging everyone by the suddenness and rapidity of my flight, rushed from the building, ran up Wall Street towards Broadway, and, jumping into the first omnibus, was soon removed from pursuit... So fearful was I of being again hunted out by the incensed landlord and his exasperated tenants that, surrendering my business to Nippers for a few days, I drove about the upper part of the town and through the suburbs in my rockaway [carriage]; crossed over to Jersey City and Hoboken, and paid fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria. In fact, I almost lived in my rockaway for the time. 120

When again I entered my office, a note from the landlord lay upon the desk. I opened it with trembling hands. It informed me that the writer had sent to the police, and had Bartleby removed to the Tombs¹ as a vagrant. Moreover, since I knew more about him than anyone else, he wished me to appear at that place and make a suitable statement of the facts...

The same day I received the note, I went to the Tombs, or to speak more properly, the Halls of Justice. Seeking the right officer, I stated the purpose of my call, and was informed that the individual I described was indeed within. I then assured him that Bartleby was a perfectly honest man, and greatly to be compassionated, however unaccountably eccentric. I narrated all I knew, and closed by suggesting the idea of letting him remain in as indulgent confinement as possible till something less harsh might be done—though, indeed, I hardly knew what. At all events, if nothing else could be decided upon, the almshouse must receive him. I then begged to have an interview.

Being under no disgraceful charge, and quite serene and harmless in all his ways, they had permitted him freely to wander about the prison, and, especially, in the inclosed grass-platted yards thereof. And so I found him there, standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves.

“Bartleby!”

“I know you,” he said, without looking round—“and I want nothing to say to you.” 125

“It was not I that brought you here, Bartleby,” said I, keenly pained at his implied suspicion. “And, to you, this should not be so vile a place.

¹ A well-known New York City prison in the 19th century.

Nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass."

"I know where I am," he replied, but would say nothing more, and so I left him.

As I entered the corridor again, a broad meatlike man in an apron accosted me, and, jerking his thumb over his shoulder said—"Is that your friend?"

"Yes."

"Does he want to starve? If he does, let him live on the prison fare, that's all." 130

"Who are you?" asked I, not knowing what to make of such an unofficially speaking person in such a place.

"I am the grubman. Such gentlemen as have friends here hire me to provide them with something good to eat."

"Is this so?" said I, turning to the turnkey.

He said it was.

"Well, then," said I, slipping some silver into the grubman's hands (for so they called him), "I want you to give particular attention to my friend there; let him have the best dinner you can get. And you must be as polite to him as possible." 135

"Introduce me, will you?" said the grubman, looking at me with an expression which seemed to say he was all impatience for an opportunity to give a specimen of his breeding.

Thinking it would prove of benefit to the scrivener, I acquiesced, and, asking the grubman his name, went up with him to Bartleby.

"Bartleby, this is a friend; you will find him very useful to you."

"Your sarvant, sir, your sarvant," said the grubman, making a low salutation behind his apron. "Hope you find it pleasant here, sir; nice grounds—cool apartments—hope you'll stay with us some time—try to make it agreeable. What will you have for dinner today?"

"I prefer not to dine today," said Bartleby, turning away. "It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners." So saying, he slowly moved to the other side of the inclosure and took up a position fronting the dead-wall. 140

"How's this?" said the grubman, addressing me with a stare of astonishment. "He's odd, ain't he?"

"I think he is a little deranged," said I, sadly.

Some few days after this, I again obtained admission to the Tombs, and went through the corridors in quest of Bartleby; but without finding him.

"I saw him coming from his cell not long ago," said a turnkey, "maybe he's gone to loiter in the yards."

So I went in that direction. 145

"Are you looking for the silent man?" said another turnkey, passing me. "Yonder he lies—sleeping in the yard there. Tis not twenty minutes since I saw him lie down."

The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom.

Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones, I saw the wasted Bartleby. But nothing stirred. I paused, then went close up to him, stooped over, and saw that his dim eyes were open; otherwise he seemed profoundly sleeping. Something prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet.

The round face of the grubman peered upon me now. "His dinner is ready. Won't he dine today, either? Or does he live without dining?"

"Lives without dining," said I, and closed the eyes.

"Eh!—He's asleep, ain't he?"

"With kings and counselors,"² murmured I.

150

There would seem little need for proceeding further in this history. Imagination will readily supply the meager recital of poor Bartleby's internment. But ere parting with the reader, let me say, that if this little narrative has sufficiently interested him, to awaken curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator's making his acquaintance, I can only reply, that in such curiosity I fully share, but am wholly unable to gratify it. Yet here I hardly know whether I should divulge one little item of rumor, which came to my ear a few months after the scrivener's decease. Upon what basis it rested, I could never ascertain; and hence, how true it is I cannot now tell. But inasmuch as this vague report has not been without a certain strange suggestive interest to me, however sad, it may prove the same with some others; and so I will briefly mention it. The report was this: that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington,³ from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. When I think over this rumor, I cannot adequately express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than

² From Job's Lament in the Bible: Bartleby is now dead, delivered from his troubled existence.

³ The Dead Letter office is where letters go when recipients cannot be found.

that of continually handling these dead letters and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring:—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

A Dark-Brown Dog

Stephen Crane

Stephen Crane (1871–1900) had a short but brilliant life. He is best known for two masterpieces of naturalistic literary fiction, *The Red Badge of Courage*, about a young private's experience in the Civil War, and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, a novella set in New York City that follows the misfortunes of a young girl once she is kicked out of her tenement household. "A Dark-Brown Dog" is one of many stories also set in New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the nineteenth century, an area densely populated and known for its vice and harsh living conditions. This shocking tale speaks to the cruelty—and cruel lives—of the impoverished and neglected of the city at the time.

A CHILD was standing on a street-corner. He leaned with one shoulder against a high board fence and swayed the other to and fro, the while kicking carelessly at the gravel. 1

Sunshine beat upon the cobbles, and a lazy summer wind raised yellow dust which trailed in clouds down the avenue. Clattering trucks moved with indistinctness through it. The child stood dreamily gazing.

After a time, a little dark-brown dog came trotting with an intent air down the sidewalk. A short rope was dragging from his neck. Occasionally he trod upon the end of it and stumbled.

He stopped opposite the child, and the two regarded each other. The dog hesitated for a moment, but presently he made some little advances with his tail. The child put out his hand and called him. In an apologetic manner the dog came close, and the two had an interchange of friendly pattings and waggles. The dog became more enthusiastic with each moment of the interview, until with his gleeful caperings he threatened to overturn the child. Whereupon the child lifted his hand and struck the dog a blow upon the head.

This thing seemed to overpower and astonish the little dark-brown dog, and wounded him to the heart. He sank down in despair at the child's feet. When the blow was repeated, together with an admonition in childish sentences, he turned over upon his back, and held his paws in a peculiar manner. At the same time with his ears and his eyes he offered a small prayer to the child. 5

He looked so comical on his back, and holding his paws peculiarly, that the child was greatly amused and gave him little taps repeatedly, to keep him so. But the little dark-brown dog took this chastisement in the most serious way and no doubt considered that he had committed some grave

crime, for he wriggled contritely and showed his repentance in every way that was in his power. He pleaded with the child and petitioned him, and offered more prayers.

At last the child grew weary of this amusement and turned toward home. The dog was praying at the time. He lay on his back and turned his eyes upon the retreating form.

Presently he struggled to his feet and started after the child. The latter wandered in a perfunctory way toward his home, stopping at times to investigate various matters. During one of these pauses he discovered the little dark-brown dog who was following him with the air of a footpad.

The child beat his pursuer with a small stick he had found. The dog lay down and prayed until the child had finished, and resumed his journey. Then he scrambled erect and took up the pursuit again.

On the way to his home the child turned many times and beat the dog, proclaiming with childish gestures that he held him in contempt as an unimportant dog, with no value save for a moment. For being this quality of animal the dog apologized and eloquently expressed regret, but he continued stealthily to follow the child. His manner grew so very guilty that he slunk like an assassin. 10

When the child reached his doorstep, the dog was industriously ambling a few yards in the rear. He became so agitated with shame when he again confronted the child that he forgot the dragging rope. He tripped upon it and fell forward.

The child sat down on the step and the two had another interview. During it the dog greatly exerted himself to please the child. He performed a few gambols with such abandon that the child suddenly saw him to be a valuable thing. He made a swift, avaricious charge and seized the rope.

He dragged his captive into a hall and up many long stairways in a dark tenement. The dog made willing efforts, but he could not hobble very skillfully up the stairs because he was very small and soft, and at last the pace of the engrossed child grew so energetic that the dog became panic-stricken. In his mind he was being dragged toward a grim unknown. His eyes grew wild with the terror of it. He began to wiggle his head frantically and to brace his legs.

The child redoubled his exertions. They had a battle on the stairs. The child was victorious because he was completely absorbed in his purpose, and because the dog was very small. He dragged his acquirement to the door of his home, and finally with triumph across the threshold.

No one was in. The child sat down on the floor and made overtures to the dog. These the dog instantly accepted. He beamed with affection upon his new friend. In a short time they were firm and abiding comrades. 15

When the child's family appeared, they made a great row. The dog was examined and commented upon and called names. Scorn was leveled at him from all eyes, so that he became much embarrassed and drooped like a scorched plant. But the child went sturdily to the center of the floor, and, at the top of his voice, championed the dog. It happened that he was roaring protestations, with his arms clasped about the dog's neck, when the father of the family came in from work.

The parent demanded to know what the blazes they were making the kid howl for. It was explained in many words that the infernal kid wanted to introduce a disreputable dog into the family.

A family council was held. On this depended the dog's fate, but he in no way heeded, being busily engaged in chewing the end of the child's dress.

The affair was quickly ended. The father of the family, it appears, was in a particularly savage temper that evening, and when he perceived that it would amaze and anger everybody if such a dog were allowed to remain, he decided that it should be so. The child, crying softly, took his friend off to a retired part of the room to hobnob with him, while the father quelled a fierce rebellion of his wife. So it came to pass that the dog was a member of the household.

He and the child were associated together at all times save when the child slept. The child became a guardian and a friend. If the large folk kicked the dog and threw things at him, the child made loud and violent objections. Once when the child had run, protesting loudly, with tears raining down his face and his arms outstretched, to protect his friend, he had been struck in the head with a very large saucepan from the hand of his father, enraged at some seeming lack of courtesy in the dog. Ever after, the family were careful how they threw things at the dog. Moreover, the latter grew very skilful in avoiding missiles and feet. In a small room containing a stove, a table, a bureau and some chairs, he would display strategic ability of a high order, dodging, feinting and scuttling about among the furniture. He could force three or four people armed with brooms, sticks and handfuls of coal, to use all their ingenuity to get in a blow. And even when they did, it was seldom that they could do him a serious injury or leave any imprint. 20

But when the child was present these scenes did not occur. It came to be recognized that if the dog was molested, the child would burst into sobs, and as the child, when started, was very riotous and practically unquenchable, the dog had therein a safeguard.

However, the child could not always be near. At night, when he was asleep, his dark-brown friend would raise from some black corner a wild, wailful cry, a song of infinite loneliness and despair, that would go

shuddering and sobbing among the buildings of the block and cause people to swear. At these times the singer would often be chased all over the kitchen and hit with a great variety of articles.

Sometimes, too, the child himself used to beat the dog, although it is not known that he ever had what truly could be called a just cause. The dog always accepted these thrashings with an air of admitted guilt. He was too much of a dog to try to look to be a martyr or to plot revenge. He received the blows with deep humility, and furthermore he forgave his friend the moment the child had finished, and was ready to caress the child's hand with his little red tongue.

When misfortune came upon the child, and his troubles overwhelmed him, he would often crawl under the table and lay his small distressed head on the dog's back. The dog was ever sympathetic. It is not to be supposed that at such times he took occasion to refer to the unjust beatings his friend, when provoked, had administered to him.

He did not achieve any notable degree of intimacy with the other members of the family. He had no confidence in them, and the fear that he would express at their casual approach often exasperated them exceedingly. They used to gain a certain satisfaction in underfeeding him, but finally his friend the child grew to watch the matter with some care, and when he forgot it, the dog was often successful in secret for himself.

So the dog prospered. He developed a large bark, which came wondrously from such a small rug of a dog. He ceased to howl persistently at night. Sometimes, indeed, in his sleep, he would utter little yells, as from pain, but that occurred, no doubt, when in his dreams he encountered huge flaming dogs who threatened him direfully.

His devotion to the child grew until it was a sublime thing. He wagged at his approach; he sank down in despair at his departure. He could detect the sound of the child's step among all the noises of the neighborhood. It was like a calling voice to him.

The scene of their companionship was a kingdom governed by this terrible potentate, the child; but neither criticism nor rebellion ever lived for an instant in the heart of the one subject. Down in the mystic, hidden fields of his little dog-soul bloomed flowers of love and fidelity and perfect faith.

The child was in the habit of going on many expeditions to observe strange things in the vicinity. On these occasions his friend usually jogged aimfully along behind. Perhaps, though, he went ahead. This necessitated his turning around every quarter-minute to make sure the child was coming. He was filled with a large idea of the importance of these journeys. He would carry himself with such an air! He was proud to be the retainer of so great a monarch.

25

One day, however, the father of the family got quite exceptionally drunk. He came home and held carnival with the cooking utensils, the furniture and his wife. He was in the midst of this recreation when the child, followed by the dark-brown dog, entered the room. They were returning from their voyages. 30

The child's practised eye instantly noted his father's state. He dived under the table, where experience had taught him was a rather safe place. The dog, lacking skill in such matters, was, of course, unaware of the true condition of affairs. He looked with interested eyes at his friend's sudden dive. He interpreted it to mean: Joyous gambol. He started to patter across the floor to join him. He was the picture of a little dark-brown dog en route to a friend.

The head of the family saw him at this moment. He gave a huge howl of joy, and knocked the dog down with a heavy coffee-pot. The dog, yelling in supreme astonishment and fear, writhed to his feet and ran for cover. The man kicked out with a ponderous foot. It caused the dog to swerve as if caught in a tide. A second blow of the coffee-pot laid him upon the floor.

Here the child, uttering loud cries, came valiantly forth like a knight. The father of the family paid no attention to these calls of the child, but advanced with glee upon the dog. Upon being knocked down twice in swift succession, the latter apparently gave up all hope of escape. He rolled over on his back and held his paws in a peculiar manner. At the same time with his eyes and his ears he offered up a small prayer.

But the father was in a mood for having fun, and it occurred to him that it would be a fine thing to throw the dog out of the window. So he reached down and, grabbing the animal by a leg, lifted him, squirming, up. He swung him two or three times hilariously about his head, and then flung him with great accuracy through the window.

The soaring dog created a surprise in the block. A woman watering plants in an opposite window gave an involuntary shout and dropped a flower-pot. A man in another window leaned perilously out to watch the flight of the dog. A woman who had been hanging out clothes in a yard began to caper wildly. Her mouth was filled with clothes-pins, but her arms gave vent to a sort of exclamation. In appearance she was like a gagged prisoner. Children ran whooping. 35

The dark-brown body crashed in a heap on the roof of a shed five stories below. From thence it rolled to the pavement of an alleyway.

The child in the room far above burst into a long, dirge-like cry, and toddled hastily out of the room. It took him a long time to reach the alley, because his size compelled him to go downstairs backward, one step at a time, and holding with both hands to the step above.

When they came for him later, they found him seated by the body of his dark-brown friend.

Mrs. Manstey's View

Edith Wharton

Edith Wharton (1862–1937) is recognized today as one of the most important writers of the early twentieth century. In novels such as *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, she wrote about wealthy New Yorkers, often times criticizing their customs and attitudes. “Mrs. Manstey’s View” is an early tale by Wharton written when she was just beginning to discover New York as a rich subject for stories. Though written over a century ago, its focus on anger and despair over urban development is a theme that still resonates with present day New Yorkers.

The view from Mrs. Manstey’s window was not a striking one, but to her at least it was full of interest and beauty. Mrs. Manstey occupied the back room on the third floor of a New York boardinghouse, in a street where the ash-barrels lingered late on the sidewalk and the gaps in the pavement would have staggered a Quintus Curtius [a famous Roman historian]. She was the widow of a clerk in a large wholesale house, and his death had left her alone, for her only daughter had married in California, and could not afford the long journey to New York to see her mother. Mrs. Manstey, perhaps, might have joined her daughter in the West, but they had now been so many years apart that they had ceased to feel any need of each other’s society, and their intercourse had long been limited to the exchange of a few perfunctory letters, written with indifference by the daughter, and with difficulty by Mrs. Manstey, whose right hand was growing stiff with gout. Even had she felt a stronger desire for her daughter’s companionship, Mrs. Manstey’s increasing infirmity, which caused her to dread the three flights of stairs between her room and the street, would have given her pause on the eve of undertaking so long a journey; and without perhaps, formulating these reasons she had long since accepted as a matter of course her solitary life in New York. 1

She was, indeed, not quite lonely, for a few friends still toiled up now and then to her room; but their visits grew rare as the years went by. Mrs. Manstey had never been a sociable woman, and during her husband’s lifetime his companionship had been all-sufficient to her. For many years she had cherished a desire to live in the country, to have a hen-house and a garden; but this longing had faded with age, leaving only in the breast of the uncommunicative old woman a vague tenderness for plants and animals. It was, perhaps, this tenderness which made her cling so fervently to her view from her window, a view in which the most optimistic eye would at first have failed to discover anything admirable.

