

spring 2010  
**euphony**

vol. 10, no. 2



Faustine  
Leopard  
Faustine leopards

Charlie & Christine  
North American Sea  
Lion  
Charlie & Christine

# EDITORS' FOREWORD

We invite you to enjoy the Spring 2010 issue of *Euphony*. This issue is for the most part quietly reflective, punctuated at times by fierce explosions of energy, and though these pieces may roam far—India, Scotland, Tierra del Fuego—each offers its own unique take on relationships, whether that of mother and child, that between lovers, that between the artist and the spectator, or some other “*I-Thou*.” We are also pleased to include an original translation of the Italian poet Umberto Saba, as well as a brace of book reviews by members of the *Euphony* staff.

Our website continues to be updated with exclusive online content year-round. Visit [euphonyjournal.com](http://euphonyjournal.com) for the lighter, offbeat side of *Euphony* as well as submissions guidelines and information on joining our staff.

THE EDITORS



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# EUPHONY

VOLUME 10, NUMBER 2  
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*Euphony* is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations. Visit our website for more information.

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# Elizabeth Bastos

## A Mom Reads Kipling

I am the many-armed  
goddess of the market-going  
and market-coming-back-from,  
a sacred balloon tied to each child's wrist. Death

of shrimp.

In the middle of the night, you better believe  
I am the mongoose.

Beside me lies the lump of Man, unconscious,  
who does not hear (and maybe could never hear)  
the stirrings of Nag,

a sound so different from the heat.

Look at me, Darzee:  
how viciously and how lovingly  
I put the rinds of the melon onto the melon bed.

# Tom Lachman

## The Black Sails

“I only wish I had any color to make them blacker.”  
—J. M. W. Turner

Close your eyes and you see black—  
black sails preening—but open them  
and all is aflame, flames your flowers,  
your element. You have all the colors  
you need to start your fires.  
You burn marble halls and slow rivers,  
hay-filled silos and harvest moons  
to see them perfect  
in their state of light and exaltation,  
their ecstasy of smoke,  
before that moment when fire  
burning fire consumes itself, leaving  
but a black dress, untorched.

# Will Larsen

## Map of Edinburgh, 1641 [unattributed]

When this city was mud, there were no armies  
so we became them. A building was in my way so I  
smashed it to bits. It, too, became an army. In this emptiness

we first discovered the past. You rose quickly in the ranks  
and your first act as colonel was to tear down  
the signposts and paint them the color of desolation

and give them new names: Road of the Flowers, Road  
Resembling the Ideal Snake, Avenue on which You  
Will Always Get Lost. Not to be outdone, I drew

animals not yet discovered on every map. When you cried,  
I handed you a stone and it became your hand. This  
was an act of great patience. You invented a ship

and I invented a canal for it to travel through. When people  
one hundred years from now will look at the map  
of our battle, the map with the creatures discovered by then

but not yet discovered today, they will remember a song  
they've heard, a song about how sailing is a metaphor  
for remaining still, how waves are the illusion

of motion, how coherence is like a simile for rope,  
and they will remember you. And only when the last bitter breath  
is pulled from my little pocketbook of lungs will I forget.

# Simon Perchik

Even its glue, another sheet  
lets go, turning its back  
by leaning over, headfirst, a small splash

held till the burn marks show  
—without a beach or the soft breast  
your child is filling with feathers

with just before sleep—this page  
on the way home, crawling in sand  
and your hands still fastened

soaking in hot milk, carried  
as if they were written down at night  
one wearing through the other.

# Julia Koets

## Gentle Corners of the Night

Small bundle swaddled against your back,  
he hasn't learned why we are afraid, why  
lonesome, here, can be worse than dying.

For months without knowing, he was kept safe  
inside another life, held gentle into the night.  
One thing your father still does like a child  
is fly. But he is aware of the strings, wind aging

under the kite. You cannot unlearn why  
we are afraid, but dream so often in the dark.  
All the stories children hear fill the places  
we'll never see: gentle corners of the night.

I tell him of cities left in sand; his fist, tight  
around my finger, holding what we have of day.  
He has not yet learned why we are afraid,  
why strings can never keep things safe.

# Alex Foreman

## Ulysses

*Translated from the Italian of Umberto Saba*

When I was in my younger days, I sailed  
The coastlines of Dalmatia. Isles appeared  
In bloom along the billows where sporadic  
Birds hung in intent hunger over prey.  
Those algae-slippery isles were glittering  
Emeralds in gold sunlight. And when high  
Tide and the night extinguished them, sails slipped  
Leeward to deeper waters to evade  
That perfidy. Today I am a king  
Of no man's land. The harbor light is lit  
For other men. I turn once more to sea  
Impelled by an indomitable spirit,  
By an excruciating love for life.

# Umberto Saba

## Ulisse

*Originally published in Mediterraneo © 1946 Arnoldo Mondadori*

Nella mia giovinezza ho navigato  
lungo le coste dalmate. Isolotti  
a fior d'onda emergevano, ove raro  
un uccello sostava intento a prede,  
coperti d'alghe, scivolosi, al sole  
belli come smeraldi. Quando l'alta  
marea e la notte li annullava, vele  
sottovento sbandavano più al largo,  
per sfuggirne l'insidia. Oggi il mio regno  
è quella terra di nessuno. Il porto  
accende ad altri i suoi lumi, me al largo  
sospinge ancora il non domato spirito,  
e della vita il doloroso amore.

# Angela Zito

## Mamihlapinatapai

I wish you would say it, what I can't  
when you hold me like this: close-in.  
Though pushing, lips apart,  
my tongue swims unable to utter  
a thing. Lodged between us, this look—  
*knowing*—stranded and lingering  
in ticking, substernal seconds.  
We share this space, waiting,  
wanting the other to (please)  
call this what it is.

\*

Call this what it is?  
*Wanting*. The other to please,  
we share this space, waiting  
in ticking, substernal seconds—  
knowing. Stranded. And lingering,  
a thing lodged between us—this look.  
My tongue swims, unable to utter  
though pushing lips apart.  
When you hold me like this, closed-in,  
I wish you would say it. What I can't.

# John Sibley Williams

## It is not you

It is not you I have lost  
crossing the road  
to taste this other dream  
of myself,  
following a whisper  
of butterfly.

Lifting this stone  
the same love-creatures  
struggling beneath  
stare up with the same  
magnificent eyes—  
up through me.

And in them still  
clouds draw back  
exposing the sky's pink flesh.  
Naked before you  
it is not you  
who are naked  
chasing the unfulfilled  
and not you

this stone butterfly long  
will rest upon.