Mrs. Manstey, from her coign of vantage (a slightly projecting bow-window where she nursed an ivy and a succession of unwholesome-looking bulbs), looked out first upon the yard of her own dwelling, of which, however, she could get but a restricted glimpse. Still, her gaze took in the topmost boughs of the ailanthus below her window, and she knew how early each year the clump of dicentra strung its bending stalk with hearts of pink.

But of greater interest were the yards beyond. Being for the most part attached to boarding-houses they were in a state of chronic untidiness and fluttering, on certain days of the week, with miscellaneous garments and frayed table-cloths. In spite of this Mrs. Manstey found much to admire in the long vista which she commanded. Some of the yards were, indeed, but stony wastes, with grass in the cracks of the pavement and no shade in spring save that afforded by the intermittent leafage of the clotheslines. These yards Mrs. Manstey disapproved of, but the others, the green ones, she loved. She had grown used to their disorder; the broken barrels, the empty bottles and paths unswept no longer annoyed her; hers was the happy faculty of dwelling on the pleasanter side of the prospect before her.

In the very next enclosure did not a magnolia open its hard white flowers against the watery blue of April? And was there not, a little way down the line, a fence foamed over every May with lilac waves of wistaria? Farther still, a horse-chestnut lifted its candelabra of buff and pink blossoms above broad fans of foliage; while in the opposite yard June was sweet with the breath of a neglected syringa, which persisted in growing in spite of the countless obstacles opposed to its welfare.

But if nature occupied the front rank in Mrs. Manstey's view, there was much of a more personal character to interest her in the aspect of the houses and their inmates. She deeply disapproved of the mustard-colored curtains which had lately been hung in the doctor's window opposite; but she glowed with pleasure when the house farther down had its old bricks washed with a coat of paint. The occupants of the houses did not often show themselves at the back windows, but the servants were always in sight. Noisy slatterns, Mrs. Manstey pronounced the greater number; she knew their ways and hated them. But to the quiet cook in the newly painted house, whose mistress bullied her, and who secretly fed the stray cats at nightfall, Mrs. Manstey's warmest sympathies were given. On one occasion her feelings were racked by the neglect of a housemaid, who for two days forgot to feed the parrot committed to her care. On the third day, Mrs. Manstey, in spite of her gouty hand, had just penned a letter, beginning: "Madam, it is now three days since your parrot has been fed," when the forgetful maid appeared at the window with a cup of seed in her hand.

But in Mrs. Manstey's more meditative moods it was the narrowing perspective of far-off yards which pleased her best. She loved, at twilight, when the distant brown-stone spire seemed melting in the fluid yellow of the west, to lose herself in vague memories of a trip to Europe, made years ago, and now reduced in her mind's eye to a pale phantasmagoria of indistinct steeples and dreamy skies. Perhaps at heart Mrs. Manstey was an artist; at all events she was sensible of many changes of color unnoticed by the average eye, and dear to her as the green of early spring was the black lattice of branches against a cold sulphur sky at the close of a snowy day. She enjoyed, also, the sunny thaws of March, when patches of earth showed through the snow, like inkspots spreading on a sheet of white blotting-paper; and, better still, the haze of boughs, leafless but swollen, which replaced the clear-cut tracery of winter. She even watched with a certain interest the trail of smoke from a far-off factory chimney, and missed a detail in the landscape when the factory was closed and the smoke disappeared.

Mrs. Manstey, in the long hours which she spent at her window, was not idle. She read a little, and knitted numberless stockings; but the view surrounded and shaped her life as the sea does a lonely island. When her rare callers came it was difficult for her to detach herself from the contemplation of the opposite window-washing, or the scrutiny of certain green points in a neighboring flower-bed which might, or might not, turn into hyacinths, while she feigned an interest in her visitor's anecdotes about some unknown grandchild. Mrs. Manstey's real friends were the denizens of the yards, the hyacinths, the magnolia, the green parrot, the maid who fed the cats, the doctor who studied late behind his mustard-colored curtains; and the confidant of her tenderer musings was the church-spire floating in the sunset.

One April day, as she sat in her usual place, with knitting cast aside and eyes fixed on the blue sky mottled with round clouds, a knock at the door announced the entrance of her landlady. Mrs. Manstey did not care for her landlady, but she submitted to her visits with ladylike resignation. To-day, however, it seemed harder than usual to turn from the blue sky and the blossoming magnolia to Mrs. Sampson's unsuggestive face, and Mrs. Manstey was conscious of a distinct effort as she did so.

"The magnolia is out earlier than usual this year, Mrs. Sampson," she remarked, yielding to a rare impulse, for she seldom alluded to the absorbing interest of her life. In the first place it was a topic not likely to appeal to her visitors and, besides, she lacked the power of expression and could not have given utterance to her feelings had she wished to. 10

"The what, Mrs. Manstey?" inquired the landlady, glancing about the room as if to find there the explanation of Mrs. Manstey's statement.

"The magnolia in the next yard—in Mrs. Black's yard," Mrs. Manstey repeated.

"Is it, indeed? I didn't know there was a magnolia there," said Mrs. Sampson, carelessly. Mrs. Manstey looked at her; she did not know that there was a magnolia in the next yard!

"By the way," Mrs. Sampson continued, "speaking of Mrs. Black reminds me that the work on the extension is to begin next week."

"The what?" it was Mrs. Manstey's turn to ask.

15

"The extension," said Mrs. Sampson, nodding her head in the direction of the ignored magnolia. "You knew, of course, that Mrs. Black was going to build an extension to her house? Yes, ma'am. I hear it is to run right back to the end of the yard. How she can afford to build an extension in these hard times I don't see; but she always was crazy about building. She used to keep a boarding-house in Seventeenth Street, and she nearly ruined herself then by sticking out bow-windows and what not; I should have thought that would have cured her of building, but I guess it's a disease, like drink. Anyhow, the work is to begin on Monday."

Mrs. Manstey had grown pale. She always spoke slowly, so the landlady did not heed the long pause which followed. At last Mrs. Manstey said: "Do you know how high the extension will be?"

"That's the most absurd part of it. The extension is to be built right up to the roof of the main building; now, did you ever?"

"Mrs. Manstey paused again. "Won't it be a great annoyance to you, Mrs. Sampson?" she asked.

"I should say it would. But there's no help for it; if people have got a mind to build extensions there's no law to prevent 'em, that I'm aware of." Mrs. Manstey, knowing this, was silent. "There is no help for it," Mrs. Sampson repeated, "but if I *am* a church member, I wouldn't be so sorry if it ruined Eliza Black. Well, good-day, Mrs. Manstey; I'm glad to find you so comfortable."

20

So comfortable—so comfortable! Left to herself the old woman turned once more to the window. How lovely the view was that day! The blue sky with its round clouds shed a brightness over everything; the ailanthus had put on a tinge of yellow-green, the hyacinths were budding, the magnolia flowers looked more than ever like rosettes carved in alabaster. Soon the wistaria would bloom, then the horse-chestnut; but not for her. Between her eyes and them a barrier of brick and mortar would swiftly rise; presently even the spire would disappear, and all her radiant world be blotted out. Mrs. Manstey sent away untouched the dinner-tray brought to her that evening. She lingered in the window until the windy sunset died in bat-colored dusk; then, going to bed, she lay sleepless all night.

Early the next day she was up and at the window. It was raining, but even through the slanting gray gauze the scene had its charm—and then the rain was so good for the trees. She had noticed the day before that the ailanthus was growing dusty.

“Of course I might move,” said Mrs. Manstey aloud, and turning from the window she looked about her room. She might move, of course; so might she be flayed alive; but she was not likely to survive either operation. The room, though far less important to her happiness than the view, was as much a part of her existence. She had lived in it seventeen years. She knew every stain on the wall-paper, every rent in the carpet; the light fell in a certain way on her engravings, her books had grown shabby on their shelves, her bulbs and ivy were used to their window and knew which way to lean to the sun. “We are all too old to move,” she said.

That afternoon it cleared. Wet and radiant the blue reappeared through torn rags of cloud; the ailanthus sparkled; the earth in the flower-borders looked rich and warm. It was Thursday, and on Monday the building of the extension was to begin.

On Sunday afternoon a card was brought to Mrs. Black, as she was engaged in gathering up the fragments of the boarders’ dinner in the basement. The card, black-edged, bore Mrs. Manstey’s name.

“One of Mrs. Sampson’s boarders; wants to move, I suppose. Well, I can give her a room next year in the extension. Dinah,” said Mrs. Black, “tell the lady I’ll be upstairs in a minute.”

Mrs. Black found Mrs. Manstey standing in the long parlor garnished with statuettes and antimacassars; in that house she could not sit down.

Stooping hurriedly to open the register, which let out a cloud of dust, Mrs. Black advanced on her visitor.

“I’m happy to meet you, Mrs. Manstey; take a seat, please,” the landlady remarked in her prosperous voice, the voice of a woman who can afford to build extensions. There was no help for it; Mrs. Manstey sat down.

“Is there anything I can do for you, ma’am?” Mrs. Black continued. “My house is full at present, but I am going to build an extension, and—”

“It is about the extension that I wish to speak,” said Mrs. Manstey, suddenly. “I am a poor woman, Mrs. Black, and I have never been a happy one. I shall have to talk about myself first to—to make you understand.”

Mrs. Black, astonished but imperturbable, bowed at this parenthesis.

“I never had what I wanted,” Mrs. Manstey continued. “It was always one disappointment after another. For years I wanted to live in the country. I dreamed and dreamed about it; but we never could manage it. There was no sunny window in our house, and so all my plants died. My daughter married years ago and went away—besides, she never cared for the same things. Then my husband died and I was left alone. That was seventeen

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years ago. I went to live at Mrs. Sampson's, and I have been there ever since. I have grown a little infirm, as you see, and I don't get out often; only on fine days, if I am feeling very well. So you can understand my sitting a great deal in my window—the back window on the third floor—”

“Well, Mrs. Manstey,” said Mrs. Black, liberally, “I could give you a back room, I dare say; one of the new rooms in the ex—”

“But I don't want to move; I can't move,” said Mrs. Manstey, almost with a scream. “And I came to tell you that if you build that extension I shall have no view from my window—no view! Do you understand?” 35

Mrs. Black thought herself face to face with a lunatic, and she had always heard that lunatics must be humored.

“Dear me, dear me,” she remarked, pushing her chair back a little way, “that is too bad, isn't it? Why, I never thought of that. To be sure, the extension *will* interfere with your view, Mrs. Manstey.”

“You do understand?” Mrs. Manstey gasped.

“Of course I do. And I'm real sorry about it, too. But there, don't you worry, Mrs. Manstey. I guess we can fix that all right.” 40

Mrs. Manstey rose from her seat, and Mrs. Black slipped toward the door. “What do you mean by fixing it? Do you mean that I can induce you to change your mind about the extension? Oh, Mrs. Black, listen to me. I have two thousand dollars in the bank and I could manage, I know I could manage, to give you a thousand if—” Mrs. Manstey paused; the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

“There, there, Mrs. Manstey, don't you worry,” repeated Mrs. Black, soothingly. “I am sure we can settle it. I am sorry that I can't stay and talk about it any longer, but this is such a busy time of day, with supper to get—”

Her hand was on the door-knob, but with sudden vigor Mrs. Manstey seized her wrist.

“You are not giving me a definite answer. Do you mean to say that you accept my proposition?”

“Why, I'll think it over, Mrs. Manstey, certainly I will. I wouldn't annoy you for the world—” 45

“But the work is to begin to-morrow, I am told,” Mrs. Manstey persisted.

Mrs. Black hesitated. “It shan't begin, I promise you that; I'll send word to the builder this very night.” Mrs. Manstey tightened her hold.

“You are not deceiving me, are you?” she said.

“No—no,” stammered Mrs. Black. “How can you think such a thing of me, Mrs. Manstey?”

Slowly Mrs. Manstey's clutch relaxed, and she passed through the open door. “One thousand dollars,” she repeated, pausing in the hall; then she let herself out of the house and hobbled down the steps, supporting herself on the cast-iron railing. 50

"My goodness," exclaimed Mrs. Black, shutting and bolting the hall-door, "I never knew the old woman was crazy! And she looks so quiet and ladylike, too."

Mrs. Manstey slept well that night, but early the next morning she was awakened by a sound of hammering. She got to her window with what haste she might and, looking out saw that Mrs. Black's yard was full of workmen. Some were carrying loads of brick from the kitchen to the yard, others beginning to demolish the old-fashioned wooden balcony which adorned each story of Mrs. Black's house. Mrs. Manstey saw that she had been deceived. At first she thought of confiding her trouble to Mrs. Sampson, but a settled discouragement soon took possession of her and she went back to bed, not caring to see what was going on.

Toward afternoon, however, feeling that she must know the worst, she rose and dressed herself. It was a laborious task, for her hands were stiffer than usual, and the hooks and buttons seemed to evade her.

When she seated herself in the window, she saw that the workmen had removed the upper part of the balcony, and that the bricks had multiplied since morning. One of the men, a coarse fellow with a bloated face, picked a magnolia blossom and, after smelling it, threw it to the ground; the next man, carrying a load of bricks, trod on the flower in passing.

"Look out, Jim," called one of the men to another who was smoking a pipe, "if you throw matches around near those barrels of paper you'll have the old tinder-box burning down before you know it." And Mrs. Manstey, leaning forward, perceived that there were several barrels of paper and rubbish under the wooden balcony.

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At length the work ceased and twilight fell. The sunset was perfect and a roseate light, transfiguring the distant spire, lingered late in the west. When it grew dark Mrs. Manstey drew down the shades and proceeded, in her usual methodical manner, to light her lamp. She always filled and lit it with her own hands, keeping a kettle of kerosene on a zinc-covered shelf in a closet. As the lamp-light filled the room it assumed its usual peaceful aspect. The books and pictures and plants seemed, like their mistress, to settle themselves down for another quiet evening, and Mrs. Manstey, as was her wont, drew up her armchair to the table and began to knit.

That night she could not sleep. The weather had changed and a wild wind was abroad, blotting the stars with close-driven clouds. Mrs. Manstey rose once or twice and looked out of the window; but of the view nothing was discernible save a tardy light or two in the opposite windows. These lights at last went out, and Mrs. Manstey, who had watched for their extinction, began to dress herself. She was in evident haste, for she merely flung a thin dressing-gown over her night-dress and wrapped her head in a scarf; then she opened her closet and cautiously took out the kettle

of kerosene. Having slipped a bundle of wooden matches into her pocket she proceeded, with increasing precautions, to unlock her door, and a few moments later she was feeling her way down the dark staircase, led by a glimmer of gas from the lower hall. At length she reached the bottom of the stairs and began the more difficult descent into the utter darkness of the basement. Here, however, she could move more freely, as there was less danger of being overheard; and without much delay she contrived to unlock the iron door leading into the yard. A gust of cold wind smote her as she stepped out and groped shiveringly under the clothes-lines.

That morning at three o'clock an alarm of fire brought the engines to Mrs. Black's door, and also brought Mrs. Sampson's startled boarders to their windows. The wooden balcony at the back of Mrs. Black's house was ablaze, and among those who watched the progress of the flames was Mrs. Manstey, leaning in her thin dressing-gown from the open window.

The fire, however, was soon put out, and the frightened occupants of the house, who had fled in scant attire, reassembled at dawn to find that little mischief had been done beyond the cracking of window panes and smoking of ceilings. In fact, the chief sufferer by the fire was Mrs. Manstey, who was found in the morning gasping with pneumonia, a not unnatural result, as everyone remarked, of her having hung out of an open window at her age in a dressing-gown. It was easy to see that she was very ill, but no one had guessed how grave the doctor's verdict would be, and the faces gathered that evening about Mrs. Sampson's table were awestruck and disturbed. Not that any of the boarders knew Mrs. Manstey well; she "kept to herself," as they said, and seemed to fancy herself too good for them; but then it is always disagreeable to have anyone dying in the house and, as one lady observed to another: "It might just as well have been you or me, my dear."

But it was only Mrs. Manstey; and she was dying, as she had lived, lonely if not alone. The doctor had sent a trained nurse, and Mrs. Sampson, with muffled step, came in from time to time; but both, to Mrs. Manstey, seemed remote and unsubstantial as the figures in a dream. All day she said nothing; but when she was asked for her daughter's address she shook her head. At times the nurse noticed that she seemed to be listening attentively for some sound which did not come; then again she dozed.

The next morning at daylight she was very low. The nurse called Mrs. Sampson and as the two bent over the old woman they saw her lips move.

"Lift me up—out of bed," she whispered.

They raised her in their arms, and with her stiff hand she pointed to the window.

"Oh, the window—she wants to sit in the window. She used to sit there all day," Mrs. Sampson explained. "It can do her no harm, I suppose?"

"Nothing matters now," said the nurse.

They carried Mrs. Manstey to the window and placed her in her chair. The dawn was abroad, a jubilant spring dawn; the spire had already caught a golden ray, though the magnolia and horsechestnut still slumbered in shadow. In Mrs. Black's yard all was quiet. The charred timbers of the balcony lay where they had fallen. It was evident that since the fire the builders had not returned to their work. The magnolia had unfolded a few more sculptural flowers; the view was undisturbed.

It was hard for Mrs. Manstey to breathe; each moment it grew more difficult. She tried to make them open the window, but they would not understand. If she could have tasted the air, sweet with the penetrating ailanthus savor, it would have eased her; but the view at least was there—the spire was golden now, the heavens had warmed from pearl to blue, day was alight from east to west, even the magnolia had caught the sun.

Mrs. Manstey's head fell back and smiling she died.

That day the building of the extension was resumed.

The Making of a New Yorker

O. Henry

O. Henry (1862–1910) was a prolific American short-story writer, a master of surprise endings, who wrote about the life of ordinary people in New York City. A twist of plot, which turns on an ironic or coincidental circumstance, is typical of O. Henry's stories.

Besides many things, Raggles was a poet. He was called a tramp; but that was only an elliptical way of saying that he was a philosopher, an artist, a traveller, a naturalist, and a discoverer. But most of all he was a poet. In all his life he never wrote a line of verse; he lived his poetry. His Odyssey would have been a Limerick, had it been written. But, to linger with the primary proposition, Raggles was a poet. 1

Raggles's specialty, had he been driven to ink and paper, would have been sonnets to the cities. He studied cities as women study their reflections in mirrors; as children study the glue and sawdust of a dislocated doll; as the men who write about wild animals study the cages in the zoo. A city to Raggles was not merely a pile of bricks and mortar, peopled by a certain number of inhabitants; it was a thing with soul, characteristic and distinct; an individual conglomeration of life, with its own peculiar essence, flavor, and feeling. Two thousand miles to the north and south, east and west, Raggles wandered in poetic fervor, taking the cities to his breast. He footed it on dusty roads, or sped magnificently in freight cars, counting time as of no account. And when he had found the heart of a city and listened to its secret confession, he strayed on, restless, to another. Fickle Raggles!—but perhaps he had not met the civic corporation that could engage and hold his critical fancy. . . .

One day Raggles came and laid siege to the heart of the great city of Manhattan. She was the greatest of all; and he wanted to learn her note in the scale; to taste and appraise and classify and solve and label her and arrange her with the other cities that had given him up the secret of their individuality. And here we cease to be Raggles's translator and become his chronicler.

Raggles landed from a ferry-boat one morning and walked into the core of the town with the blasé air of a cosmopolite. He was dressed with care to play the role of an "unidentified man." No country, race, class,

From *The Four Million* by O' Henry.

clique, union, party clan, or bowling association could have claimed him. His clothing, which had been donated to him piece-meal by citizens of different height, but same number of inches around the heart, was not yet as uncomfortable to his figure as those specimens of raiment, self-measured, that are railroaded to you by transcontinental tailors with a suit case, suspenders, silk handkerchief and pearl studs as a bonus. Without money—as a poet should be—but with the ardor of an astronomer discovering a new star in the chorus of the milky way, or a man who has seen ink suddenly flow from his fountain pen, Raggles wandered into the great city.

Late in the afternoon he drew out of the roar and commotion with a look of dumb terror on his countenance. He was defeated, puzzled, discomfited, frightened. The greetings of the other cities he had known—their homespun kindness, their human gamut of rough charity, friendly curses, garrulot curiosity, and easily estimated credulity or indifference. This city Manhattan gave him no clue; it was walled against him. Like a river of adamant, it flowed past him in the streets. Never an eye was turned upon him; no voice spoke to him. His heart yearned for the clap of Pittsburg's sooty hand on his shoulder; for Chicago's menacing but social yawp in his ear; for the pale and eleemosynary stare through the Bostonian eyeglass—even for the precipitate but unmalicious boot-toe of Louisville or St. Louis.

On Broadway Raggles, successful suitor of many cities, stood, bashful, like any country swain. For the first time he experienced the poignant humiliation of being ignored. And when he tried to reduce this brilliant, swiftly changing, ice-cold city to a formula he failed utterly. Poet though he was, it offered him no color similes, no points of comparison, no flaw in its polished facets, no handle by which he could hold it up and view its shape and structure, as he familiarly and often contemptuously had done with other towns. The houses were interminable ramparts loop-holed for defence; the people were bright but bloodless spectres passing in sinister and selfish array.

The thing that weighed heaviest on Raggles's soul and clogged his poet's fancy was the spirit of absolute egotism that seemed to saturate the people as toys are saturated with paint. Each one that he considered appeared a monster of abominable and insolent conceit. Humanity was gone from them; they were toddling idols of stone and varnish, worshipping themselves and greedy for though oblivious of worship from their fellow graven images. Frozen, cruel, implacable, impervious, cut to an identical pattern, they hurried on their ways like statues brought by some miracle to motion, while soul and feeling lay unaroused in the reluctant marble.

Gradually Raggles became conscious of certain types. One was an elderly gentleman with a snow-white, short beard, pink, unwrinkled face, and stony, sharp blue eyes, attired in the fashion of a gilded youth, who

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seemed to personify the city's wealth, ripeness and frigid unconcern. Another type was a woman, tall, beautiful, clear as a steel engraving, goddess-like, calm, clothed like the princesses of old, with eyes as coldly blue as the reflection of sunlight on a glacier. And another was a by-product of this town of marionettes—a broad, swaggering, grim, threateningly sedate fellow, with a jowl as large as a harvested wheat field, the complexion of a baptized infant, and the knuckles of a prize-fighter. This type leaned against cigar signs and viewed the world with frappéd contumely.

A poet is a sensitive creature, and Raggles soon shriveled in the bleak embrace of the undecipherable. The chill, sphinx-like, ironical, illegible, unnatural, ruthless expression of the city left him downcast and bewildered. Had it no heart? Better the woodpile, the scolding of vinegar-faced housewives at back doors, the kindly spleen of bartenders behind provincial free-lunch counters, the amiable truculence of rural constables, the kicks, arrests, and happy-go-lucky chances of the other vulgar, loud, crude cities than this freezing heartlessness.

Raggles summoned his courage and sought hand-outs from the populace. Unheeding, regardless, they passed on without the wink of an eyelash to testify that they were conscious of his existence. And then he said to himself that this fair but pitiless city of Manhattan was without a soul; that its inhabitants were mannikins moved by wires and springs, and that he was alone in a great wilderness. 10

Raggles started to cross the street. There was a blast, a roar, a hissing and a crash as something struck him and hurled him over and over six yards from where he had been. As he was coming down, like the stick of a rocket, the earth and all the cities thereof turned to a fractured dream.

Raggles opened his eyes. First an odor made itself known to him—an odor of the earliest spring flowers of Paradise. And then a hand soft as a falling petal touched his brow. Bending over him was the woman clothed like the princess of old, with blue eyes, now soft and humid with human sympathy. Under his head on the pavement were silks and furs. With Raggles's hat in his hand and with his face pinker than ever from a vehement outburst of oratory against reckless driving, stood the elderly gentleman who personified the city's wealth and ripeness. From a near-by café hurried the by-product with the vast jowl and baby complexion, bearing a glass full of crimson fluid that suggested delightful possibilities.

"Drink dis, sport," said the by-product, holding the glass to Raggles's lips.

Hundreds of people huddled around in a moment, their faces wearing the deepest concern. Two flattering and gorgeous policemen got into the circle and pressed back the overplus of Samaritans. An old lady in a black shawl spoke loudly of camphor; a newsboy slipped one of his papers

beneath Raggles's elbow, where it lay on the muddy pavement. A brisk young man with a notebook was asking for names.

A bell clanged importantly, and the ambulance cleaned a lane through the crowd. A cool surgeon slipped into the midst of affairs. 15

"How do you feel, old man?" asked the surgeon, stooping easily to his task. The princess of silks and stains wiped a red drop or two from Raggles's brow with a fragrant cobweb.

"Me?" said Raggles, with a seraphic smile, "I feel fine."

He had found the heart of his new city.

In three days they let him leave his cot for the convalescent ward in the hospital. He had been in there an hour when the attendants heard sounds of conflict. Upon investigation they found that Raggles had assaulted and damaged a brother convalescent—a glowering transient whom a freight train collision had sent in to be patched up.

"What's all this about?" inquired the head nurse. 20

"He was runnin' down me town," said Raggles.

"What town?" asked the nurse.

"Noo York," said Raggles.

Ferryslip

John Dos Passos

John Dos Passos (1896–1970) was one of the most famous writers of the “Lost Generation,” a group of writers—including Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald—who wrote about modern life using modern, experimental literary forms. Dos Passos wrote poetry, drama, and non-fiction essay, but he is most well-known for his more than forty novels. The section below is the first chapter of his 1925 novel *Manhattan Transfer*, an experimental novel that sought to capture the Jazz Age in New York City, a time of radical change and colliding forces. Over 130 short sections, or vignettes, make up this novel; and rather than writing about one or two characters, Dos Passos portrays dozens of characters who move into and out of the reader’s main focus at rapid speed.

Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads that heave between the splintered plank walls, the green waves spume under the round bow as the ferry, skidding on the tide, crashes, gulps the broken water, slides, settles slowly into the slip. Handwinches whirl with jingle of chains. Gates fold upwards, feet step out across the crack, men and women press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry-house, crushed and. Jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press. 1

THE NURSE, holding the basket at arm’s length as if it were a bedpan, opened the door to a big dry hot room with greenish distempered walls where in the air tintured with smells of alcohol and iodoform hung writhing a faint sourish squalling from other baskets along the wall. As she set her basket down she glanced into it with pursed-up lips. The newborn baby squirmed in the cottonwool feebly like a knot of earthworms.

On the ferry there was an old man playing the violin. He had a monkey’s face puckered up in one corner and kept time with the toe of a cracked patent-leather shoe. Bud Korpenning sat on the rail watching him, his back to the river. The breeze made the hair stir round the tight line of his cap and dried the sweat on his temples. His feet were blistered, he was leadentired, but when the ferry moved out of the slip, bucking the little slapping scalloped waves of the river he felt something warm and tingling shoot suddenly through all his veins. “Say, friend, how fur is it into the city from

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where this ferry lands?" he asked a young man in a straw hat wearing a blue and white striped necktie who stood beside him.

The young man's glance moved up from Bud's roadswelled shoes to the red wrist that stuck out from the frayed sleeves of his coat, past the skinny turkey's throat and slid up cockily into the intent eyes under the broken visored cap.

"That depends where you want to get to."

"How do I get to Broadway? . . . I want to get to the center of things." 5

"Walk east a block and turn down Broadway and you'll find the center of things if you walk far enough."

"Thank you sir. I'll do that."

The violinist was going through the crowd with his hat held out, the wind ruffling the wisps of gray hair on his shabby bald head. Bud found the face tilted up at him, the crushed eyes like two black pins looking into his. "Nothin," he said gruffly and turned away to look at the expanse of river bright as knifeblades. The plank walls of the slip closed in, cracked as the ferry lurched against them; there was rattling of chains, and Bud was pushed forward among the crowd through the ferryhouse. He walked between two coal wagons and out over a dusty expanse of street towards yellow streetcars. A trembling took hold of his knees. He thrust his hands deep in his pockets.

EAT on a lunchwagon halfway down the block. He slid stiffly onto a revolving stool and looked for a long while at the pricelist.

"Fried eggs and a cup o coffee." 10

"Want 'em turned over?" asked the redhaired man behind the counter who was wiping off his beefy freckled forearms with his apron. Bud Korpenning sat up with a start.

"What?"

"The eggs? Want em turned over or sunny side up?"

"Oh sure, turn 'em over." Bud slouched over the counter again with his head between his hands.

"You look all in, feller," the man said as he broke the eggs into the sizz- 15
zling grease of the frying pan.

"Came down from upstate. I walked fifteen miles this mornin'."

The man made a whistling sound through his eyeteeth. "Comin to the big city to look for a job, eh?"

Bud nodded. The man flopped the eggs sizzling and netted with brown out onto the plate and pushed it towards Bud with some bread and butter on the edge of it. "I'm goin to slip you a bit of advice, feller, and it won't cost you nutten. You go an git a shave and a haircut and brush the hayseeds out o yer suit a bit before you start lookin. You'll be more likely to git some-thing. It's looks that count in this city."

"I kin work all right. I'm a good worker," growled Bud with his mouth full.

"I'm tellin yez, that's all," said the redhaired man and turned back to his stove. 20

When Ed Thatcher climbed the marble steps of the wide hospital entry he was trembling. The smell of drugs caught at his throat. A woman with a starched face was looking at him over the top of a desk. He tried to steady his voice.

"Can you tell me how Mrs. Thatcher is?"

"Yes, you can go up."

"But please, miss, is everything all right?"

"The nurse on the floor will know anything about the case. Stairs to the left, third floor, maternity ward." 25

Ed Thatcher held a bunch of flowers wrapped in green waxed paper. The broad stairs swayed as he stumbled up, his toes kicking against the brass rods that held the fiber matting down. The closing of a door cut off a strangled shriek. He stopped a nurse.

"I want to see Mrs. Thatcher, please."

"Go right ahead if you know where she is."

"But they've moved her."

"You'll have to ask at the desk at the end of the hall." 30

He gnawed his cold lips. At the end of the hall a redfaced woman looked at him, smiling.

"Everything's fine. You're the happy father of a bouncing baby girl."

"You see it's our first and Susie's so delicate," he stammered with blinking eyes.

"Oh yes, I understand, naturally you worried... you can go in and talk to her when she wakes up. The baby was born two hours ago. Be sure not to tire her."

Ed Thatcher was a little man with two blond wisps of mustache and washedout gray eyes. He seized the nurse's hand and shook it showing all his uneven yellow teeth in a smile. 35

"You see it's our first."

"Congratulations," said the nurse.

Rows of beds under bilious gaslight, a sick smell of restlessly stirring bedclothes, faces fat, lean, yellow, white; that's her. Susie's yellow hair lay in a loose coil round her little white face that looked shriveled and twisted. He unwrapped the roses and put them on the night table. Looking out the window was like looking down into water. The trees in the square were tangled in blue cobwebs. Down the avenue lamps were coming on marking off with green shimmer brickpurple blocks of houses, chimney pots and water tanks cut sharp into a sky flushed like flesh. The blue lids slipped back off her eyes.

That you Ed? . . . Why Ed they are Jacks. How extravagant of you?

"I couldn't help it dearest. I knew you liked them." 40

A nurse was hovering near the end of the bed.

"Couldn't you let us see the baby, miss?"

The nurse nodded. She was a lanternjawed grayfaced woman with tight lips.

"I hate her," whispered Susie. "She gives me the fidgets that woman does; she's nothing but a mean old maid."

"Never mind dear, it's just for a day or two." Susie closed her eyes. 45

"Do you still want to call her Ellen?"

The nurse brought back a basket and set it on the bed beside Susie.

"Oh isn't she wonderful!" said Ed. "Look she's breathing. . . . And they've oiled her." He helped his wife to raise herself on her elbow; the yellow coil of her hair unrolled, fell over his hand and arm. "How can you tell them apart nurse?"

"Sometimes we cant," said the nurse, stretching her mouth in a smile. Susie was looking querulously into the minute purple face.

"You're sure this is mine." 50

"Of course."

"But it hasn't any label on it."

"I'll label it right away."

"But mine was dark." Susie lay back on the pillow, gasping for breath. 55

"She has lovely little light fuzz just the color of your hair."

Susie stretched her arms out above her head and shrieked: "It's not mine. It's not mine. Take it away. . . . That woman's stolen my baby."

"Dear, for Heaven's sake! Dear, for Heaven's sake!" He tried to tuck the covers about her.

"Too bad," said the nurse, calmly, picking up the basket. "I'll have to give her a sedative."

Susie sat up stiff in bed. "Take it away," she yelled and fell back in hysterics, letting out continuous frail moaning shrieks.

"O my God!" cried Ed Thatcher, clasping his hands. 60

"You'd better go away for this evening, Mr. Thatcher. . . . She'll quiet down, once you've gone. . . . I'll put the roses in water."

On the last flight he caught up with a chubby man who was strolling down slowly, rubbing his hands as he went. Their eyes met.

"Everything all right, sir?" asked the chubby man.

"Oh yes, I guess so," said Thatcher faintly.

The chubby man turned on him, delight bubbling through his thick voice. 65

"Congradulade me, congradolade me; mein vife has giben birth to a poy."

Thatcher shook a fat little hand. "Mine's a girl," he admitted, sheepishly.

"It is fif years yet and every year a girl, and now dink of it, a poy."

"Yes," said Ed Thatcher as they stepped out on the pavement, "it's a great moment."

"Vill yous allow me sir to invite you to drink a congradulation drink mit me?"

"Why with pleasure." 70

The latticed halfdoors were swinging in the saloon at the corner of Third Avenue. Shuffling their feet politely they went through into the back room.

"Ach," said the German as they sat down at a scarred brown table, "family life is full of vorries."

"That it is sir; this is my first."

"Vill you haf beer?"

"All right anything suits me." 75

"Two pottles Culmbacher imported to drink to our little folk." The bottles popped and the sepia-tinged foam rose in the glasses. "Here's success. . . . Prosit," said the German, and raised his glass. He rubbed the foam out of his mustache and pounded on the table with a pink fist "Vould it be indiscreet meester. . . .?"

"Thatcher's my name."

"Vould it be indiscreet, Mr. Thatcher, to inquvire vat might your profession be?"

"Accountant. I hope before long to be a certified accountant."

"I am a printer and my name is Zucher—Marcus Antonius Zucher." 80

"Pleased to meet you Mr. Zucher."

They shook hands across the table between the bottles.

"A certified accountant makes big money," said Mr. Zucher.

"Big money's what I'll have to have, for my little girl."

"Kids, they eat money," continued Mr. Zucher, in a deep voice. 85

"Won't you let me set you up to a bottle?" said Thatcher, figuring up how much he had in his pocket. Poor Susie wouldn't like me to be drinking in a saloon like this. But just this once, and I'm learning, learning about fatherhood.