## Chen Kasher

### Ode to Ellipses

You were your own deep exterior; a shallop  
That took one rower;  
A sink whose slush sounded like a rill;  
Ballast so cubed in blue-black water  
Sometimes you sensed your own depth.  
You were the sleepy steamed broccoli; the travel  
Serendipity; the room whose light  
Stayed up past 3 A.M.;  
The goldfish that prayed for rain.  
You were the island pew filled with  
So many trogons and water,  
The tropical growth had to vacate its space;  
You were the last to shut your door and let self keep  
Fuchsia – catnip – winter jeans:

# Philip Fried

## Cash for Clunkers

Tempest-tost or poor, come to MB's Golden Door dealership and redeem your fuel-inefficient ego for the inter-relational vehicle of your dreams.

Folks of all persuasions, teens, seniors, and the great betweenery—*Thou* and *Thou* and *Thou* . . . here is a government deal that is pure poetry.

And with MB, it's *I-Thou* all the way because “cash for clunkers” means the era of gas-guzzling individuality is finito.

So, dear friends, not customers, my *I* is at your *Thou's* disposal during normal business hours, which are way abnormal through November.

We'll hustle your sad-assed auto-selves to junkyards where compactors and guillotine shears will process your tons of me-me-me into furnace feed,

While *you* ease out of the lot with cash in your pocket and a whole new model of way-to-be, a Nexus or Destiny, with meta-psychical perks.

But Destiny is far from the limit, no no. With a minimal down-payment, you too can inhabit the aura of one of our electro-retro classics.

Cruise with The Socrates on full-dialogue throttle, clocking thousands of miles on a single cup of hemlock.

Resonate to the purring *I* of The Goethe. Running on pure intercourse with nature, it will lap up a continent on 5 minutes of sunlight, 10 of moonlight.

Finally, for those with a real appetite for redemption, how powerful even overpowering is the I-glide engine of unconditional relation.

With accompanying GPS programmed to respond to “Father” and to address all directions to you as “Daughter,” “Son.”

Pass through the Golden Door and under our motto: Leisure is the exultation of the possible. The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable.



# Nicholas Poluhoff

## People With Money

I was sucking on a rotten tooth when my boss came into my office and shut the door.

“Wait till you hear this, Billy bud. I have a great opportunity for you, a potentially life-changing proposition.”

Andy Kruger was a sweet, round man, always trying to drag me by the collar with him into his enthusiasms. But I knew not to take seriously the exaggerations of a professional journalist. Whether he offered me a million dollars or a breath mint, his voice would hold the same passion. Here was Andy’s pitch: there was a wealthy businessman looking for someone to help him write his memoir. All I’d have to do is have dinner with him and his wife, convince him that I found his life as fascinating as he did. If hired, I’d receive a large check, plus the gift I’d always dreamed of—my name on the cover of a book.

Not that I hadn’t been published before. My poem “Midnight Aubade” had appeared in the prestigious *Manitoba Review*. My limited-edition chapbook had been awarded honorable mention by my MFA professors. So how did a modestly laureled young poet end up an associate editor at a business magazine? All blame goes to my father. The publisher was an old chum from back at Williams, where three generations of Shawcross-Jones men—myself included—have matriculated. Instead of composing with one eye on eternity at our Berkshires estate, I was editing with both eyes on the clock in the glass coffin they call an office building, because he’d sold the Berkshires spread to pay his debts. This job was my father’s sole legacy—along with a painful periodontal disease that was turning my teeth into stale, gray Chiclets.

Andy wasn’t expecting me to accept so quickly. Usually, when he offered advice about career enhancement, I’d nod and chew my lips until he changed the subject. Almost two years working for him, and he still hadn’t sussed my secret: I hated business. I hated business, businesspeople, people who cared about business or businesspeople. They were whores and sycophants, thieves and parasites—all of them. In my heart of hearts I cheered their terminations, rejoiced at their bankruptcies. But now I was desperate; the company dental coverage provided for plaque to be scraped and cavities to be filled, yet was silent on the topic of major surgery. And there was no way around it; my teeth needed to be yanked and replaced with a brand-new set. While I dreamed of a movie-star smile, Andy insisted upon providing details.

“Don’t you want to hear about Tom?”

When I heard the name Tom Stearns naturally I thought of Thomas Stearns Eliot, master poet, who taught us all about the cruelties of April. But this Tom Stearns wouldn’t know the difference between a villanelle and a Volvo—instead of breathing fresh life into dead images, he was a corporate vampire, famous for sucking the blood out of vulnerable companies then selling their carcasses at an obscene profit. He was a billionaire investor and art collector, known as the Dracula of Wall Street. Andy had just edited a feature on him—the Stearnses were wonderful, amazing people, he gushed—and would love to help with the book if only his responsibilities at the magazine didn’t interfere.

But the dinner was that night. I’d have no time to perform due diligence, no time to steel myself for a confrontation with a captain of industry. So I did a few Internet searches and then, after work, took our recent issue with the Tom Stearns story downstairs to the bar. I only kept up with the magazine because there was always a copy next to the men’s room toilet. Stocks or bonds, bulls or bears—I was proud to know nothing about any of it. My purview was the LUXE LIVING section, where I edited small pieces about the best place on Wall Street to get your shoes shined, the benefits of helicopter vs. private jet, or how to design your own yacht. I thought of myself as a gardener of sentences, clipping what was extraneous, coaxing weak prose to grow florid.

While soaking my aching gums in warm Scotch, I absorbed the charmed life of Tom Stearns. His apartment was a duplex penthouse that had a view of Central Park fit for a vulture. Its spiral staircase was an architectural wonder that cost more than a boatload of polio vaccines. Tom was a “brash contrarian” who beat the market every day and then came home to his collection of priceless masterpieces. He was so brash that he’d placed his Rauschenberg and his Motherwell on the same wall, daring you to derive any aesthetic pleasure from absorbing them both at once. But Tom’s most stunning acquisition was his trophy wife, Cecilia. Black ringlets, lithe limbs, pink skin burnished like a Renaissance cherub. Cecilia chaired charitable boards, ministered to poor babies with cleft palates, and even found time to dabble in watercolors.

With the help of a second Scotch, I moved from pictures of the Stearns’ home to the real thing. Their building on Central Park West was a stone fortress designed to protect its occupants from tipsy interlopers. While peeing in a bush, I formulated my plan of attack. I would confess to Tom that while my chosen *métier* was poetry, I could do prose just as well, and to impress him further, I’d whip up a rough outline for his book

right on the spot. I zipped my fly, smoothed my hair, inspected my murky reflection in a car window. What did I see? A serious, upstanding business journalist on his way to fame and riches.

“Mr. William Shawcross-Jones for Mr. Thomas Stearns,” I announced to the doorman, one esteemed colleague calling upon another.

The elevator was one of those old-fashioned gilded cages that rose expressly to the penthouse. A maid dressed like a French maid was waiting to take my coat. The apartment opened like a jewelry box—tinkling piano, flickers of soft light, gold-framed mirrors. There was a foyer with a vaulted ceiling, polished parquet, Chinese vases bearing calla lilies. A woman in high heels drummed across the floor, an alabaster hand was extended: this was Cecilia Stearns. Her smile showed teeth so strong and white that they would outshine mine even when she was a skeleton; her perfume smelled so delicious, I would have guzzled it by the gallon.

“You must be William,” she sang. “Thank you so much for coming. Please, come meet Tom.”

Tom Stearns was a handsome patrician, over sixty yet still spry and broad-shouldered. He had a mint-julep drawl that made his hello a caress. His blond head was fit to be bronzed, his jaw a granite square that would stand as the foundation for generations.

“Come on in,” he grumbled, offering a crushing handshake. “You’re keeping this hungry carnivore from a fresh kill.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I was stuck at work. A very important story. Please accept my apologies.”

“I appreciate your diligence,” said Tom. “Most writers are right on time when there’s a free meal involved.”

Cecilia stabbed me with her dimples and led me into the dining room. We shuffled in behind the sound of Tom’s voice. The man had a megaphone in his throat, every word came conjoined with its own echo. There was a table as big as a ship, a single modest chandelier sprouting glass daggers. But as my eyes adjusted I saw a pair of strange fallow men facing me, already seated. Were these Tom’s lawyers? His accountants? What a fool I was! Only someone with limited business experience would have pictured this night as a cozy threesome—of course there were other candidates. I forced them both to shake my clammy hand, get an eyeful of my shantytown smile.

I sat next to Cecilia, with Tom at the head of the table, my opponents arrayed directly across. The dining room was draped in heavy blood-red tapestries, I imagined King Arthur or Beowulf tearing into a drumstick. There was delicious wine inside a goblet and I swigged it like a thirsty pilgrim. Absorbing the prospective ghostwriters at once, I

noticed we looked suspiciously similar. We each wore square black glasses, had a bookworm's sickly pallor, our shabby clothes rumpled with editorial slovenliness. I hated them passionately, instantly. Why are writers always so ugly? There was no doubt that by the end of the evening my inherent superiority would be revealed.

Servants brought fragrant cheese, Cecilia nibbled genteelly. Each candidate explained the work he did, all of us some type of scribbler or language caretaker. Résumés were transformed into lively narratives, heroic tales of how these men fought their way in the world with sharpened minds their only weapons. The first candidate—me with hair receding and paunch advancing—blushed and stammered so bad I almost felt sorry for him. The other guy—me with dandruff and a pig snout—told of how he'd been closely following Mr. Stearns's career—the hostile takeovers, the friendly takeovers, the salacious mergers—spouting statistics as if he'd memorized the back of Tom's baseball card. Then they turned to me.

"Are you familiar with the work of T. S. Eliot?" I asked Tom. "Your names are almost identical. He didn't know much about business, but he was a lord of language. *We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men / Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw*. Know that one?"

"I'm afraid not," he answered.

"Well, I want to write your book like Eliot wrote a poem. A main theme running subtly throughout like a golden thread. Simple, crystalline images that reveal your life from every possible angle. I already have an outline worked out."

"Is that how you do it down at the magazine?"

"No, not at all. That's like building an outhouse: your book will be like constructing a cathedral."

Even my opponents laughed. I did too, hiding my smile inside a wine glass. The first victory was mine.

"I can't wait to tell Andy Kruger," Tom roared. "He builds outhouses!"

"He said only great things about you," cooed Cecilia.

"Never believe a word he says," I warned her.

An exotic South American skate was laid upon my plate like a delicate flower. The sight of it made us all smile. Cecilia glanced my way—I was definitely her favorite candidate. Staring into the fish was the only way to keep my eyes off her. It was like sitting next to the sun, the heat and sweat were dizzying. Tom, inscrutable behind his leathery poker face, chewed from an Olympian distance—a devout believer in the glory of competition, he wanted to watch us slice each other up for his dinnertime diversion. I hid the skate in the cave of my mouth, knew that as long as I kept my teeth busy, no one would dare look my way.

Pigface—my nickname for the fool who thought he knew everything—mentioned a 5000- word feature he was working on about pharmaceutical investing. Stearns flexed his eyebrows and asked for particulars. This was his most beloved sector. The exquisite thrills of pharmaceutical investing would be the very heart and soul of his memoir.

“Pharmaceuticals is how we met,” said Cecilia, so unlike any of the women I’d met with the assistance of pharmaceuticals. “I was working as a regional sales director. I gave a presentation to his company. Tom sat in the front row. I’d never been so terrified.”

“She did just fine,” said her husband.

“But you didn’t invest in the company!”

“I invested in you instead,” he said, and all three of his suitors chuckled.

I almost commented on her lovely dividends but bit my tongue. For the rest of the meal, my doppelgängers told Tom about which of his brilliant deals they most admired, competed to see who could wedge their head farthest up his ass. While they groveled, I savored a spicy Merlot. Why should I sell myself when he’d be lucky to have me? Soon the plates were cleared and we adjourned to the living room for dessert and liqueur.

“Have a seat, gentlemen,” Tom insisted, “and I’ll tell you the story of my first great conquest. Of the financial variety, that is.”

We passed a servant on the way and I asked her to direct me to the nearest bathroom. There’s always something unsettling about having dinner with the tacky rich; I needed a moment alone. The room she led me to was the size of my bedroom.

“Get me a hot plate and a blanket and I’ll move right in,” I told her, but she only nodded and ran away.

I washed my face and peed a gallon jug of wine. It felt liberating, almost transgressive, to be half-naked in such a constricting setting. I heard Cecilia’s voice and imagined her in here with me, my greedy hands all over her. The towels were plush black and touching one inspired the wild impulse to jerk off into it. The towel had a dark sheen like Cecilia’s hair and if I pushed my dick into it and left behind a surprise, maybe she’d rub it against her face. I tried to conjure images of Cecilia slipping out of silk lingerie but I was already too drunk, my body numb from churning anxiety. Even becoming a sex criminal seemed just another tedious career choice.

Instead, I ran the water and quietly cracked the medicine cabinet. America’s preeminent pharmaceutical investor would have to have special goodies, maybe experimental existential painkillers or champagne-flavored aspirin. I wanted something that would make me irresistible, render every

word I spoke sharp and luminous. The Stearnses needed to see the real me: that, though cash-poor and ugly-toothed, I was an aristocrat of the soul; that those other guys were hacks while I was a wolf in sheep's khakis, a future great writer, waiting to devour the world. I would have settled for gargling Cecilia's perfume like mouthwash, but only found foot powder. Hidden in a corner was a bottle marked HYDROCODONE; I popped one in my mouth and drank it down.