"The more the merrier," said Mr. Zucher. "...But kids, they eat money. . . . Dont do nutten but eat and vear out clothes. Vonce I get my business on its feet. . . . Ach! Now vot mit hypothecations and the difficult borrowing of money and vot mit vages going up und these here crazy tra-deunion socialists and bomsters. . . ."

"Well here's how, Mr. Zucher." Mr. Zucher squeezed the foam out of his mustache with the thumb and forefinger of each hand. "It aint every day ve pring into the voird a papy poy, Mr. Thatcher."

"Or a baby girl, Mr. Zucher."

The barkeep wiped the spillings off the table when he brought the new bottles, and stood near listening, the rag dangling from his red hands. 90

"And I have the hope in mein heart that ven my poy drinks to his poy, it vill be in champagne vine. Ach, that is how things go in this great city."

"I'd like my girl to be a quiet homey girl, not like these young women nowadays, all frills and furbelows and tight lacings. And I'll have retired by that time and have a little place up the Hudson, work in the garden evenings.... I know fellers downtown who have retired with three thousand a year. It's saving that does it."

"Aint no good in savin," said the barkeep. "I saved for ten years and the savings bank went broke and left me nутten but a bankbook for my trouble. Get a close tip and take a chance, that's the only system."

"That's nothing but gambling" snapped Thatcher.

"Well sir it's a gamblin game," said the barkeep as he walked back to the bar swinging the two empty bottles. 95

"A gamblin game. He aint so far out," said Mr. Zucher, looking down into his beer with a glassy meditive eye. "A man vat is ambeetious must take chances. Ambeetions is vat I came here from Frankfort mit at the age of tvelf years, and now that I haf a son to vork for... Ach, his name shall be Vilhelm after the mighty Kaiser."

"My little girl's name will be Ellen after my mother." Ed Thatcher's eyes filled with tears.

Mr. Zucher got to his feet. "Veil goodpy Mr. Thatcher. Happy to have met you. I must go home to my little girls."

Thatcher shook the chubby hand again, and thinking warm soft thoughts of motherhood and fatherhood and birthday cakes and Christmas watched through a sepia-tinged foamy haze Mr. Zucher waddle out through the swinging doors. After a while he stretched out his arms. Well poor little Susie wouldn't like me to be here.... Everything for her and the bonny wee bairn.

"Hey there yous how about settlin?" bawled the barkeep after him when he reached the door. 100

"Didnt the other feller pay?"

"Like hell he did."

"But he was t-t-treating me...."

The barkeep laughed as he covered the money with a red lipper. "I guess that bloat believes in savin."

A small bearded bandylegged man in a derby walked up Allen Street, up the sunstriped tunnel hung with skyblue and smoked-salmon and mustardyellow quilts, littered with second hand ginger bread-colored furniture. He walked with his cold hands clasped over the tails of his frockcoat, picking his way among packing boxes and scuttling children. He kept gnawing his lips and clasping and unclasping his hands. He walked without 105

hearing the yells of the children or the annihilating clatter of the L trains overhead or smelling the rancid sweet huddled smell of packed tenements.

At a yellowpainted drugstore at the corner of Canal, he stopped and stared abstractedly at a face on a green advertising card. It was a high-browed cleanshaven distinguished face with arched eyebrows and a bushy neatly trimmed mustache, the face of a man who had money in the bank, poised prosperously above a crisp wing collar and an ample dark cravat. Under it in copybook writing was the signature King C. Gillette. Above his head hovered the motto NO STROPPING NO HONING. The little bearded man pushed his derby back off his sweating brow and looked for a long time into the dollarproud eyes of King C. Gillette. Then he clenched his fists, threw back his shoulders and walked into the drugstore.

His wife and daughters were out. He heated up a pitcher of water on the gasburner. Then with the scissors he found on the mantel he dipped the long brown locks of his beard. Then he started shaving very carefully with the new nickelbright safety razor. He stood trembling running his fingers down his smooth white cheeks in front of the stained mirror. He was trimming his mustache when he heard a noise behind him. He turned towards them a face smooth as the face of King C. Gillette, a face with a dollarbland smile. The two little girls' eyes were popping out of their heads. "Mommer...it's popper," the biggest one yelled. His wife dropped like a laundrybag into the rocker and threw the apron over her head.

"Oyoy! Oyoy!" she moaned rocking back and forth.

"Vat's a matter? Dontye like it?" He walked back and forth with the safety razor shining in his hand now and then gently fingering his smooth chin.

Prologue to “Invisible Man”

Ralph Ellison

Ralph Ellison (1914–1994) wrote reviews, essays, and short stories, but he became famous for his novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. After teaching at various universities, he became the Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at New York University (1970–9). He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969. Ellison was an experimental writer who used modern writing techniques to tell stories of the daily lives of African Americans who lived with the legacy of slavery and had to negotiate modern racial politics. In this selection from *Invisible Man*, readers follow the story of an unnamed narrator who is living underground.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. 1

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

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One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled. I pulled his chin down sharp upon the crown of my head, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled, "Apologize! Apologize!" But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding. I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh yes, I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth—when it occurred to me that the man had not *seen* me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street. I stared at him hard as the lights of a car stabbed through the darkness. He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs. Then I was amused: Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. Would he have awakened at the point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living? But I didn't linger. I ran away into the dark, laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself. The next day I saw his picture in the *Daily News*, beneath a caption stating that he had been "mugged." Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!

Most of the time (although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it) I am not so overtly violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers. I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it. For instance, I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light & Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don't know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don't know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. The joke, of course, is that I don't live in Harlem but in a border area. Several years ago (before I discovered the advantages of being invisible) I went through the routine process of buying service and paying their outrageous rates. But no more. I gave up all that, along with

my apartment, and my old way of life: That way based upon the fallacious assumption that I, like other men, was visible. Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century, which I discovered when I was trying to escape in the night from Ras the Destroyer. But that's getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead.

The point now is that I found a home—or a hole in the ground, as you will. Now don't jump to any conclusion that because I call my home a "hole" it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole. And remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell. I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation.

My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, *full* of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest

5



Jeff Wall, *After Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the Preface, 1999–2001, transparency in lightbox, 174 × 250.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

of our whole civilization—pardon me, our whole *culture* (an important distinction, I've heard)—which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.) I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness. And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I *am* invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. A beautiful girl once told me of a recurring nightmare in which she lay in the center of a large dark room and felt her face expand until it filled the whole room, becoming a formless mass while her eyes ran in bilious jelly up the chimney. And so it is with me. Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.

The Inheritance of Loss

Kiran Desai

Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971, she moved to the USA when she was fifteen. She attended Bennington College, Hollins University, and Columbia University, where she studied creative writing. She published in the *The New Yorker* and is the author of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which won the Booker Prize. The following excerpt is about the experience of an Indian immigrant who lives illegally in New York.

Ten

Biju had started his second year in America at Pinocchio's Italian Restaurant, stirring vats of spluttering Bolognese, as over a speaker an opera singer sang of love and murder, revenge and heartbreak. 1

"He smells," said the owner's wife. "I think I'm allergic to his hair oil." She had hoped for men from the poorer parts of Europe—Bulgarians perhaps, or Czechoslovakians. At least they might have something in common with them like religion and skin color, grandfathers who ate cured sausages and looked like them too, but they weren't coming in numbers great enough or they weren't coming desperate enough, she wasn't sure....

The owner bought soap and toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo plus conditioner, Q-tips, nail clippers, and most important of all, deodorant, and told Biju he'd picked up some things he might need.

They stood there embarrassed by the intimacy of the products that lay between them.

He tried another tactic: "What do they think of the pope in India?" 5

By showing his respect for Biju's mind he would raise Biju's self-respect, for the boy was clearly lacking in that department.

"You've tried," his wife said, comforting him a few days later when they couldn't detect any difference in Biju. "You even *bought* the soap," she said.

Biju approached Tom & Tomoko's—"No jobs."

McSweeney's Pub—"Not hiring."

Freddy's Wok—"Can you ride a bicycle?"

Yes, he could.

Chapters Ten and Twenty-Two from *The Inheritance of Loss*, copyright © 2006 by Kiran Desai. Used by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.

Szechuan wings and French fries, just \$3.00. Fried rice \$1.35 and \$1.00 for pan-fried dumplings fat and tight as babies—slice them open and flood your plate with a run of luscious oil. In this country poor people eat like kings! General Tso's chicken, emperor's pork, and Biju on a bicycle with the delivery bag on his handlebars, a tremulous figure between heaving buses, regurgitating taxis—what growls, what sounds of flatulence came from this traffic. Biju pounded at the pedals, heckled by taxi drivers direct from Punjab—a man is not a caged thing, a man is wild *wild* and he must drive as such, in a bucking yodeling taxi. They harassed Biju with such blows from their horns as could split the world into whey and solids: paaaaaaWWW!

One evening, Biju was sent to deliver hot-and-sour soups and egg foo yong to three Indian girls, students, new additions to the neighborhood in an apartment just opened under reviewed city laws to raised rents. Banners reading "Antigentrification Day" had been hauled up over the street by the longtime residents for a festival earlier in the afternoon when they had played music, grilled hot dogs in the street, and sold all their gritty junk. One day the Indian girls hoped to be gentry, but right now, despite being unwelcome in the neighborhood, they were in the student stage of vehemently siding with the poor people who wished them gone.

The girl who answered the buzzer smiled, shiny teeth, shiny eyes 10 through shiny glasses. She took the bag and went to collect the money. It was suffused with Indian femininity in there, abundant amounts of sweet newly washed hair, gold strung Kolhapuri slippers lying about. Heavy-weight accounting books sat on the table along with a chunky Ganesh brought all the way from home despite its weight, for interior decoration plus luck in money and exams.

"Well," one of them continued with the conversation Biju had interrupted, discussing a fourth Indian girl not present, "why doesn't she just go for an Indian boy then, who'll understand all that temper tantrum stuff?"

"She won't look at an Indian boy, she doesn't want a nice Indian boy who's grown up chatting with his aunties in the kitchen."

"What does she want then?"

"She wants the Marlboro man with a Ph.D."

They had a self-righteousness common to many Indian women of the 15 English-speaking upper-educated, went out to mimosa brunches, ate their Dadi's roti with adept fingers, donned a sari or smacked on elastic shorts for aerobics, could say "*Namaste, Kusum Auntie, aayiye, baethiye, khayiye!*" as easily as "*Shit!*" They took to short hair quickly, were eager for Western-style romance, and happy for a traditional ceremony with lots of jewelry: green set (meaning emerald), red set (meaning ruby), white set (meaning diamond). They considered themselves uniquely positioned to

lecture everyone on a variety of topics: accounting professors on accounting, Vermonters on the fall foliage, Indians on America, Americans on India, Indians on India, Americans on America. They were poised; they were impressive; in the United States, where luckily it was still assumed that Indian women were downtrodden, they were lauded as extraordinary—which had the unfortunate result of making them even more of what they already were.

Fortune cookies, they checked, chili sauce, soy sauce, duck sauce, chopsticks, napkins, plastic spoons knives forks.

"Dhanyawad. Shukria. Thank you. Extra tip. You should buy topi-muffler-gloves to be ready for the winter."

The shiny-eyed girl said it many ways so that the meaning might be conveyed from every angle—that he might comprehend their friendliness completely in this meeting between Indians abroad of different classes and languages, rich and poor, north and south, top caste bottom caste.

Standing at that threshold, Biju felt a mixture of emotions: hunger, respect, loathing. He mounted the bicycle he had rested against the railings and was about to go on, but something made him stop and draw back. It was a ground-floor apartment with black security bars, and he put two fingers to his lips and whistled into the window at the girls dunking their spoons into the plastic containers where the brown liquid and foggy bits of egg looked horrible against the plastic, *twe tweeeeee twhoo*, and before he saw their response, he pedaled as fast as he could into the scowling howling traffic down Broadway, and as he pedaled, he sang loudly, *"O, yeh ladki zara si deewani lagti hoi..."*

Old songs, best songs.

20

But then, in a week, five people called up Freddy's Wok to complain that the food was cold. It had turned to winter.

The shadows drew in close, the night chomped more than its share of hours. Biju smelled the first of the snow and found it had the same pricking, difficult smell that existed inside the freezer; he felt the Thermocol scrunch of it underfoot. On the Hudson, the ice cracked loudly into pieces, and within the contours of this gray, broken river it seemed as if the city's inhabitants were being provided with a glimpse of something far and forlorn that they might use to consider their own loneliness.

Biju put a padding of newspapers down his shirt—leftover copies from kind Mr. Iype the newsagent—and sometimes he took the scallion pancakes and inserted them below the paper, inspired by the memory of an uncle who used to go out to the fields in winter with his lunchtime *parathas* down his vest. But even this did not seem to help and once, on his bicycle, he began to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicked a deeper vein of grief—such a terrible groan issued from between the whimpers that he was shocked his sadness had such depth.

When he returned home to the basement of a building at the bottom of Harlem, he fell straight into sleep.

The building belonged to an invisible management company that listed its address as One and a Quarter Street and owned tenements all over the neighborhood, the superintendent supplementing his income by illegally renting out basement quarters by the week, by the month, and even by the day, to fellow illegals. He spoke about as much English as Biju did, so between Spanish, Hindi, and wild mime, Jacinto's gold tooth flashing in the late evening sun, they had settled the terms of rental. Biju joined a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maids' rooms, laundry rooms, and storage rooms at the bottom of what had been a single-family home, the entrance still adorned with a scrap of colored mosaic in the shape of a star. The men shared a yellow toilet; the sink was a tin laundry trough. There was one fuse box for the whole building, and if anyone turned on too many appliances or lights, *PHUT*, the entire electricity went, and the residents screamed to nobody, since there was nobody, of course, to hear them.

Biju had been nervous there from his very first day. "Howdy," a man on the steps of his new abode had said, holding out his hand and nodding, "my name's Joey, and I just had me some WHEES-KAY!" Power and hiss. This was the local homeless man at the edge of his hunting and gathering territory, which he sometimes marked by peeing a bright arc right across the road. He wintered here on a subway grate in a giant plastic-bag igloo that sagged, then blew taut with stale air each time a train passed. Biju had taken the sticky hand offered, the man had held tight, and Biju had broken free and run, a cackle of laughter following him.

"The food is cold," the customers complained. "Soup arrived cold! Again! The rice is cold each and every time."

"I'm also cold," Biju said losing his temper.

"Pedal faster," said the owner.

"I cannot."

It was a little after 1 A.M. when he left Freddy's Wok for the last time, the street lamps were haloes of light filled with starry scraps of frozen vapor, and he trudged between snow mountains adorned with empty take-out containers and solidified dog pee in surprised yellow. The streets were empty but for the homeless man who stood looking at an invisible watch on his wrist while talking into a dead pay phone. "Five! Four! Three! Two! One—TAKEOFF!!" he shouted, and then he hung up the phone and ran holding onto his hat as if it might get blown off by the rocket he had just launched into space.

Biju turned in mechanically at the sixth somber house with its tombstone facade, past the metal cans against which he could hear the

unmistakable sound of rat claws, and went down the flight of steps to the basement.

"I am very tired," he said out loud.

A man near him was frying in bed, turning this way, that way. Someone else was grinding his teeth.

By the time he had found employment again, at a bakery on Broadway and La Salle, he had used up all the money in the savings envelope in his sock. 35

It was spring, the ice was melting, the freed piss was flowing. All over, in city cafés and bistros, they took advantage of this delicate nutty sliver between the winter, cold as hell, and summer, hot as hell, and dined al fresco on the narrow pavement under the cherry blossoms. Women in baby-doll dresses, ribbons, and bows that didn't coincide with their personalities indulged themselves with the first fiddleheads of the season, and the fragrance of expensive cooking mingled with the eructation of taxis and the lascivious subway breath that went up the skirts of the spring-clad girls making them wonder if *this* was how Marilyn Monroe felt—somehow not, somehow not....

The mayor found a rat in Gracie Mansion.

And Biju, at the Queen of Tarts bakery, met Saeed Saeed, who would become the man he admired most in the United States of America.

"I am from Zanzibar, *not* Tanzania," he said, introducing himself.

Biju knew neither one nor the other. "Where is that?"

"Don't you know?? Zanzibar full of Indians, man! My grandmother—she is Indian!" 40

In Stone Town they ate samosas and *chapatis*, *jalebis*, pilau rice.... Saeed Saeed could sing like Amitabh Bachhan and Hema Malini. He sang, "*Mera joota hai japani... .*" and "*Bombay se aaya mera dost—Oi!*" He could gesture with his arms out and wiggle his hips, as could Kavafya from Kazakhstan and Omar from Malaysia, and together they assailed Biju with thrilling dance numbers. Biju felt so proud of his country's movies he almost fainted.

Twenty-two

Brigitte's, in New York's financial district, was a restaurant hall of mirrors so the diners might observe exactly how enviable they were as they ate. It was named for the owners' dog, the tallest, flattest creature you ever saw; like paper, you could see her properly only from the side.

In the morning, Biju and the rest of the staff began bustling about, the owners, Odessa and Baz, drank Tailors of Harrowgate darjeeling at a corner table. Colonial India, free India—the tea was the same, but the romance was gone, and it was best sold on the word of the past. They drank tea

and diligently they read the *New York Times* together, including the international news. It was overwhelming.