Everyone had gathered around a mahogany coffee table with curved legs and sharp claws, trying not to sink too deeply into lush sofas, the fireplace a crackling cliché behind them. Tom Stearns sat front and center in the high-backed leather chair I recognized from our photo shoot, the top buttons of his tailored shirt undone. I couldn't resist the empty seat next to Cecilia, imagining she'd already forgiven me for what almost happened in the bathroom. I was offered Cognac in a voluptuous snifter and accepted. I felt like a tardy student slinking into class; apparently, Tom had been lecturing about his business philosophy and was reaching the summation.

"Why not stop at one or ten or a hundred million?" he asked rhetorically. "The simple answer is: If you don't have the drive and ambition to keep going, you're not the kind of person who'd get there in the first place."

I was certain that Tom's admonishment was directed at me. I was not the kind of person who'd get close to one million; I was not the kind of person who knew anything about money except how to spend it. There was something about me that he hated, I decided. Suddenly, for no reason, no fault of my own, he was out to get me. In my brief business career I'd met men like him before: suspicious of those not devoted to the constant pursuit of capital, threatened by the way I flouted their rules. But I wouldn't surrender; maybe by fighting back, matching scorn with scorn, I could win him over and pen his masterpiece. While they discussed some dreary transaction, I nodded along, a fist pressed against my lips to stifle any stray yawns.

But what kind of brute wants to discuss market cap in a roomful of priceless *objets d'art*? On a shelf facing us were actual Greek amphorae, delicate images of thousand-year-old warriors frozen in eternal movement; on the floor nearby was an ancient bronze statue of some haughty goddess; and above the fireplace—was that a Matisse?

"Mind if I admire some of your art?" I asked Cecilia.

"Please, go right ahead."

But standing was a slight problem. I couldn't tell if it was the fire or the ornate lamps, but the room seemed glazed with rippling light; the

ceiling suspired, the walls trembled. The skate was swimming in circles around my stomach; the pill too seemed to be kicking in.

I steadied myself by grasping the mantel and noticed framed photos of their children, the boy towheaded like Dad, the girl a sloe-eyed toddler, sure to be a stunner like Mom. While Tom droned on, I pictured the golden futures of his progeny. Private schools, private jets, private islands, private equity. The tooth fairy slipping hundreds under their pillows, plotting their lifetime of perfect smiles. The kids were most likely tucked in somewhere down the hall—our article had mentioned their separate nannies, separate ponies, the tutor who taught them Mandarin. I couldn't decide if I wanted to be them or kidnap them.

“What lovely children,” I exclaimed.

Just as I was starting to keel, Cecilia stood and grabbed my elbow. She still liked me; I was frail and exotic, like a sad puppy at the pound.

“Are you feeling okay, William?”

I reached for a picture of their daughter but knocked it over.

“So lovely,” I slurred. “Too late for you to adopt me, I suppose?”

“Excuse me, Bill!” Tom Stearns' voice was like a slap. “Did you come here to discuss my project? Or to behave like a jackass?”

There is nothing I despise more than being called Bill. I am not a receipt asking for payment of services rendered, nor the beak of some waterfowl. I am not a Bill, have never been a Bill. I'd even surrender my beloved hyphen—the one that connects my Shawcross to my Jones and gives my name its sonorous lilt—in exchange for never again being called Bill.

“As I was saying,” he continued, as we glared at each other. “Our analysts were convinced that this new pill had blockbuster potential. But the FDA was dragging its feet. Millions of dollars were at stake. Can you understand my predicament, Bill?”

My smile was shaky yet wide, aimed at him like a weapon. I was not one of those people with objectionable teeth who push out their lips or throw a hand in front of their mouths to hide the unhideable. The great poet who'd been on my mind all night suddenly appeared between us. I couldn't help myself—having a few drinks always makes me want to recite. With one hand gripping the mantel, I swung out the other with a wild flourish.

“Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.  
A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers.”

“Hey, I know that!” cried Pigface. “Who is that?”

“Is that Kipling?” asked Cecilia.

“It was the fish,” I said. “I’m sorry, I need the bathroom again.”

The bathroom was my citadel, my chapel, and I dropped to my knees to give thanks. The toilet, at least for the few moments I spent hugging it, was the most expensive piece of property I’d ever possessed. The skate flushed out of my mouth in a torrent. “The way up and the way down are the same,” I told it. I crawled to the sink, looked in the mirror, examined my dental wasteland. Maybe I should march right out there and announce that I had no interest in ghostwriting Tom Stearns’s memoir—tell them all to fuck off, quit before being fired. “I will not be the instrument for your dismal music,” I’d say. “I, sir, am a poet—you are a vampire!”

There was a burst of mocking laughter and I pressed my ear to the door to see if I could hear my name mentioned. Now I was drunk with rage and what I felt strongest was the urge to vandalize, desecrate. My first idea was to smash the mirror with my fists, run outside wielding shards of glass and cut whoever got in my way. This should have been my house, my life, my wife. My profligate father had pissed away the future that was rightfully mine, and because of his negligence I was forced to sit caged every day like a veal calf, suffer the indignity of an office job. I opened my zipper, pulled my dick out, and stuffed it into one of their fancy towels—not that I could climax, but maybe just leave some part of me behind. While violently tugging my limp slug, I heard a clicking noise, almost as if I’d cracked a knuckle. When I looked up, there was Cecilia, sprung fully formed from the linoleum.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” she said sternly.

“Please,” I pleaded. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“William, you have to go.”

Looking at Cecilia through bleary eyes, her face seemed diamond-studded, the light gracing her head like a crown. I was in another world, I was deranged; there’s no excuse but I did it. I tried to press my puke-flecked lips to hers. She gasped and turned her head—my achievement was to graze her cheek before she shoved me away. Kissing her was the best desecration I could think of.

I turned around to zip up, preparing to calmly take my leave, when I heard a loud roar behind me—suddenly there were fists pummeling my back, thick hands straining to get at my throat. It was Tom, spewing curses, coming to protect his wife’s honor. The whole time he was punching—his bloated tyrant’s face a burning red—I was laughing. There was a sly smirk on my face when he slammed my mouth off the sink and into the fluted gold tap. But all the fun stopped at the first sight of blood. I thought it

was my gums expressing themselves, but then noticed what looked like small chunks of undercooked meat. I was spitting teeth.

Cecilia covered her face and ran out. I stayed put, polluting their sink, spitting out a half-dozen of my front teeth as if they were sunflower seeds.

“You stupid fuck!” Tom yelled, his sharp canines snapping at my ears.