Former slaves and natives. Eskimos and Hiroshima people, Amazonian 45
Indians and Chiapas Indians and Chilean Indians and American Indians
and Indian Indians. Australian aborigines, Guatemalans and Colombians
and Brazilians and Argentineans, Nigerians, Burmese, Angolans, Peruvians,
Ecuadorians, Bolivians, Afghans, Cambodians, Rwandans, Filipinos,
Indonesians, Liberians, Borneoans, Papua New Guineans, South Africans,
Iraqis, Iranians, Turks, Armenians, Palestinians, French Guyanese, Dutch
Guyanese, Surinamese, Sierra Leonean, Malagasys, Senegalese, Maldivians,
Sri Lankans, Malaysians, Kenyans, Panamanians, Mexicans, Haitians,
Dominicans, Costa Ricans, Congoans, Mauritanians, Marshall Islanders,
Tahitians, Gabonese, Beninese, Malians, Jamaicans, Botswanans, Burundians,
Sudanese, Eritreans, Uruguayans, Nicaraguans, Ugandans, Ivory
Coastians, Zambians, Guinea-Bissauans, Cameroonians, Laotians, Zaireans
coming at you screaming colonialism, screaming slavery, screaming
mining companies screaming banana companies oil companies screaming
CIA spy among the missionaries screaming it was Kissinger who killed
their father and why don't you forgive third-world debt; Lumumba, they
shouted, and Allende; on the other side, Pinochet, they said, Mobutu; contaminated
milk from Nestlé, they said; Agent Orange; dirty dealings by Xerox. World Bank, UN, IMF,
everything run by white people. Every day in the papers another thing!

Nestlé and Xerox were fine upstanding companies, the backbone of the economy, and Kissinger was at least a patriot. The United States was a young country built on the finest principles, and how could it possibly owe so many bills?

Enough was enough.

Business was business. Your bread might as well be left unbuttered were the butter to be spread so thin. The fittest one wins and gets the butter.

"Rule of nature," said Odessa to Baz. "Imagine if we were sitting around saying, 'So-and-so-score years ago, Neanderthals came out of the woods, attacked my family with a big dinosaur bone, and now you give back.' Two of the very first iron pots, my friend, and one toothsome toothy daughter from the first days of agriculture, when humans had larger molars, and four samples of an early version of the potato claimed, incidentally, by both Chile and Peru."

She was very witty, Odessa. Baz was proud of her cosmopolitan style, 50
loved the sight of her in her little wire-rimmed glasses. Once he had been shocked to overhear some of their friends say she was black-hearted, but he had put it out of his mind.

"These white people!" said Achootan, a fellow dishwasher, to Biju in the kitchen. "Shit! But at least this country is better than England," he said. "At

least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street, 'Go back to where you came from.'" He had spent eight years in Canterbury, and he had responded by shouting a line Biju was to hear many times over, for he repeated it several times a week: "Your father came to *my* country and took *my* bread and now I have come to *your* country to get *my* bread back."

Achootan didn't want a green card in the same way as Saeed did. He wanted it in the way of revenge.

"Why do you want it if you hate it here?" Odessa had said angrily to Achootan when he asked for sponsorship.

Well, he wanted it. Everyone wanted it whether you liked it or you hated it. The more you hated it sometimes, the more you wanted it.

This they didn't understand.

55

The restaurant served only one menu: steak, salad, fries. It assumed a certain pride in simplicity among the wealthy classes.

Holy cow. Unholy cow. Biju knew the reasoning he should keep by his side. At lunch and dinner the space filled with young uniformed business-people in their twenties and thirties.

"How would you like that, ma'am?"

"Rare."

"And you, sir?"

"Still mooin'."

60

Only the fools said, "Well done, please." Odessa could barely conceal her scorn. "Sure about that? Well, all right, but it's going to be tough."

She sat at the corner table where she had her morning tea and aroused the men by tearing into her steak.

"You know, Biju," she said, laughing, "isn't it ironic, nobody eats beef in India and just look at it—it's the shape of a big T-Bone."

But here there were Indians eating beef. Indian bankers. Chomp chomp. He fixed them with a concentrated look of meaning as he cleared the plates. They saw it. They knew. He knew. They knew he knew. They pretended they didn't know he knew. They looked away. He took on a sneering look. But they could afford not to notice.

65

"I'll have the steak," they said with practiced nonchalance, with an ease like a signature that's a thoughtless scribble that you *know* has been practiced page after page.

Holy cow unholy cow.

Job no job.

One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them. No, no matter what.

You had to live according to something. You had to find your dignity. 70
The meat charred on the grill, the blood beaded on the surface, and then
the blood also began to bubble and boil.

Those who could see a difference between a holy cow and an unholy
cow would win.

Those who couldn't see it would lose.

So Biju was learning to sear steaks.

Blood, meat, salt, and the cannon directed at the plates: "Would you
like freshly ground pepper on that, sir?"

"You know we may be poor in India, but there only a dog would eat 75
meat cooked like this," said Achootan.

"We need to get aggressive about Asia," the businessmen said to each
other. "It's opening up, new frontier, millions of potential consumers, big
buying power in the middle classes, China, India, potential for cigarettes,
diapers, Kentucky Fried, life insurance, water management, cell phones—
big family people, always on the phone, all those men calling their moth-
ers, all those mothers calling all their many, many children; this country is
done, Europe done, Latin America done, Africa is a basket case except for
oil; Asia is the next frontier. Is there oil anywhere there? They don't have
oil, do they? They must..."

The talk was basic. If anyone dared to call them *Fool!* they could just
point at their bank accounts and let the numbers refute the accusation.

Biju thought of Saeed Saeed who still refused to eat a pig, "They dirty,
man, they messy. *First* I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, *then* I will *BE* Ameri-
can." Once he'd shown Biju his new purchase of a model of a mosque with
a quartz clock set into the bottom that was programmed, at the five correct
hours, to start agitating: "*Allah hu Akhar, La ilhaha illullah, wal lah hu akbar...*"
Through the crackle of the tape from the top of the minaret came ancient sand-
weathered words, that keening cry from the desert offering sustenance to cre-
ate a man's strength, his faith in an empty-bellied morning and all through the
day, that he might not fall through the filthy differences between nations. The
lights came on encouragingly, flashing in the mosque in disco green and white.

"Why do you want to leave?" Odessa was shocked. A chance like they
had given him! He surely didn't know how lucky he was.

"He'll never make it in America with that kind of attitude," said Baz 80
hopefully.

Biju left a new person, a man full to the brim with a wish to live within
a narrow purity.

"Do you cook with beef?" he asked a prospective employer.

"We have a Philly steak sandwich."

"Sorry. I can't work here."

"They worship the cow," he heard the owner of the establishment tell someone in the kitchen, and he felt tribal and astonishing. 85

Smoky Joe's.

"Beef?"

"Honey," said the lady, "Ah don't mean to ahffend you, but Ah'm a steak eater and Ah AAHM beef."

Marilyn. Blown-up photographs of Marilyn Monroe on the wall, Indian owner at the desk!

The owner was on the speaker phone. 90

"Rajnibhai, *Kem chho?*"

"What?"

"*Rajnibhai?*"

"Who aez thees?" Very Indian-trying-to-be-American accent. 95

"*Kem chho? Saaru chho? Teme samjo chho?*"

"WHAAT?"

"Don't speak Gujerati, sir?"

"No."

"You are Gujerati, no?"

"No." 100

"But your name is Gujerati??"

"Who are you??!!"

"You are *not* Gujerati?"

"Who are you??!!"

"AT&T, sir, offering special rates to India." 105

"Don't know anyone in India."

"Don't know anyone???? You must have some relative?"

"Yeah," American accent growing more pronounced, "but I don' taaalk to my relateev. . ."

Shocked silence.

"Don't talk to your relative?" 110

Then, "We are offering forty-seven cents per minute."

"Vhaat deeference does that make? I haeve aalready taaald you," he spoke s l o w as if to an idiot, "no taleephone caalls to Eeendya."

"But you are from Gujerat?" Anxious voice.

"Veea Kampala, Uganda, Teepton, England, and Roanoke state of Vaer-geenia! One time I went to Eeendya and, laet me tell you, you canaat pay me to go to that caantreey agaen!

Slipping out and back on the street. It was horrible what happened to 115
Indians abroad and nobody knew but other Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret. But, no, Biju wasn't done. His country called him again. He smelled his fate. Drawn, despite himself, by his nose, around a corner, he saw the first letter of the sign, *G*, then an *AN*. His soul anticipated the

rest: *DHI*. As he approached the Gandhi Café, the air gradually grew solid. It was always unbudgeable here, with the smell of a thousand and one meals accumulated, no matter the winter storms that howled around the corner, the rain, the melting heat. Though the restaurant was dark, when Biju tested the door, it swung open.

There in the dim space, at the back, amid lentils splattered about and spreading grease transparencies on the cloths of abandoned tables yet uncleaned, sat Harish-Harry, who, with his brothers Gaurish-Gary and Dhan-sukh-Danny, ran a triplet of Gandhi Cafés in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. He did not look up as Biju entered. He had his pen hovering over a request for a donation sent by a cow shelter outside Edison, New Jersey.

If you gave a hundred dollars, in addition to such bonus miles as would be totted up to your balance sheet for lives to come, "We will send you a free gift; please check the box to indicate your preference":

1. A preframed decorative painting of Krishna-Lila: "She longs for her lord and laments."
2. A copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* accompanied by commentary by Pandit so-and-so (B A., MPhil., Ph.D., President of the Hindu Heritage Center), who has just completed a lecture tour in sixty-six countries.
3. A CD of devotional music beloved by Mahatma Gandhi.
4. A gift-coupon to the Indiagiftmart: "Surprise the special lady in your life with our special *choli* in the colors of onion and tender pink, coupled with a butter *lehnga*. For the woman who makes your house a home, a set of twenty-five spice jars with vacuum lids. Stock up on Haldiram's Premium Nagpur Chana Nuts that you must have been missing...."

His pen hovered. Pounced.

To Biju he said: "Beef? Are you crazy? We are an all-Hindu establishment. No Pakistanis, no Bangladeshis, those people don't know how to cook, have you been to those restaurants on Sixth Street? *Bilkul bekaar....*"

One week later, Biju was in the kitchen and Gandhi's favorite tunes 120 were being sung over the sound system.

New York Day Women

Edwidge Danticat

Edwidge Danticat was born in Haiti and moved to the United States when she was twelve. She is the author of several books, including *Breath, Eyes, Memory, Krik? Krak!*; and *The Farming of Bones*, an American Book Award winner. She is also the editor of *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*.

Today, walking down the street, I see my mother. She is strolling with a happy gait, her body thrust toward the DON'T WALK sign and the yellow taxicabs that make forty-five-degree turns on the corner of Madison and Fifty-seventh Street.

I have never seen her in this kind of neighborhood, peering into Chanel and Tiffany's and gawking at the jewels glowing in the Bulgari windows. My mother never shops outside of Brooklyn. She has never seen the advertising office where I work. She is afraid to take the subway, where you may meet those young black militant street preachers who curse black women for straightening their hair.

Yet, here she is, my mother, who I left at home that morning in her bathrobe, with pieces of newspapers twisted like rollers in her hair. My mother, who accuses me of random offenses as I dash out of the house.

Would you get up and give an old lady like me your subway seat? In this state of mind, I bet you don't even give up your seat to a pregnant lady.

My mother, who is often right about that. Sometimes I get up and give my seat. Other times, I don't. It all depends on how pregnant the woman is and whether or not she is with her boyfriend or husband and whether or not *he* is sitting down.

As my mother stands in front of Carnegie Hall, one taxi driver yells to another, "What do you think this is, a dance floor?"

My mother waits patiently for this dispute to be settled before crossing the street.

In Haiti when you get hit by a car, the owner of the car gets out and kicks you for getting blood on his bumper.

My mother who laughs when she says this and shows a large gap in her mouth where she lost three more molars to the dentist last week. My mother, who at fifty-nine, says dentures are okay.

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You can take them out when they bother you. I'll like them. I'll like them fine.

Will it feel empty when Papa kisses you?

Oh no, he doesn't kiss me that way anymore.

My mother, who watches the lottery drawing every night on channel 11 without ever having played the numbers.

A third of that money is all I would need. We would pay the mortgage, and your father could stop driving that taxicab all over Brooklyn.

I follow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey. Even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits, high heels and elegant short skirts, Reebok sneakers, dashing from building to building.

My mother, who won't go out to dinner with anyone.

If they want to eat with me, let them come to my house, even if I boil water and give it to them.

My mother, who talks to herself when she peels the skin off poultry.

Fat, you know, and cholesterol. Fat and cholesterol killed your aunt Hermine.

My mother, who makes jam with dried grapefruit peel and then puts in cinnamon bark that I always think is cockroaches in the jam. My mother, whom I have always bought household appliances for, on her birthday. A nice rice cooker, a blender.

I trail the red orchids in her dress and the heavy faux leather bag on her shoulders. Realizing the ferocious pace of my pursuit, I stop against a wall to rest. My mother keeps on walking as though she owns the sidewalk under her feet.

As she heads toward the Plaza Hotel, a bicycle messenger swings so close to her that I want to dash forward and rescue her, but she stands dead in her tracks and lets him ride around her and then goes on.

My mother stops at a corner hot-dog stand and asks for something. The vendor hands her a can of soda that she slips into her bag. She stops by another vendor selling sundresses for seven dollars each. I can tell that she is looking at an African print dress, contemplating my size. I think to myself, Please Ma, don't buy it. It would be just another thing that I would bury in the garage or give to Goodwill.

Why should we give to Goodwill when there are so many people back home who need clothes? We save our clothes for the relatives in Haiti.

Twenty years we have been saving all kinds of things for the relatives in Haiti. I need the place in the garage for an exercise bike.

You are pretty enough to be a stewardess. Only dogs like bones.

This mother of mine, she stops at another hot-dog vendor's and buys a frankfurter that she eats on the street. I never knew that she ate frankfurters. With her blood pressure, she shouldn't eat anything with sodium. She has to be careful with her heart, this day woman.

I cannot just swallow salt. Salt is heavier than a hundred bags of shame.

She is slowing her pace, and now I am too close. If she turns around, she might see me. I let her walk into the park before I start to follow again.

My mother walks toward the sandbox in the middle of the park. There a woman is waiting with a child. The woman is wearing a leotard with biker's shorts and has small weights in her hands. The woman kisses the child good-bye and surrenders him to my mother; then she bolts off, running on the cemented stretches in the park.

The child given to my mother has frizzy blond hair. His hand slips into hers easily, like he's known her for a long time. When he raises his face to look at my mother, it is as though he is looking at the sky.

My mother gives this child the soda that she bought from the vendor on the street corner. The child's face lights up as she puts in a straw in the can for him. This seems to be a conspiracy just between the two of them.

My mother and the child sit and watch the other children play in the sandbox. The child pulls out a comic book from a knapsack with Big Bird on the back. My mother peers into his comic book. My mother, who taught herself to read as a little girl in Haiti from the books that her brothers brought home from school.

My mother, who has now lost six of her seven sisters in Ville Rose and has never had the strength to return for their funerals.

Many graves to kiss when I go back. Many graves to kiss.

She throws away the empty soda can when the child is done with it. I wait and watch from a corner until the woman in the leotard and biker's shorts returns, sweaty and breathless, an hour later. My mother gives the woman back her child and strolls farther into the park.

I turn around and start to walk out of the park before my mother can see me. My lunch hour is long since gone. I have to hurry back to work. I walk through a cluster of joggers, then race to a *Sweden Tours* bus. I stand behind the bus and take a peek at my mother in the park. She is standing in a circle, chatting with a group of women who are taking other people's children on an afternoon outing. They look like a Third World Parent-Teacher Association meeting.

I quickly jump into a cab heading back to the office. Would Ma have said hello had she been the one to see me first?

As the cab races away from the park, it occurs to me that perhaps one day I would chase an old woman down a street by mistake and that old woman would be somebody else's mother, who I would have mistaken for mine.

Day women come out when nobody expects them.

Tonight on the subway, I will get up and give my seat to a pregnant woman or a lady about Ma's age.

My mother, who stuffs thimbles in her mouth and then blows up her cheeks like Dizzy Gillespie while sewing yet another Raggedy Ann doll that she names Suzette after me.

I will have all these little Suzettes in case you never have any babies, which looks more and more like it is going to happen.

My mother who had me when she was thirty-three—*I'dge du Christ*—at the age that Christ died on the cross.

That's a blessing, believe you me, even if American doctors say by that time you can make retarded babies.

My mother, who sews lace collars on my company softball T-shirts when she does my laundry.

Why, you can't you look like a lady playing softball?

My mother, who never went to any of my Parent-Teacher Association meetings when I was in school.

You're so good anyway. What are they going to tell me? I don't want to make you ashamed of this day woman. Shame is heavier than a hundred bags of salt.

A Good Fall

Ha Jin

Ha Jin is the pen name of Xuefei Jin, born February 21, 1956, in China's Liaoning Province. He grew up during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution, served in the army, and completed bachelor's and master's degrees in his home country before coming to the United States in 1985 to pursue his doctorate in English at Brandeis University. Ha Jin is currently a professor of creative writing at Boston University. He is the author of numerous works, including the poetry volumes *Facing Shadows* (1996) and *Wreckage* (2001), and the short-story collections *Ocean of Words: Army Stories* (1996), *Under the Red Flag* (1997), *The Bridegroom* (2001), and *A Good Earth* (2009). Jin has also published the novels *In the Pond* (1998), *Waiting* (1999), *The Crazy* (2002), *War Trash* (2004), *A Free Life* (2007), and *Nanjiang Requiem* (2011). "A Good Fall" is based on a true story of a Chinese monk in Flushing, New York.

AGAIN GANCHIN COLLAPSED in the kung fu class he was teaching. Seated 1
on the floor, he gasped for breath and couldn't get up. A student stepped
over to give him a hand, but Ganchin waved to stop him. He forced him-
self to announce, "Let's call it a day. Please come back tomorrow after-
noon." The seventeen boys and girls were collecting their bags in a corner
and exiting the exercise hall. Some kept glancing at their teacher's con-
torted face.

Late that afternoon Master Zong called Ganchin into the small medita-
tion room. They sat down on the floor, and the heavy-jawed master poured
a cup of tea for him and said, "Brother, I'm afraid we have to let you go.
We've tried but cannot get your visa renewed." He placed Ganchin's pass-
port on the coffee table, beside the teacup.

Stunned, Ganchin opened his mouth, but no words came out. Indeed,
he had been sick for weeks and couldn't teach the kung fu classes as well
as before, yet never had he imagined that Master Zong would dismiss him
before his contract expired. Ganchin said, "Can you pay me the salary the
temple owes me?"

"We don't owe you anything," Zong answered, his hooded eyes glued
to Ganchin's pale face.

"Our contract says clearly that you'll pay me fifteen hundred dollars a 5
month. So far you haven't paid me a cent."

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"Like I said, that was just a formality—we had to put down a figure to get the visa for you."

"Master Zong, I worked for you for more than two years and never made any trouble. Now that you fired me, you should give me at least my salary so I can go back and clear the debts I owe."

"We've provided lodging and board for you. This is New York, where everything's expensive. As a matter of fact, we paid you a lot more than fifteen hundred a month."

"But without some cash in hand I can't go home. I spent a fortune to get this teaching position, bribing the elders in charge of international exchanges at my monastery."

"We have no money for you."

10

"Then I cannot leave."

Zong picked up Ganchin's passport and inserted it into his robe. "I can't let you have your papers if you stay on illegally. From now on you're on your own, and you must move out tomorrow. I don't care where you go. Your visa has expired and you're already an illegal alien, a lawbreaker."

Zong got up from the floor and went out to the backyard, where his midnight blue BMW was parked. Ganchin was still sitting cross-legged in the room as the car pulled away. He knew the master was going home to Long Island, where he had recently bought a house in Syosset. Zong and his woman had just had a baby, but they couldn't marry because as the master of the temple he dared not take a wife openly. He'd kept his former residence, a town house in lower Manhattan, where he often put up his friends and the friends of his friends.

The temple felt deserted despite the tiny halos of candles on the rows of small tables in the service hall, at the end of which sat a tall statue of the Buddha smiling serenely, with his hands resting palms up on his knees. Ganchin closed the windows and bolted the front door. Since he had become ill, he had been more afraid of the night, when he felt more desolate and homesick. Originally he'd thought that by the time his three-year stint here was over he could return loaded with gifts and dollars. But now, penniless, he couldn't imagine going back. His father had written that some creditors had shown up to pester his family. The old man urged him not to rush home, not until he made enough money.

Ganchin cooked himself some rice porridge and ate it with two preserved eggs. After the meal he forced himself to drink some boiled water to keep down the acid gastric juice that was surging up into his throat. He decided to call Cindy, who had once learned martial arts from him when she visited Tianjin City, where his monastery and kung fu school were located. She was an "ABC" (American-born Chinese) but could speak Mandarin.

15

Ever since she'd met him again in Flushing, she had been friendly and often invited him to tea downtown.

They agreed to meet at Lovely Melodies, a bar at the northern end of Alexis Street. It was an out-of-the-way place where few could recognize Ganchin as a monk of Gaolin Temple. On arrival, he didn't go in, but waited for Cindy because he had no money. Within a minute she showed up. Together they entered the bar, found a table in a corner, and ordered their drinks. There were only about a dozen customers, but the music was loud. A young man near the front was belting out a karaoke song as if heartbroken:

What I miss most is your big smile

That still sweetens my dreams.

Although I run into you all the while,

Your face no longer beams . . .

20

"He really meant to get rid of you?" Cindy asked Ganchin about Master Zong, sipping her margarita with a straw.

"No doubt about it. I'll have to move out tomorrow." He gave a feeble sigh and set his glass of Sprite on the table.

"Where are you going to stay?"

"I have a friend, a fellow townsman, who might agree to take me in."

"You know, you can always use my place. I'm on trips most of the time anyway." A small-framed woman of twenty-five with a sunny face, she was a flight attendant and often flew abroad. Sometimes she was away for a whole week.

25

"Thanks. I may be able to stay with my friend for the time being. To be honest, never have I felt this low—I can neither stay on nor go back."

"Why can't you live here?"

"Master Zong said I was already an illegal alien. He kept my passport."

"You shouldn't worry so much, sweetie. If worse comes to worst, you should consider marrying a woman, a U.S. citizen." She snickered, gazing at his lean face, her big eyes warm and brave.

He knew she was fond of him, but he said, "I'm a monk and can't think of anything like that."

30

"Why not return to this earthly life?"

"Well, I'm already trapped in the web of dust. People say the temple is a place without strife, worry, or greed. It's not true. Master Zong lives like a CEO. I guess he must spend more than ten thousand dollars a month just for his house-hold expenses."

"I know. I saw him drive a brand-new car."

"That's why I am angry with him, for not paying me my salary."

"How much would be enough for you to go back?"

35

"At least twenty thousand dollars. He owes me forty thousand."

"I'm afraid he might never pay you that much."

Ganchin sighed. "I know. I'm upset but can't do a thing. He has a lot of pull back home. A cousin of his is the head the municipal police. Sometimes I wish I were an illegal coolie here, so that I could restart my life and wouldn't have to deal with any crook. But I've never worked outside a temple and don't have any skill. I'm useless here."

"Come on—you can teach martial arts."

"For that I'll have to know some English, won't I?"

40

"You can always learn it."

"Also, I'll need a work permit."

"Don't worry so much. Try to get better. Once you're well, there'll be ways for you to get by here."

He didn't want to talk more, unable to imagine making a living in America.

When they were leaving the bar, she asked him to contact her whenever he needed help. She was going to fly to Tokyo and would be back the next week. The night was slightly hazy and most shops were closed. Some young couples strolled along the sidewalks hand in hand or arm in arm. A car honked about two hundred feet away. At the blast a linden sapling nearby shuddered a little, its leaves rustling. Ganchin had a fit of wheezing coughing and wiped his mouth with a tissue. Cindy patted him on the back and urged him to rest in bed for a few days. He grimaced, his face wry. They said good night, and in no time her sylphlike figure in its orange skirt faded into the dark.

45

Fanku wasn't really Ganchin's friend. They had come to know each other about six months ago at a celebration of the Spring Festival. Ganchin had been delighted to find the man to be a fellow townsman, from the same county. Fanku worked as a line cook at an eatery. When Ganchin asked to stay with him for a few days, Fanku welcomed him, saying he was proud to help a friend.

His studio apartment was in the basement of a nine-story tenement, close to downtown Flushing. It had a tiny bathroom but no kitchenette, and was furnished with only a cot and a pair of metal chairs standing on either side of a narrow table. When Ganchin had arrived, Fanku pulled a bundle out of the closet and spread the thin sponge mattress on the floor. "Here, you can sleep on this," he told the guest. "I hope this is all right."

"Very good, thanks," Ganchin replied.

In the morning he would roll up the mattress and stow it in the closet again. The sleeping arrangement satisfied both of them, but Ganchin's hacking cough troubled Fanku, who asked him several times about the true nature of his illness. Ganchin assured him that it was not tuberculosis, that he must have hurt his lungs during his kung fu practice, and that the

illness had been aggravated by the anger and anguish he'd gone through lately. Even so, Fanku often examined the water in a pickle bottle—into which the monk spat—to see if there was blood. So far he'd found nothing abnormal. Still, Ganchin's constant coughing disturbed him, especially at night.

Fanku let his guest use whatever food he had in the studio for free, while he himself ate at work. There were a few packs of ramen noodles and a half sack of jasmine rice in the cabinets, and he urged Ganchin to eat something more nutritious so that he could recuperate, but the monk had no money. He asked Fanku for a loan of two hundred dollars, but Fanku was almost as broke as Ganchin. He'd overstayed his business visa and had to pay horrendous attorney's fees, as he had been trying to get his illegal status changed. He lent Ganchin sixty dollars instead. Fanku often brought back food for Ganchin, a box of rice mixed with pork roast, or a bag of fish croquettes, or a bunch of egg rolls and spareribs. By now, Ganchin had started eating meat and seafood; it was hard to remain vegetarian when he had no idea where he would have his next meal. Fanku said he could get those food items at a discount, but Ganchin wondered if they were leftovers. Yet whenever the thought popped into his mind, he'd push it aside and remind himself to be grateful.

Then one morning Fanku said, "Look, Ganchin, I don't mean to pressure you, but I can't continue paying for the food I bring back. My lawyer asked me to give him thirty-five hundred dollars by the end of this month. I'm totally broke."

Lowering his eyes, Ganchin said, "Please keep a record of the money you've spent on me. I'll pay it back."

"You misunderstood me, brother. I simply don't have enough cash now. Goodness knows if my lawyer really can help me. A girl at Olivia Salon has spent more than eighty thousand dollars for attorney's fees but still can't get a green card. Sometimes I'm so desperate for cash that I feel like mugging someone. You know, I have to send money to my wife and daughter back home as well."

"Can you help me find work at your restaurant? I can wash dishes and mop floors."

"You're so ill, no place would dare to use you. The best you can do is rest well and try to recover."

Ganchin turned silent for a few seconds, then replied, "I'll try to get some money."

Fanku said no more. He yawned, having slept poorly since Ganchin had been here. Fanku was only forty-one but looked wizened like an old man with a pimpled bald crown. He must have lived in fear and worry all

the time. He spread his hand towel on a clotheshorse in a corner and left for work.

After breakfast, which was two cold buns stuffed with red-bean paste and a cup of black tea, Ganchin set out for Gaolin Temple. His legs were a little shaky as he walked. A shower had descended the previous night, so the streets were clean and even the air smelled fresher, devoid of the stink of rotten fish and vegetables. He turned onto a side street. On the pavement seven plump sparrows were struggling with spilled popcorn, twittering fretfully and hardly able to break the fluffy kernels. Regardless of humans and automobiles, the birds were all working hard at the food. Approaching the temple, Ganchin heard people shouting and stamping their feet in unison inside the brick building. A new coach was teaching a kung fu class.

At the sight of Ganchin, Master Zong put on a smile and said, "You've gained some color. I hope you're well now." He led him to the back of the building, walking with a slight stoop.

Seated on a bamboo mat in the meditation room, Ganchin said, "Master, I came to see if there's some way you can pay me my salary. I can't stay on illegally—you know that—and neither can I go home without enough cash to clear my debts." 60

Zong's smile didn't stop, displaying a mouth of gleaming teeth, which had often made Ganchin wonder what kind of toothpaste the master used. Zong said, "Let me repeat, our temple doesn't owe you a thing."

"Master, you've pushed me to the edge of a cliff—I have no way out now and may have to follow Ganping's example." Ganping had been a monk at the temple, who, after three years' work, wouldn't go back on account of the unpaid salary. Master Zong had ordered him to leave, but the monk went to a park and hanged himself instead.

"You're not like Ganping," Zong said calmly, his fleshy face sleek. "He was insane and stupid, couldn't even do a clean job of hanging himself. That's why he is in jail now." People had spotted Ganping the moment he dangled from a piece of cloth tied to a bough of an oak, his legs kicking, and they'd called the police, who brought him back to the temple. Soon afterward he was sent back to China. But he went crazy because his girlfriend had taken a lover during his absence. He strangled the woman, with whom he ought not to have started a romantic relationship in the first place.

Ganchin felt like weeping but took hold of himself. He said, "Don't underestimate me, Master. If life is no longer worth living, one can end it without remorse."

"You have your old parents, who are looking forward to seeing you home. You shouldn't think of such a cowardly way out." 65

"If I went back empty-handed, I'd be a great disappointment to them. I'd prefer to die here."

"Don't talk about death. We monks must cherish every life. Life is given us only once, and it's a sin to destroy it. You know all this; no need for me to dwell on it."

"Master, farewell. See you in the next world."

"Stop bluffing. To be honest, according to my agreement with your monastery, I'm responsible for sending you home, but I won't force you. You can choose what to do." The master let out a huge burp.

"I only hope my soul can reach home. Good-bye now." Ganchin got up from the bamboo mat and made for the door. 70

"Pighead," Zong said.

Ganchin stepped out of the temple. Forks of lightning cracked the sky in the south, where dark clouds were billowing, piling on one another. The wind was rising as shop signs along the street were flapping. Pedestrians were rushing back and forth to avoid the thickening rain, a stocky woman running with a newspaper over her head, but Ganchin just strolled back to Fanku's place. Big raindrops pattered on tree leaves and on his face while his robe fluttered.

Cindy came to see him the next afternoon. His cough had turned harsher, thanks to the rain that had drenched him. He was also thinner than the previous week. She took him to Little Pepper, a Sichuan restaurant, and ordered a vegetarian firepot for both of them.

He had no appetite for vegetables and would have preferred meat or seafood. He spoke listlessly while she tried to cheer him up. "Don't think you're down and out," she said. "You're still young and can always restart."

"How do you mean?" He looked at her heart-shaped face blankly. 75

"I mean it's foolish to think you're done for. Lots of people here are illegal aliens. They live a hard life but still can manage. In a couple of years there might be an amnesty that allows them to become legal immigrants." She cut a cube of tofu in two with her chopsticks and put a half into her mouth, chewing it with her lips closed.

"I really don't know what to do. I hope I can go home soon."

"Continue to be a monk?" She gave a pixieish smile.

"I've never been someone else since I grew up."

"You can always change. This is America, where it's never too late to turn over a new page. That's why my parents came here. My mom hated her ex-mother-in-law—that's my grandmother—and wanted to restart her life far away from the old woman." 80

He grimaced again, having no idea what to say. He thought of borrowing money from Cindy to clear the debt of sixty dollars he owed Fanku, but refrained. He would prefer to leave her only good memories of him.

"You look better with your crew cut, you know." She pointed at his head, which used to be shaved bald.

"I didn't mean to keep it this way at all."

"You should let your hair grow longer. That will make your face look stronger—more masculine, I mean. Are you okay at your current place?"

He took a bite of a fake meatball made of minced mushroom and soy flour and answered, "It's all right for now. I don't know how long I can stay with Fanku. I might already be a burden to him." 85

"Keep in mind you can always use my place, I live on planes and in hotels these days."

"Thank you." His eyes went moist, but he averted his face and squeezed his lids. "If only I had been born here," he sighed.

"Except for the Indians, nobody's really a native in the United States. You mustn't think of yourself as a stranger—this country belongs to you if you live and work here."

"I'm too old to change."

"How can you say that? You're just twenty-eight!" 90

"But my heart is very, very old."

"You still have fifty years to go, at least." She giggled and patted his hand. He smiled and shook his head as if to admit he was beyond help.

After talking with Cindy, he realized that Master Zong had kept his passport with an eye to preventing him from changing his status, because illegal aliens had to produce their papers when the U.S. president issued an amnesty. It would be impossible to apply for a green card in good time if you couldn't prove your country of origin and your date of entry into the United States. Zong must be determined to get him back to China.

Fanku told Ganchin to stay in the next morning, because the superintendent of the tenement would come around eleven to check the smoke detector. Ganchin promised not to go out before the man showed up. He was lying on the cot, thinking about whether he should ask for a smaller amount of cash from Master Zong, say twenty-five thousand, since apparently the temple had never paid any monk a salary. How he regretted having tried so hard to come here! He'd been misled by the people who bragged about the opportunity found in America and wouldn't reveal the hardship they'd gone through here. They all wanted to appear rich and successful in their hometowns' eyes. Silly, how silly. If he went back, he would tell the truth—the American type of success was not for everyone. You must learn how to sell yourself there and must change yourself to live a new life.

As he was musing, someone knocked on the door. He got up to answer it. The instant he opened it a crack two men burst in. One was Master Zong and the other a brawny young fellow Ganchin had never met. They 95

grabbed his arms. “Don’t resist,” Zong hissed. “We won’t hurt you. We’re just helping you go home, to keep you from deteriorating into a bum.”

“Where are you taking me?” Ganchin gasped.

“To the airport,” Zong said, as they hauled him away. Ganchin was too weak to struggle and so he obeyed them.

They shoved him into the back of the BMW, buckled him up, and dropped on his lap two paper napkins for his phlegm. Then they got into the front seats, and the car pulled away. In a placid voice Zong explained to him, “Don’t be upset. I bought the plane ticket for you and will give you some cash for your travel expenses. When you check in at the counter, I’ll let you have your passport.”

“You’ve kidnapped me. This is against the law.”

The men both guffawed. The squint-eyed young fellow said, “Please don’t accuse us like this. You’re a Chinese and soon will board a plane for China.” 100

“Yes, you can grouse as much as you like to the elders of your monastery,” Zong told him.

Realizing it was useless to argue, Ganchin clammed up the rest of the way, though he was thinking hard about how to break loose.

They parked in a garage and then took him to Air China. A large uniformed black woman stood at the entrance to the ticketing counter; Ganchin wondered if he should shout to get her attention, but thought better of it. The three of them entered the zigzag cordoned lane filled with people. This wasn’t personal, Master Zong kept telling him. They just didn’t want to sully China’s image by letting an ocher-robed monk roam the streets of New York. That would tarnish the temple’s reputation as well.