He stuffed a towel in my mouth and grabbed me by the elbow. We were like cop and perp; I hung my head and trudged along, the only collaboration we were suited for. I was scared and embarrassed, but there was also the thrill of having been the main attraction at such an unforgettable event. The last time I saw Cecilia she was standing at her husband’s side, just like in the magazine photo. Her cheeks were slightly flushed—had I left an imprint?—yet she still maintained an impressive detachment. I considered apologizing but it just wasn’t possible. Tom Stearns tossed me into the hall, slammed the door in my face.

The next morning I awoke with a massive hangover, my mouth a mangled crash victim. I was almost absolutely certain I wouldn’t be helping Tom write his book. But then the phone rang, and it was some snarling attorney who claimed to represent Mr. Thomas Stearns. Maybe I was getting a reprieve—maybe the brilliant businessman realized that the greatest artists are always the worst houseguests. “My client would like to make a deal with you,” he said. In exchange for my confidentiality regarding last night’s incident and the waiving of all future right to seek redress, I would receive a check for 5000 dollars.

“Not enough,” I said, drooling on the phone.

“It’s our final offer.”

“Gotta be ten,” I said. Who was the ruthless negotiator now? “Ten or I call a lawyer and a newspaper.”

“How soon can you be in my office?”

Now, whenever I bite into an apple or smile at a rich young woman, I always think of Tom Stearns. Not an immortal poet, like I’ll be one day, but a takeover artist, a destroyer of worlds—and my accidental benefactor. The king who paid for my crowns, the architect who built my bridges, the billionaire who bought me the strongest, whitest teeth money can buy.

# David Luntz

## The Star Seller

“The great tragedy of life is not that we die, it’s that we experience consciousness asymmetrically; we live in such mental isolation that language cannot adequately inform others, *when it really matters*, what we think and feel.”

Those were the last words the star seller said to me. I did not really understand what he was trying to tell me then or before, but maybe you will. So I will play a game with you, as he played with me. See if you can guess what he was *really* trying to tell me. I know, it’s not fair: you weren’t there. But I will relate as best I can my impressions of him, what he did and what he said. And to compensate for this second hand version, I will give you one big clue: think *Oedipus*, but without the incest or patricide.

The funny thing is I should never have met him, because I normally took the train home from work and rarely ever walked through the park. But it was one of those crisp autumn evenings—leaves turning red, scent of wood smoke—that demands to be experienced, if for nothing else, than to remember what it’s like to feel alive. The stars had just begun to prick their way through the sky and you couldn’t help but notice how beautiful they were. Moreover, it had been a good day at work, market soaring, and all seemed right with the world.

As a veteran bond trader, I fancy myself experienced, sophisticated, nobody’s patsy. Perhaps, for this reason, two-bit hustlers, fast talkers, schemers and swindlers have long fascinated me. It’s partly admiration—for the way they live by their wits—but mainly it’s about uncovering what’s behind their ploys and pretensions. Call it a character defect, but I need to think I know every trick in the book; that I am possessed of deep subtlety and well acquainted with the darker machinations of the mind. So when I first saw him, holding court near the exit of the park, his fingers darting lark-like, as though strumming some invisible instrument or brushing Chinese characters against the air, I knew right away I had found a live one.

My blood up, I slipped into the crowd and sampled his performance with a connoisseur’s critical eye. It disappointed me though. I thought: *here’s just another scammer peddling plots on the moon or what not; oh, see how he pinches the stars between his fingers, like so many threads, over which his fools and cons gladly trip the light fantastic.* But there was something in his face, a sort of resolution that gave me pause, while the prophetic timbre of his voice imbued him with a kind of presence not commonly found amongst cheap fraudsters

and showmen. Nor was the crowd he attracted composed wholly of that urban dross, the gullible and lonely hearts desperate to line their empty lives with some meaning, on which con men so easily prey. Rather, for every New Ager and self-absorbed weirdo who waited patiently for him, stood a woman in furs or some suit sporting custom-made shoes who should have, I assumed, known better.

Physically, his haunted brow, untended beard, and sinewy fingers all conspired to lend him an Adam-like aspect. And that, perhaps, because of romantic inclination or, because we often fashion stories about those whom we first meet, is how I initially saw him: an Adam, stalking the heavens, taking dominion over the stars by naming them, and then transferring title to them by sale. Apart from that, he was about sixty years old, wiry, and displayed the self-assured gait of a born athlete.

To break the ice with new customers, he liked to quip that he was “just a star salesman.” Joking aside though, he had a good thing going. His operation consisted simply of a fold-up chair and table that he brought to the park most nights when it was clear—yet there was always a line to see him that he never seemed particularly anxious to move. Perhaps, he sensed, like any shrewd businessman, that the longer someone is prepared to wait, the more he or she will value what you’re offering. When you got to him, he would point up into the darkness and tell you what was for sale. Sometimes, he took a telescope out of a frayed rucksack, but he never bothered to use it. Nor did he ever invite any of his customers to. I figured it was just a prop: something to conjure associations of who he was and what he was selling. He gathered the stars with his eyes, as the ancients did.

Nonetheless, I cottoned on pretty quickly that whatever he was up to, it wasn’t about money. He never transacted commercially with children or young adults. He would sell only one star per customer per night. And though often asked, he refused to do any astrology or fortune telling. He wanted only (so it seemed) to give everybody a piece of the “raging beauty,” as he termed it, around us. Occasionally, an astronomer, professional or amateur, would try to trick him. But he knew his stuff and, more impressively, he remembered every star sold, as well as the name of each person who purchased it.

How he did this was the subject of much speculation, for he did not hand out faux parchments or other legally dubious certifications entitling the holder or bearer to some sidereal possession. Nor did he maintain a register or ledger in which a customer’s name was recorded against the name of a star. No one ever complained about not receiving any proof of purchase, perhaps because the very lack of any tangible evidence made

the transaction purer and sense of ownership dearer.

Yet when pressed about how he could possibly remember all his customers and know so much about astronomy, he replied cryptically that he was a merely an usher in Giulio Camillo's *Memory Theatre*, guiding its patrons to the seats of the stars they had reserved long ago; as for his expertise, he had acquired this in his youth, where he had read every book available on physics and astronomy in the British Library. From my appreciation of poetry and philosophy, I sensed in the star seller's explanation a kindred spirit and, more specifically, a veiled reference to one of the Greek myths about the birth of the soul.

The truth was, since most of my working life was occupied with trading bonds, my literary and philosophic excursions rarely extended beyond mere dabbling. They were, nonetheless, a font of deep pride. I felt they gave me a richer and fuller life than my colleagues or, for that matter, most other people who evinced little or no interest in such subjects. But the feeling ran deeper. At times, I sensed a certain boundlessness of spirit, an ineffable connection to all things around me: the ghosts in the cathedral's stones near my house spoke to me; sunlight quivering in spider webs represented, I was sure, some ancient code or melody that predated language, logic or thought itself—intelligible only in dreams or highly attenuated states of consciousness. Occasionally, expectation and memory ceased: the world enveloped me like a drop of dew and each moment hung still and motionless—trapped—seemingly forever, within that fluid membrane.