What should Ganchin do? He could get rid of his robe as he had slacks underneath. Should he go to the men’s room and see if he could find a way to escape from there? No, they would see through him. How about calling to the fully armed security guards with the big German shepherd near the checkpoint? No. Master Zong might still be able to get him on the plane, claiming he was mentally ill, dangerous like a terrorist, and must be sent home for treatment.

As he was wondering, a passenger cart with three rows of seats on it was coming up, an old couple sitting in the first row. Ganchin glanced at his kidnappers—both of them were looking at the counter, where two young women were lugging a family’s baggage onto the conveyor belt. Ganchin lifted the blue cordon beside him, slunk out of the lane, and leapt upon the last row of seats on the cart, then rolled down into the legroom. He pulled in his feet so his kidnappers couldn’t see him. The battery-powered vehicle was running away when he heard Zong shout, “Ganchin, Ganchin, where are you?” 105

"Come here, Ganchin, you dickhead!" another voice barked.

"Ganchin, come over, please! We can negotiate," Zong cried.

Ganchin realized they didn't know he was on the vehicle, which veered off and headed for another terminal. He stayed put, letting it take him as far away as possible.

Finally the cart stopped, and he raised his head to look around. "Hey, this is for disability only," the black driver told him, flashing a smile while helping the old couple off.

Ganchin didn't know what the man meant, and just said, "Thank you." 110
That was all the English he had besides "goodbye." He got off and went into a men's room, where he shed his robe. He dumped it into a trash can and came out wearing black slacks and an off-white sweatshirt.

He managed to get back to Flushing by a hotel shuttle, following the suggestion of a middle-aged Taiwanese woman. Terrified, he could not return to Fanku's place. Evidently that man and Master Zong were in cahoots. Where to go now? Where was a safe place? Never had Ganchin imagined that Zong would resort to force to fly him back. A pain tightened his chest and he coughed again.

He still had a few dollars in his pocket, so he slouched into Teng's Garden, which wasn't far from Gaolin Temple. A trim little man in shirtsleeves, apparently the owner of the restaurant, greeted him and, raising his forefinger, said heartily, "One?" He was about to take him into the interior.

"Just a minute. Can I use your phone?" Ganchin asked.

"There's a pay phone down the street. Why not use that one?" The man waved in the direction of the temple.

"I don't know how to use a pay phone." 115

"Similar to a regular one—drop in a quarter and dial the number you want to call. We're talking about a local call, right?"

"Actually, I don't have to use a phone. I'm Ganchin, a monk of Gaolin Temple, and I'd like to leave a word for Master Zong there. Can you pass it for me?"

"I don't know you."

"Look, this is me." Ganchin produced a laminated photo and showed it to the man. In it Ganchin, wearing black cloth shoes, struck a pose like an eagle about to hop off; above his shiny shaved head a golden banner was floating in a breeze; he looked like a movie star, a hero, full of spunk.

The little man squinted at the picture and then at him. "Yes, it's you. 120
What do you want me to tell your master?"

"Tell him to say prayers and make offerings for my soul tomorrow morning before sunrise."

"What are you talking about? Like you're already a ghost."

"I'm going to die soon. Tell Master Zong to pray to redeem my soul before six o'clock tomorrow morning, all right?"

"Young brother, you shouldn't think like this. You mustn't give up so easily. Come with me, let's talk and see if this old man can be any help."

Ganchin followed him into an inner room; in its center stood a round dining table with a revolving, two-level tray on it. Apparently this was a place for banquets. The moment they sat down at the immense table, Ganchin said he'd decided to kill himself today. He was sick and penniless, while Master Zong tried to send him back to China without paying him the salary the temple owed him. The little man listened, wordless. The more Ganchin rambled, the more heartbroken he became, until he couldn't continue anymore and collapsed into sobbing. 125

The restaurant owner sighed and shook his broad head. He said, "You wait here and I'll be back in a minute."

By now Ganchin had calmed down some, though was still tearful. He believed this was his last day on earth. Thinking about his old parents, he felt his insides writhing. How devastated they would be by his death! And without him, their only son, how miserable their remaining years would become. But he simply had no way out. If he died here, at least some of the creditors might take pity on his parents and forgive the debts. Oh, this was the only way he could help his family!

The little man came back with a large bowl of rice topped with sautéed seafood and vegetables. He said to Ganchin, "Young brother, I can see you're hungry. Eat this and you might think differently afterward. Gosh, I totally forgot you're a monk, a vegetarian! Sorry about this. I'm gonna—"

"I eat seafood," Ganchin said.

"Then eat this. Keep in mind, yours is not the worst sorrow. Life is precious and full of wonderful things in spite of all the bitterness and sufferings." 130

"Thank you, Uncle," he mumbled. "I will put in a good word for you when I meet the Buddha in the other world." He broke the connected chopsticks and began eating.

Oh, it tasted so good! This was the most delicious meal he'd had in recent years, and he picked up the shrimp and scallops one after another and swallowed them as if they did not require chewing. The snow peas were crisp, the bamboo shoots crunchy, and the portabella mushrooms succulent, perfectly done. He ate and ate, and in no time finished the whole thing. Then he lifted the bowl, about to drink up the remaining sauce, but caught himself and put it down.

"Uncle," he said, "I know you're kind and generous. You gave ear to a stranger's grievance, you didn't ask me but guessed I was hungry, and you have a compassionate soul. Here's a bit of cash. Please keep this." He

pulled all the money out of his pants pocket and left it on the table, one five and three singles.

Waving his stubby fingers, the man protested, "I didn't mean to sell you any food. I don't want your money. Just think about all the good things in this life, okay? Don't let your grief crush you."

"Please tell Master Zong to pray for me before sunrise tomorrow morning. Good-bye, Uncle." Ganchin hurried out the door and dragged himself away, feeling the restaurateur's gaze at his back. 135

Where should he go? He wanted to find a building out of which he could jump and kill himself. How about the temple? No, it had only two stories. Too low. How about the elementary school? No, his ghost might frighten the children if he died there, and people would condemn him.

Having crossed Northern Boulevard, he saw a brick building to his right, partly boarded up. He took a brief measure of it—it was high enough, five stories. Also, this was a deserted spot and his death might not disturb many people in the neighborhood. So he decided to use this building, which must once have been a factory and still had metal ventilators on its roof.

As he was laboring up the sagging stairs, a flock of pigeons took off, their wings flickering explosively, and a few bats flitted about, catching mosquitoes while emitting tinny squeaks in the glow of the sinking sun. The distant houses and the spires of the churches were obscured, half hidden in the golden smog. At a landing the floor was strewn with needleless syringes, takeout containers, cigarette butts, beer cans. He wondered if some people lived in here at night. Well, if they did, they shouldn't continue using this place when it got cold. On the top floor he leaned over a few unboarded windows to survey the base of the building. Down there in the empty parking lot a lone seagull with black wing tips was wrestling with a paper bag, dragging out balled-up napkins and plastic cups and plates to pick up bits of fries. Ganchin decided to use the backyard to avoid the traffic on the front street. He propped two thick boards on a windowsill that had lost its wood and was just lined with bricks. He pictured himself running all the way up the boards and springing out of the building head-first. That would do the job for sure. He backed up a dozen steps, ready to dash.

Suddenly his stomach churned and sent up a chunk of scallop and a few rice grains that he hadn't chewed thoroughly. Oh, they still tasted good! He swallowed the morsel while tears were trickling down his cheeks. He started running, up and up, until he hurled himself into the air. As he was falling facedown, somehow all the years of training in martial arts at once possessed him. His body instinctively adjusted itself and even his arms spread out, swinging to ensure that he wouldn't hurt himself fatally. With a

thump his feet landed on the ground. "Ow!" he yelled, thunderstruck that he had just cheated death. A tearing pain shot up from his left thigh while his right leg twitched.

"Ow, help me! Help!" he hollered.

140

How ludicrous this whole thing turned out! He kept yelling, and some people came over, most of them high school students playing basketball nearby. A man dialed 911 and another comforted him, saying, "Don't move. Everything's cool, man. I know this hurts, must hurt like hell, but help's on the way."

"Oh, let me die, let me finish myself!" Eyes shut, Ganchin was screaming and shaking his head, but nobody understood his Mandarin.

In addition to a broken leg, the doctors found, he also suffered from tracheitis. No wonder he was running a temperature and coughing non-stop. They kept him in the hospital for three days until his fever was gone. Meanwhile, his attempted suicide had become news in the Chinese communities across North America, reported by numerous small newspapers; a charitable organization offered to pick up his medical bills; and even the owner of Teng's Garden got famous for a week, having appeared twice on local TV. Everyone knew that the master of Gaolin Temple had exploited young monks and pocketed their salaries. Many declared that they would never donate anything to the temple again. A pretty thirtysome-thing named Amy Lok, running for a seat in the state senate, paid Ganchin a visit and told him to contact her office if he needed any assistance. Several lawyers called, eager to represent him in a lawsuit against the temple. All the notoriety befuddled and unnerved Ganchin.

Cindy took him in after he was released from the hospital with a pair of crutches, and she persuaded him to let her speak with the attorneys on his behalf so that they might not take advantage of him. She urged him to use Jon Mah, an older man who spoke both Mandarin and Korean and was known for handling this kind of case. Ganchin was worried about the legal fee, but Mr. Mah told him, "You don't need to pay before you get the damages from the defendant."

Cindy said to Ganchin, "They'll get a third of the money the court awards you." 145

"This is America," Mr. Mah resumed, "a land ruled by law, and nobody is entitled to abuse others with impunity. Rest assured, you're in safe hands."

After the attorney left, Ganchin was still antsy. He asked Cindy, "What will the INS do to me? If they deport me, can I get enough money for the debts back home?"

“Now there’ll be ways for you to avoid deportation—you can apply for political asylum, or marry a citizen or a legal resident. You know, you’ll be rich, but not filthy rich like a millionaire who doesn’t have to work.”

Amazed, Ganchin thought about her words, then sighed. “I guess I’m not a monk anymore, and no temple will ever take me in.”

“That also means you’re free to date a girl.” She giggled, rubbing her nose with a knuckle. 150

“Well, I hope that’s something I can learn.” He gazed at her and smiled.

The Bridge

Hart Crane

Hart Crane (1899–1932) was inspired by the modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot and wrote similarly difficult and highly stylized work. His most ambitious work, was *The Bridge* (1930). This poem depicts an epic vision of American life with the Brooklyn Bridge as a central image. The section reprinted below, entitled “To Brooklyn Bridge,” is the poem’s prologue.

THE BRIDGE

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest 1
 The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him,
 Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
 Over the chained bay waters Liberty—

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes 5
 As apparitional as sails that cross
 Some page of figures to be filed away;
 —Till elevators drop us from our day...

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
 With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene 10
 Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
 Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
 As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
 Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,— 15
 Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
 A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
 Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,
 A jest falls from the speechless caravan. 20

Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
 A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene;

“The Bridge,” from *Complete Poems of Hart Crane* by Hart Crane, edited by Marc Simon. Copyright © 1933, 1958, 1966 by Liveright Publishing Corporation. Copyright © 1986 by Marc Simon. Used by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn...
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews, 25
Thy guerdon... Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused, 30
(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)
Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,
Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry,—

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars, 35
Beading thy path—condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City's fiery parcels all undone, 40
Already snow submerges an iron year...

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

In a Station of the Metro

Ezra Pound

Ezra Pound (1885–1972) is considered one of the founding fathers of modern poetry, which sought to reduce writing to its essential features. His poem “In the Station of the Metro” is an excellent example of “imagist” writing, which strives to convey meaning concisely and vividly. Pound attended Hamilton College in New York and lived much of his life abroad. He is best known for *The Cantos*, a collection of poems he worked on throughout much of his life.

IN A STATION OF THE METRO¹

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

1913–1916

From PERSONAE by Ezra Pound, 1909.



George Tooker (1920–2011), *The Subway*, 1950, egg tempera on gesso panel, 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ in., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchased with funds from the Juliana Force Purchase Award, 50.23. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

¹ The Paris subway.

Recuerdo

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Edna St Vincent Millay (1892–1950) was born in Rockland, Maine. When Edna was twenty her poem, *Renascence*, was published in *The Lyric Year*. As a result of this poem, Edna won a scholarship to Vassar. In 1917, the year of her graduation, Millay published her first book, *Renascence and Other Poems*. After leaving Vassar she moved to New York's Greenwich Village where she befriended writers such as Floyd Dell, John Reed, and Max Eastman. The three men were all involved in the left-wing journal, *The Masses*, and she joined in their campaign against Americans involvement in the First World War.

RECUERDO

We were very tired, we were very merry—
 We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
 It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—
 But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,
 We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon; 1
 And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came
 soon.

We were very tired, we were very merry—
 We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry;
 And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,
 From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere; 5
 And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
 And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.

We were very tired, we were very merry,
 We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
 We hailed, "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered 10
 head,
 And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;
 And she wept, "God bless you!" for the apples and pears,
 And we gave her all our money but our subway fares.

From *Collected Poems* by Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1922

The Taxi

Amy Lowell

Amy Lowell (1874–1925) was an American Imagist poet. She grew up in a sophisticated and literary environment, yet she did not attend college and was largely self-educated. Although her writing career spanned just twelve years, she wrote over 600 poems. Lowell lectured about and wrote free-verse poetry; that is, poetry that does not follow strict rules of form. Her poetry used common speech, as she wanted to be free to communicate directly about any subject. In the poem below, published in 1914 in the collection *Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds*, readers get the impression of a city and of loss. For what things does the speaker in this poem yearn?

THE TAXI

| | |
|--|----|
| When I go away from you | 1 |
| The world beats dead | |
| Like a slackened drum. | |
| I call out for you against the juttred stars | |
| And shout into the ridges of the wind. | 5 |
| Streets coming fast, | |
| One after the other, | |
| Wedge you away from me, | |
| And the lamps of the city prick my eyes | |
| So that I can no longer see your face. | 10 |
| Why should I leave you, | |
| To wound myself upon the sharp edges of the night? | |

Lenox Avenue: Midnight

Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was one of the most important figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Although widely respected, he was often criticized for publishing stories and poetry that included violence and imperfect characters. In this poem, published in 1926, the speaker combines musical terms with a specific street to evoke a certain mood.

LENOX AVENUE: MIDNIGHT

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| The rhythm of life | 1 |
| Is a jazz rhythm, | |
| Honey, | |
| The gods are laughing at us. | |
| The broken heart of love, | 5 |
| The weary, weary heart of pain— | |
| Overtones, | |
| Undertones, | |
| To the rumble of street cars, | |
| To the swish of rain. | |
| Lenox Avenue, | |
| Honey, | 10 |
| Midnight, | |
| And the gods are laughing at us. | |

“Lenox Avenue: Midnight” from THE COLLECTED POEMS OF LANGSTON HUGHES by Langston Hughes, edited by Arnold Rampersad with David Roessel, Associate Editor, copyright © 1994 by the Estate of Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

New York Subway

Hilda Morley

Hilda Morley (1919–1998) had a long and distinguished career as a poet and teacher. She taught for many years in New York City. In the poem below, published in the collection titled *To Hold My Hand: Selected Poems 1955–1983*, we read about a subway event that might still happen today. Readers might notice that many different people come together to help someone. Do these acts of kindness still take place?

NEW YORK SUBWAY

The beauty of people in the subway 1
 that evening, Saturday, holding the door for whoever
 was slower or
 left behind
 (even with 5
 all that Saturday-night
 excitement)
 & the high-school boys from Queens, boasting,
 joking together
 proudly in their expectations
 & power, young frolicsome
 bulls, 10
 & the three office-girls
 each strangely beautiful, the Indian
 with dark skin & the girl with her haircut
 very short and fringed, like Joan
 at the stake, the corners
 of her mouth laughing 15
 & the black girl delicate
 as a doe, dark-brown in pale-brown clothes
 & the tall woman in a long caftan, the other
 day,
 serene & serious & the Puerto Rican
 holding the door for more than 3 minutes for 20
 the feeble, crippled, hunched little man who
 could not raise his head,
 whose hand I held, to
 help him into the subway-car—
 so we were
 joined in helping him & someone, 25
 seeing us, gives up his seat,
 learning
 from us what we had learned from each other.

From *To Hold My Hand: Selected Poems 1955–1983* by Hilda Morley. Reprinted by permission of The Sheep Meadow Press.

The City in Which I Love You

Li-Young Lee

Li-Young Lee was born in 1957 in Jakarta, Indonesia, of Chinese parents. His father, who was a personal physician to Mao Zedong while in China, relocated his family to Indonesia, where he helped found Gamaliel University. In 1959 the Lee family fled the country to escape anti-Chinese sentiment and after a five-year trek through Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan, they settled in the United States in 1964. He is the author of *Book of My Nights*, *The City in Which I Love You* (1991), *Rose* (1986), as well as a memoir entitled *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (1995).

THE CITY IN WHICH I LOVE YOU

| | |
|--|----|
| Morning comes to this city vacant of you. | 1 |
| Pages and windows flare, and you are not there. | |
| Someone sweeps his portion of sidewalk, | |
| wakens the drunk, slumped like laundry, | |
| and you are gone. | 5 |
| You are not in the wind | |
| which someone notes in the margins of a book. | |
| You are gone out of the small fires in abandoned lots | |
| where human figures huddle, | |
| each aspiring to its own ghost. | 10 |
| Between brick walls, in a space no wider than my face, | |
| a leafless sapling stands in mud. | |
| In its branches, a nest of raw mouths | |
| gaping and cheeping, scrawny fires that must eat. | |
| My hunger for you is no less than theirs. | 15 |

Li-Young Lee, excerpt from *The City in Which I Love You*. Copyright © 1990 by Li-Young Lee. Reprinted by permission of Boa Editions, Ltd., www.boaeditors.org

Lost Son's Self-Assessment

Abraham Benjamin

Abraham Benjamin, a.k.a. Honest Abe, was born in Brooklyn, NY. He is a spoken word artist who has recently published a book of poems, *Unlocked Thoughts of a Prophet's Temple: Humble Beginnings* as well as the indie album, *Brooklyn's Lost Son: Prelude to the Road 2 Redemption*.

LOST SON'S SELF-ASSESSMENT

| | |
|---|----|
| In this disease of Nature we call life | 1 |
| I've been feeling out of place since birth | |
| And I've been trying to realize my purpose | |
| More times than not contemplated suicide | |
| Now wondering if it's really worth this. | 5 |
| To quote one of my brothers in words & knowledge, 'Mar Hill, | |
| "I didn't choose poetry. Poetry choose Me!!" | |
| So I was pulled into this | |
| Through a force of nature I couldn't control | |
| Was never one to throw stones | 10 |
| With my nose to the grindstone | |
| Since I first touched a microphone. | |
| At times, the journey has felt so cold, | |
| So I looked at myself | |
| At the man in the mirror | 15 |
| And asked myself: Am I the only one? | |
| After all the twists and turns in this roller coaster ride in | |
| Spoken Word, | |
| I guess that's why I dubbed myself, "Brooklyn's Lost Son." | |
| Finding my path on this road to redemption | 20 |
| To finally accept the solace of my mind, body, soul, | |
| I was taught to speak my mind | |
| Even if it meant being so damn bold! | |
| Trying to rebuild the bridges | |
| I done burned, | 25 |
| Hoping the Almighty and Universe offer a | |
| Clean slate. | |

Reprinted by permission of Abraham Benjamin.

Burn notices tend to leave scars of life lessons
 When they've been nailed to your chest
 By the hammer of Karma, 30
 So you can endure the next test
 Of change you need to make, and to change the needs to come.
 Father Time seems to play the role of universal parent and
 Wisdom teacher,
 While Mother Nature is the soul doctor 35
 Birthing spoken healers like myself
 Delivering Flintstone vitamin strength of knowledge
 To my people
 So you know better in dealing smarter about
 Who you play with or who you lay with. 40
 The acolytes with swindler sell-out tendencies
 Offer to buy your self-worth
 With a price high enough to kill
 To leave bankrupt your morality
 In your memory banks that used to secure them. 45
 The doors of opportunity for me—
 They've always had loose hinges
 Bringing determination with track star kicks.
 So when they close too soon with my .44 pen waving,
 I'd kick them in. 50
 I didn't enter Spoken Word for "Slams" to win;
 This is just the vehicle I discovered to repent my sins.
 I've been accused as a blasphemer with my words.
 But with no remorse to blast FEMA for B.S. 'n after Katrina.
 Maybe all this is just the design of a prophet's torment 51
 With the pain of the world on his shoulders
 And one of the strifes my man Black Ice
 Didn't mention of a lone soldier.

Immigrant Mother (Lovely to Me)

Taiyo Na

Honored by Governor David A. Paterson and the State of New York for his “legacy of leadership to the Asian American community and the Empire State” in May 2010, Taiyo Na is a singer, songwriter, MC, and producer. His debut album *Love is Growth* (Issilah Productions, 2008) features the song “Lovely To Me (Immigrant Mother),” whose music video was heralded by MTV’s Iggy as “the realest thing seen in a while.” In June 2010, he released an album *Home: Word* with hip hop duo Magnetic North. The title track off that album was released as a single in Japan in March 2011 and hit #2 on Japan’s iTunes Hip-Hop charts.

IMMIGRANT MOTHER (LOVELY TO ME)

| | |
|---|----|
| Verse One: | 1 |
| I got an immigrant mother, ain’t no one like her | |
| She struggle everyday so she’s something like a fighter | |
| See her on the streets carrying loads of groceries | |
| See her on the streets carrying loads of broken dreams | 5 |
| It takes a whole lot to leave your homeland | |
| And raise a few children with your own hands | |
| She couldn’t read well, but she could feed well | |
| With a few hustles on the DL | |
| Overworked, underpaid, so much my mother gave | 10 |
| It’s through her, how I learned love is brave | |
| Working to the evening, then cooking & cleaning, | |
| But they straight ignored her at school meetings | |
| Straight dissin’ her, cuz she speak with an accent | |
| But under the accent is a heart full of passion | 15 |
| You went through the fire to be a mother to me | |
| Thank you for being so lovely to me | |
| Chorus: | |
| You’ve been lovely to me | |
| A dear mother to me | 20 |
| Like no other to me | |
| Lovely to me, lovely to me | |
| I got an immigrant mother (Lovely to me) | |

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Immigrant mother (A dear mother to me)
 Immigrant mother (Like no other to me) 25
 Lovely to me, lovely to me

Verse Two:

She on the subway trying to learn English
 Wishing for her son to be distinguished
 There lots of things she don't know how to say 30
 So immigrant mothers they know how to pray
 But they ain't perfect, and that's what hurt me
 They need some damn help when they all by themselves
 Cuz they'll break down, see my mom was single
 Raised us alone since we was real little 35
 She worked her ass off, Man, I saw it every night
 Passed out on the couch, I tucked her in tight
 But working all the time will make a woman crazy
 And compromise her time with her dear babies
 She got lonely, so she fell for stupid men 40
 Like alcoholics, and I felt ruined then,
 So I stepped up, said, Ma, you acting ugly
 You deserve better cuz you so lovely

Chorus:

You've been lovely to me 45
 A dear mother to me
 Like no other to me
 Lovely to me, lovely to me
 I got an immigrant mother (Lovely to me)
 Immigrant mother (A dear mother to me) 50
 Immigrant mother (Like no other to me)
 Lovely to me, lovely to me

Verse Three:

She smell like cumin, smell like garlic
 Smell like adobo, smell like an artist 55
 INS tests don't know nothing about this
 About babies on your breasts and giving 'em happiness
 About holding your own despite a broken home
 She had no degree but she gave me poetry
 Living through the struggle and giving cuz she loves you 60
 I got an immigrant mother, I sing this cuz I'm humbled

Bridge:

She wakes up in the morning when the birds are loudest
Something about her feels like Mary
She needs strength just like anybody else
So when I see her in the kitchen I offer her my help

65

Chorus:

You've been lovely to me
A dear mother to me
Like no other to me
Lovely to me, lovely to me
I got an immigrant mother (Lovely to me)
Immigrant mother (A dear mother to me)
Immigrant mother (Like no other to me)
Lovely to me, lovely to me

70

75

The Place Where We Dwell

Gang Starr

Gang Starr is a hip hop duo that consisted of Guru and DJ Premier. They were an influential East Coast throughout the 1990s, and during this time, they were recognized as having pioneered the hardcore New York City rap sound. In 2006, Gang Starr split up, and Guru died of a heart attack in 2010. Readers probably have noticed that the lyrics in the song “The Place Where We Dwell,” are also the title of this textbook. Gang Starr mentions many neighborhoods in New York City, as a way to announce their affiliation and connection to place and home.

THE PLACE WHERE WE DWELL

| | |
|---|----|
| New York, New York is where we live and we're thorough | 1 |
| Never taking shorts cuz Brooklyn's the borough | |
| Peace to Uptown, to queens and the Bronx | |
| Long Island and Jersey get as fly as they want | |
| Where we rest is no joke | 5 |
| So let me break it down to sections for you slowpokes | |
| Fort Green, bedstuy, Flatbush, Brownsville | |
| Crown Heights and East New York will be down till | |
| Medina takes respect for the style's we bring | |
| Cuz in Brooklyn, we be into our own thing | 10 |
| Alantic terminals, redhook bushwick | |
| Come to Brooklyn frontin, and you'll get mushed quick | |
| We ain't just know for flipping and turning out parties | |
| But also for the take no bullshit hotties | |
| On the subject of blackness, well let me share this | 15 |
| Brooklyn is the home for cultural awareness | |
| So in all fairness, you can never compare this | |
| Some good, some bad. Little hope for the weak | |
| Dangerous streets and Coney Island Beach | |
| All this included when you go for a tour | 20 |
| Some can get scandalous and outright raw | |
| When you step, step correct and watch where you move | |
| We pay dues so we ain't trying to lose | |
| Here in Brooklyn | |
| The home of the black and the beautiful | 25 |
| For a ruffrap sound, ain't a place more suitable | |
| Other cities claim this, and others claim that | |

But let me give some props to the place where we be at
B-R-double O- K-L-Y-N
I came in for a visit and ever since then 30
I've been incorporated with select personel
Right here in Brooklyn, the place where we dwell

Way down in Brooklyn (3x)
Those who live in Brooklyn know just what I'm talking about

Peace to Boston, Philly, Conneticut, DC 35
All the east coast cities are fly to me
Peace to everybody down south and out west
But for me, Brooklyn, New York is the best
Don't be afraid to venture over the bridge
Although you may run in to some wild ass kids 40
Take the j train, the d or the a if you dare
And the 2,3,4,5 also comes here
There's so much to see cuz Brooklyn's historic
Fools act jealous but you have to ignore it
So I just lounge wit the fat clientele 45
Out here in Brooklyn, the place where we dwell

Way down in brooklyn
You know the place...

Central Park, Carousel

Meena Alexander

Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad, India. At eighteen she went to study in England. She is Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York and teaches in the MFA program at Hunter College and the Ph.D. Program at the Graduate Center. "Central Park, Carousel" is a post-9/11 poem that is inspired by the Hindu idea of *dukham*, which means sorrow experienced in the cycle of births and rebirths.

CENTRAL PARK, CAROUSEL

| | |
|---|----|
| June already, it's your birth month, nine months since the towers fell. | 1 |
| I set olive twigs in my hair torn from a tree in Central Park, I ride a painted horse, its mane a sullen wonder. | 5 |
| You are behind me on a lilting mare. You whisper—What of happiness? <i>Dukham</i> , Federico. Smoke fills my eyes. Young, I was raised to a sorrow song short fires and stubble on a monsoon coast. | 10 |
| The leaves in your cap are very green. The eyes of your mare never close. Somewhere you wrote: <i>Despedida</i> . <i>If I die leave the balcony open!</i> | |

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Life in the New World

George Guida

George Guida is the author of four books, including *The Pope Stories and Other Tales of Troubled Times* (forthcoming). His fiction, poetry, and criticism appear in many journals and anthologies. He is also a playwright and a popular and enthusiastic performer of his work. Guida is an Associate Professor of English at New York City College of Technology, the Poetry Editor of *2 Bridges Review*, and the President of the American Italian Historical Association.

LIFE IN THE NEW WORLD

| | |
|---|----|
| I. | |
| We are westbound, | 1 |
| a background of Brooklyn and Queens, | |
| cell phones to ears for gleaning. | |
| Rogue planes, jet fuel, | |
| an absence of planted bombs | 5 |
| are rudely interrupting Manhattan. | |
| The World Trade Center, like Godzilla, | |
| absorbs suicide shrapnel, | |
| as office managers' shrieks and roars | |
| charge the autumn morning air. | 10 |
| Poets wait eternities for tragedies like this. | |
| Aboard a bedroom community railroad, | |
| I am only remotely connected. | |
| An obese woman waving cell phone | |
| invading my seat, claims | 15 |
| they want everyone out of the city. | |
| I wonder where they all will go, | |
| if they can risk suburban shelter. | |
| At a time like this, | |
| what becomes of Brooklyn | 20 |
| between those who see | |
| Manhattan as symbol of America, | |
| all triumphs and crimes laid bare to the world, | |
| and those who see Manhattan as, | |
| of all things, tourist Mecca? | 25 |

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A dusky, turbaned man across the aisle,
 a regular commuter in intermittent dialogue
 with a cherry-white office woman
 dialing like mad for answers to her question,
 "Will I get the day off?" 30
 reads the gentle Arabic pen strokes
 of a pocket-sized Koran.
 At a time like this,
 what becomes of him
 aboard this middle-class car? 35
 Sudden subject of suspicion,
 he chats in unaccented American
 with the conductor
 who suddenly can't remember
 the next train out. 40
 Arrived in Brooklyn, I hear
 the mayor has ordered us away.
 Fleeing, watching the skyline die
 in the distance, how now
 can I wrestle shadows for this world? 45
 How can I tolerate safety,
 when a high school teammate,
 fond, forgotten boy,
 has known the sensation of eighty floors
 trembling beneath him, 50
 intimacy with smooth-skinned death?

II.

The twin towers have fallen,
 and with them an empire of the senses,
 the sense that this New York, new world,
 is eternal, that we will always breath 55
 the autumn air of poets' paeans,
 that the subway will always take us home.
 Everyone loses some beloved,
 some past and future,
 when a steel and glass dream falls. 60
 On the Brooklyn streets, crowds gawk
 at gray smoke,
 at the spectacle of Manhattan,
 as they always have, vigil now.
 A miles-long cloud ribbons New York Harbor, 65
 limiting vision to loss.
 Two arrogant towers in death

suffocate our innocents,
 some spared only by the north wind's mercy.
 Businessmen klatsched to keep from shaking, 70
 speak of death for all immigrants,
 payback for crimes we have all committed.

III.

Escaped, beneath a trestle I am lost
 in suburban sunlight and siren shadow,
 half-witness to death, 75
 to imagined wives and mothers
 imploded like skyscrapers
 that have collapsed our memory of peace,
 in the million pieces that are each one lost
 to plastic explosive anger, 80
 poverty and dire religion.
 I am staring at the suburban sun,
 clinging to faith.
 I pray for the 100th floor jumpers.
 I pray for the acrid smoke inhalers, 85
 for the sad generations
 newly sworn to vengeance.
 Safe in my family home, I opine,
 the sins of the father,
 cross-couch from my own, 90
 retired law enforcer, warrior by taste,
 watching as we watched ten years before
 the smart-strafting of secular sons,
 the hidden slaughter of daughters,
 their misfortune to dream in Arabic, 95
 under a different Sun,
 lost to the blood-lusty cry,
 "Bomb them back to the Stone Age."

IV.

We walk among rubble now,
 as poisonous clouds drift out to sea, 100
 where navy vessels steam
 through red and black spume,
 to rescue us from harm,
 though all the harm to do is done,
 every rumble in the distance 105
 a declaration of war,
 an assault on the ignorant peace of means.

Worst of all is absence:
 of towers, 110
 bankers,
 secretaries,
 firefighters,
 Arab vendors,
 cops like my father,
 and still here 115
 a callous leader chastened,
 and we, eastbound, ocean-bound,
 finally world-facing,
 absent from our former selves. 120
 White soot-covered zombies
 of the new millennium,
 we wash our hands like Pilate,
 comprehend televised images
 like special effects,
 jumbo jets, American and United, 125
 annihilating our national dream.

V.

We live now in a land
 of detectors, cavity searches,
 and snarling dogs.
 We are the old world reborn. 130
 The new has drifted beyond putrid clouds,
 beyond serene blue skies.
 We speak of death
 as one with attack amnesia
 might speak of Hawaii. 135
 We live now with
 King Kong, the primate,
 beating his chest atop
 the Empire State still upright
 in the distance, a fantasy 140
 of another American time.
 We cling to that tower now,
 through television screens,
 as both heroes and beasts in agony,
 conscious of our place, our dilemma, 145
 and most of all our sense
 that once we had a home.

The Dead of September 11

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. She graduated from Howard University in 1953 with a B.A. in English. She then attended Cornell University and received a master's degree in 1955. She worked as an editor and taught writing before she became a writer. She is the author of *The Bluest Eyes* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1986), and *Jazz* (1992). In 1993, she became the first African-American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.

THE DEAD OF SEPTEMBER 11

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Some have God's words; others have songs of comfort for the bereaved. If I can pluck courage here, I would like to speak directly to the dead—the September dead. | 1 |
| Those children of ancestors born in every continent on the planet: Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas...; born of ancestors who wore kilts, obis, saris, gèlès, wide straw hats, yamulkes, goatskin, wooden shoes feathers and cloths to cover their hair. But I would not say a word until I could set aside all I know or believe about nations, war, leaders, the governed and ungovernable; | 5 10 |
| all I suspect about armor and entrails. First I would freshen my tongue, abandon sentences crafted to know evil—wanton or studied; explosive or quietly sinister; whether born of a sated appetite or hunger; of vengeance or the simple compulsion to stand up before falling down. I would purge my language of hyperbole; of its eagerness to analyze the levels of wickedness; ranking them; calculating their higher or lower status among others of its kind. | 15 |
| Speaking to the broken and the dead is too difficult for a mouth full of blood. Too holy an act for impure thoughts. Because the dead are free, absolute; they cannot be seduced by blitz. | 20 |

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To speak to you, the dead of September, I must not claim
false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed
just in time for a camera. I must be steady and I must be clear, 25
knowing all the time that I have nothing to say—no words
stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture
older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you
have become.

And I have nothing to give either—except this gesture, 30
this thread thrown between your humanity and mine;
I want to hold you in my arms and as your soul got shot
of its box of flesh to understand, as you have done, the wit
of eternity: its gift of unhinged release tearing through
the darkness of its knell. 35