As the alchemists believed an invisible umbilicus bound the outermost stars to the lowliest plants, I too sensed that my poetic sketches and philosophic musings manifested overtly some inner, untapped genius that simply required the skills of a gifted mentor or teacher to bring into being. And with his wild hair, self-taught expertise, and unattached affiliations, the star seller seemed the perfect embodiment of such an imagined teacher; a sort of "Gipsy Scholar," who had wandered straight out of Arnold's poem into my life; the prototype guru of which I had so often dreamt. Naturally, I lost no time in flying, like the proverbial moth, toward that tempting source of illumination.

In any event, his explanation seemed to satisfy the other doubters, as I heard no further challenges to his credentials from them. Soon enough, apropos of his prodigious mental ability, a rumor circulated that he had once counted in his mind to the millionth decimal point of Pi, but had to stop, because he needed the bathroom. Back then, it sounded like a good story to me—as I was still not entirely taken in—but by the end of the year I had no doubt it was true.

The thing though that really swept aside all my earlier skepticism, that persuaded me the star seller was not just another sleazy scammer, was what a marvel he was with local kids. For on several occasions I had seen him demonstrate to them magically how eclipses occur using nothing more than a flashlight and cut-up cue cards. On other nights, he would explain the differences between meteors and comets, red dwarfs and white dwarfs or illustrate how stars are born while passing out custom-made Chinese lanterns with the great constellations lit up on their onion-paper skin. Once I watched him play the guitar to an enthralled throng while relating that years ago people thought the planets made music as they moved across the sky, because the distances between the planets corresponded to the distances of the chords on musical instruments. Afterwards, he asked them to pretend that they had fallen asleep in a vast desert and then awoke in the middle of the night where they discovered a long pole that seemed to stretch from one edge of the desert to the other with a large spherical mirror stuck on its end. If they were to hoist that pole up, they would see the mirror reflect the sunlight, “Just as the moon does,” he chortled.

I remember smiling as he said this, thinking that he was giving them their first thought experiment. But suddenly I felt as though the cable that ground me to the world had snapped, and for a moment I was completely free, as I glanced into his mind and realized what he was really doing: his invitation to imagine had little to do with thinking or thought experiments (at least in the sense that I understood these words); rather, it was about what matters to most children: their fear of the dark and the things that lie in wait in for them under their beds, behind curtains and in the flickering shadows. And in his artful way he had shown them the thing they fear most—darkness—is not real. It’s just the absence of light.

Given all his charms, I found myself often stopping by to watch him ply his trade, engage him in conversation, or purchase a star he had put aside for me. Those stars, and by extension the subject of astronomy, had become, to my surprise, something of an obsessive past-time. For when I was not drawn directly to the star seller, I was busy taking photos of “my” stars, which clustered principally around Orion. The best ones hung prominently in my office. Their magnitudes, densities, ages, and distances from themselves and the earth I knew by heart.

One evening, I decided on a whim to add an eighth star to my collection. This would be a significant acquisition. Eight was my lucky number, appearing not just on my birthday and birth month, but also with uncanny frequency in the numbers of the houses or streets on which I had lived.

I took my time getting to the park; the air was crisp and pleasing; the leaves had just begun to fall. The night felt oddly much like that night

I had first met the star seller. But the sensation wasn't exactly *deja-vu*, because the star seller or "Starman" which is what everybody was now calling him, had evolved from then into some kind of neighborhood fixture, like the barber who has always cut your hair or the corner bistro whose owner and menu never change. But he was more than that; he was an immeasurable asset, a sort of roving library, a communal beneficence, due to his extraordinary erudition. It was that, more than anything else, which I, and the others, waited in line to buy, or thought we were buying. He knew it. We knew it. The stars were just an excuse.

Without effort, I can still hear him describe how the Phoenicians mastered celestial navigation and Eratosthenes measured the equator, of Ptolemy's influence on medieval astronomy, Newton's "Experimentum Crucis," and of worm holes and singularities. Mostly, I recall how his fingers splayed against the night sky when he spoke, as if he were beating back the currents of time so we could witness, even if for a moment, those lost worlds. But he was careful not to fatigue his audience with too many facts. He would often switch scenery, sometimes in mid-sentence, to the literary realms of Shakespeare and Milton and quote at length from *King Lear* and *Samson Agonistes*. I took them to be idiosyncratic selections. I should have known better.

That said, I was also keen to see him to discuss further some observations he made the last time I was there. Knowing my interest in philosophy, he claimed then that for many years he struggled between the worldviews of Aristotle and Plato. But, after a life altering experience, he realized that Plato had got it right. In his own words: "You can't get to truth by counting and measuring and certainly you won't find it at the end of a lens, no matter how magnified. Truth can only be found in the mind, through strict contemplation and the use of reason."

While he was saying this, some vagrants nearby had set fire to a garbage can and were daring each other loudly to stick their hands inside. Flames and sparks leaped all around them. I tried to reconcile their behavior with the Starman's view of the human condition, his quest for truth, and about what we can and cannot know. The best I could do, for some inscrutable reason, was to recall a seminary student who had told me why *Genesis* begins with the Hebrew letter "Bet." "It's because," he averred, "the letter resembles a three-sided box, which signifies that knowledge about life and creation can only be found within the literal "space" of *Genesis*, as suggested by, and which follows from, the letter's shape. Conversely, what remains outside the confines of the letter, that is, what is *not* written, is beyond our ken." And, as though the Starman knew what I was thinking, he continued:

"I think the same is true of consciousness. We will most likely discover that it is as old as time and originated with the universe and the first stars.

This should not be strange; after all, chemically speaking we are all stardust. But when we finally do see consciousness, we will truly understand ourselves.”

When I got to his usual spot, a bunch of people were milling about, looking confused and lost, because there was no stand, no telescope, no Starman. As the night was clear, they were trying to explain his absence, speculating in hushed tones that maybe he was running late or was sick. After a while, some lost interest and peeled away. Eventually, the local drunk pitched up, sat on a bench nearby and started taunting us. We tried to ignore him. But it was his night. He had the goods on us and was dying to spill them. Finally, no longer able to contain himself, he bleated:

“If you fuckwits are all hanging around for the Starman, you’re wasting your time. He’s gone and he ain’t coming back.”

“What do you mean?” someone asked.

“Just what I said, asshole. Gone, vamoosed, sayanoraed. Comprende, mi amigo? Jew speaka da ingleesh?”

“When?”

“About an hour ago. They took him away.”

I am a number cruncher, bottom-line seeker, “Bond Salesman of the Year” winner (twice in a row) who yet possesses at times an overheated imagination and the words “They took him away” opened doors in my mind that I would have preferred stayed shut. Through those doors swept burly men in white coats, who pinned the Starman down and thrust glistening needles into his veins. After them, came ambulances and straightjackets, white walls, sodium lights, dripping pentathol, gurneys, padlocks, cuckoo nests, lunatic howls, and my eighth star, my lucky star, fading irretrievably in the distance.

But it made no sense. The Starman wasn’t crazy. A neighborhood curiosity, a harmless crank, an eccentric, sure, maybe even a freak, but not dangerous to himself or others. Nothing requiring institutionalization.

I became frantic; I had to find him and rectify what was obviously a grave injustice or terrible mistake. I resolved to make clear to whoever was holding him that he was perfectly sane and certainly didn’t require any supervision or monitoring. He belonged in the park selling stars.

I turned on the drunk, gloating in the jaundiced hue of the lamplight, and practically shrieked, “*Who* took him away?”

“The cops.”

“The cops? For what? For not drinking beer out of a paper bag?” I snarled.

The sot started laughing hysterically, convulsing. We were all watching him, stupefied, waiting for the punch line of some joke we couldn’t quite

grasp. He did not disappoint. “You dumb fucks just don’t get it. He’s a con artist. He can’t see shit. Blind as a fucking bat. Been in and out the can most of his life.”

The trapdoor of all my illusions finally gave way under me.

I felt sick and backed away. It was inconceivable that he was blind. Yet I knew—in the way you know something in your bones, in the way when your hairs stand on end and the world stops moving, and in the way that no amount of experimentation, demonstration and strict contemplation can prove—that it was true. I stumbled out of the park, not really conscious of where I was headed. I saw a hare-lipped girl astride a primrose fence laughing at me. Disturbed, I skirted away from her; but when I looked back, she was pointing a long, gnarled finger at me with a deformed grin marring her face. Behind her, Tweedledum and Tweedledee were fighting each other to the death over a broken baby rattle. But the hare-lipped girl was really just a token of my shame, and the groans from the Tweedle twins were really just the cries from the drunk raging at the remnant of the Starman faithful. His howls rang against the falling leaves and the night sky, and, at the rim where the stars drank away at the darkness, they paused momentarily, and then washed out into the emptiness and oblivion.

After a while, I found a little light. I walked several blocks until I got control of my breathing. I leaned against a wall and tried to grapple with what I had learned. I understood now what that transformative experience in the Starman’s life was, why he taught children not to fear darkness, and why he spoke about the tragedy of our fragmented consciousness and his hope that one day we may be able to see it whole and entire. (You wouldn’t need eyes, presumably, for that!) And while I stewed in disgust at my own stupidity, I also felt oddly elated, exalted, even blessed, by his magnificent gesture. What he pulled off was nothing short of amazing, Houdiniesque, miraculous.

I slid down the wall and wept as I comprehended the real value of the stars I had purchased. In a sense, I, and all the others, had bought a piece of genius, whose cost of production we could never begin to fathom. That would always be his secret. It would always lie outside the box.

As my sobs subsided, I began to pray, which I found strange and disquieting, partly because I am not spiritually inclined, and partly because I did not like to admit how good it felt. It was like that surprised feeling you get when you smell the sea before you see it. But, perhaps, what was stranger, was that I was praying for something really absurd, but which I knew would mean the world to him. I was praying that wherever they had taken him, they would give him a room with a window.

## Andrew S. Chen

### Review: *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* by Tony Hoagland

Graywolf Press, 2010

The title of Tony Hoagland's fourth collection of poetry harks back to the empires of the ancient East, an anachronism consonant with his portrait of American consumerism: powerful, all-encompassing, and rooted in a sublime philosophy, albeit corporate rather than Confucian. In the scope of Hoagland's oeuvre, *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* takes the confessional *Donkey Gospel* and the socially concerned *What Narcissism Means to Me* and synthesizes them, spawning a collection of politically concerned, hilarious and incisive roasts of American culture, taking on diverse subjects from Hollywood and Britney Spears to advertising and academia. While this new impulse toward the culturally cynical comprises much of the collection, we receive moments of vintage Hoagland, too; scornful lyric poems about his father, erotic odes to his beloveds, and bantering addresses to the same motley coterie of poet friends all find their way into the collection. This newest work also begs comparison to close friend Dean Young, as Hoagland's new poems—while just as humorous as the old ones—blaze new territory in their skillful straddling of the fine line between the laugh-out-loud funny and the dead serious, a line whose existence he and Young just love pointing out. Though it embraces the sentimental more readily than Young, Hoagland's new work also locates itself within a New York School lineage that follows from O'Hara and Koch in its conversational witticisms and narrative charm.

Hoagland's poems are and always have been voiced by a single speaker: an intelligent, masochistic, sharp-tongued madman that situates himself in the middle of shopping malls, intellectual circles, and bourgeois dinner parties. In *Unincorporated Persons*, this speaker is newly interested in race, writing in "Hinge" of how a "light-brown African-American professor" at learning the high Irish concentration of his DNA, can no longer "say the sentence, / 'I be at the crib' / with the same brotherly ease as before." Sexual humor, too, often shamelessly graphic, winds in and out of the poems, and Hoagland most often approaches the erotic with the paralyzing fervor and fearful humility of a pubescent boy: in "Visitation" he writes, "I am not the first person to locate god / in erectile tissue and the lubricating gland". And even in their most scathing and derisive moments, Hoagland's criticism, while unfailingly wry, never feels mean; we

get the sense that this poet is kind. As always, Hoagland is also strikingly perceptive and effortlessly accurate. In “My Father’s Vocabulary” he calmly declares, “I was conceived in the decade / between ‘Far out’ and ‘Whatever’; / at the precise moment when ‘going all the way’ / turned into ‘getting it on.’” He also loves to challenge us, unabashedly posing difficult questions whose answers he by no means pretends to know: “*The bible says, Be fruitful and multiply* / but is it not also fruitful to subtract and divide?” he wonders in “In Praise of Their Divorce.”

But despite these overarching congruities uniting *Unincorporated Persons* with the rest of his oeuvre, Hoagland blazes new trails in the central concern of critiquing American culture and the mindlessness that—at least for him—characterizes it. In “Big Grab,” a poem on the recognizable junk food packaging, he opens:

The corn-chip engineer gets a bright idea,  
and talks to the corn-chip executive  
and six months later at the factory they begin subtracting  
a few chips from every bag,

but they still call it on the outside wrapper,  
*The Big Grab*,  
so the concept of *Big* is quietly modified  
to mean *More Or Less Large*, or *Only Slightly*  
*Less Big Than Before*.

From this idea of corporate manipulation and consumer stupidity, Hoagland focuses in on the idea of language and its degradation: “Confucius said this would happen— / that language would be hijacked and twisted / by a couple of tricksters from the Business Department”. For Hoagland, the degeneration of language is merely a consequence of the same greater cultural dilapidation that leads to drunk driving, objectification of women, and obesity—problems which according to Hoagland we unknowingly and regularly condone.

Yet Hoagland readily admits his own complicity, which leads all of us to question our own in turn. Hoagland, more than wanting simply to point out and deride the grotesque and pathetic state of American culture, wants to highlight its pervasiveness and its inescapability. In implicating himself in the final two stanzas, he writes:

In a story whose beginning I must have missed,  
without a name for the thing  
I can barely comprehend I desire,

I speak these words that do not know  
where they're going

No wonder I want something more or less large  
and salty for lunch.  
No wonder I stare into space while eating it.

In this way, Hoagland's poems often operate by way of a late, aggressive tonal shift, reversing a poem's humor or staunch criticism to reveal, say, the tragic or the tender or the didactic. The risk, of course, in relying regularly on such a resounding and potentially wowing shift is they often feel unearned, overdramatic, or outright clumsy. "Expensive Hotel" takes as its subject an interaction in a four-star hotel when "the middle-class black family" and "the immigrant housekeeper from Belize" pass each other and invariably, "one pair of eyes is lowered", inciting a clash of bourgeois guilt and racial disintegration. Throughout the course of what is already a very short poem—five tercets and a single, set-off line—the images are scant and by the end, the final image of "the cart piled high with fresh towels and sheets, / small bars of soap and bottles / of bright green shampoo"—stanza break to closing line—"which are provided for the guests to steal" feels awfully unearned. Sure; a servant class is expected to steal and it is ironic that the rich do the same, which calls to attention a double standard. But not only have we heard this before, we've heard it better.

Yet when Hoagland succeeds, as he often does, he is nothing short of marvelous, and to be sure, the success in the final turns comes from striking, original images undergirding the dramatic shifts. In "I Have News for You," a poem that offers a portrayal of the childhood that produces American greed, Hoagland delivers a series of syntactic parallelisms that take the simple form of "There are people who do not...", each time further describing a distanced, almost mythicized group of Americans—people "unlike me and you", says Hoagland. He writes, "There are people who do not see a broken playground swing as a symbol of a ruined childhood / and there are people who don't interpret the behavior / of a fly in a motel room as a mocking representation of their thought process... and other persons in the Midwest who can kiss without / debating the imperialist baggage of heterosexuality." Hoagland displays both his imagination and intelligence, and he continues by asking a question in a direct address that heightens the mounting drama:

Do you see that creamy, lemon-yellow moon?  
There are some people, unlike me and you,

who do not yearn after fame or love or quantities of money as  
unattainable as that moon;  
thus, they do not later  
have to waste more time  
defaming the object of their former ardor.

Or consequently run and crucify themselves  
in some solitary midnight Starbucks Golgotha.

Then in a rapid, effortless shift that disrupts both the tone and the parallelism with a declaration in the affirmative:

I have news for you—  
there are people who get up in the morning and cross a room  
  
and open a window to let the sweet breeze in  
and let it touch them all over their faces and bodies.

Indeed, the risks of this sweeping tonal shift right before the end of the poem pay off at times like this, when simplicity and sincerity succeed for him.

Another structural tool Hoagland often wields is his long, tumbling list of similes, each more wild than the last. In a way that is reminiscent of B.J. Ward or Billy Collins, these often occur in the most slapstick of poems, where a basic scene is depicted and many comparisons snowball off of it, becoming more and more absurd until, seemingly still in the middle of this rush of language, Hoagland stops in his tracks and delivers his concluding shift. In “Romantic Moment,” a poem that utterly reinvents the familiar post-second date awkwardness, he begins by telling of the uncomfortable yet exciting moment sitting wordlessly on a bench after seeing a movie. Yet images from the nature documentary that our couple has just seen quickly begin to leap into the poem. He writes, “if I were a bull penguin right now I would lean over / and vomit softly into the mouth of my beloved”, while “if she were a female walkingstick bug she might / insert her hypodermic proboscis delicately into my neck / and inject me with a rich hormonal sedative / before attaching her egg sac to my thoracic undercarriage” and so on and so forth, the comparisons becoming increasingly outrageous, increasingly ridden with this delightful biological language, and increasingly hilarious.

By way of *Unincorporated Persons*, Hoagland has fully forged a singular place in the scope of contemporary American poetry, both as traditionalist

and iconoclast. Although he is traditional in his retaining of a narrative, linear ideal of experience, more than clinging to it he flaunts it, making him simultaneously iconoclastic in the face of postmodern forms. When all is said and done, he never takes poetry too seriously. In the Poetry Foundation's *Poetry Off the Shelf* podcast series, Hoagland and Dean Young converse by telephone on poetry and poetics, yet the entire time the two cannot help themselves but make mock declarations of profundity like "the purpose of poetry is the dental floss of the soul," which Hoagland claims to be a quote from "Ezra Pound's son, Extra Pound." And later, Hoagland asks of Young, "Do you think poetry in general is more like a crayfish or a waterfall?" to which Young thoughtfully replies, "Well, I think it's like a fireplace in a swimming pool." We cannot help but adore Hoagland for his ability to be so concerned with delivering a perceptive yet hilarious critique of American culture and yet remain so profoundly occupied by love and human suffering. And we cannot help but admire and revere him, even as he ridicules us, because, like most contemporary poets, he dejectedly observes "how difficult it is / to be both skillful and sincere"—yet unlike most contemporary poets, he hasn't given up.

Review: *The Infinity of Lists* by Umberto Eco

Rizzoli, 2009

Umberto Eco is terrifyingly erudite, as anyone who has read his novels will attest: the extravagant wealth of information in his novels, on medieval scholarship, or the Kabbalah, or any of a dozen other subjects, is staggering. And anyone who has read, for example, the six-page-long description of the main door of the church of the abbey in *The Name of the Rose* will confirm that Eco has a penchant – perhaps even a passion – for the obsessively detailed catalogue. In fact, his most recent novel, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, could with justice be described as the mind of the amnesic narrator rattling down through a catalogue of pre-World War II Italian comic books, popular songs, magazines, newspapers, and other relics of his forgotten childhood.

So Eco's latest book, *The Infinity of Lists*, a work of non-fiction about lists in literature and art from Homer to Dalí, is at the very least in character. And much as Yambo worms his way through pages and pages of exhaustively detailed memorabilia in *Queen Loana*, so Eco's musings on the list worm their way through pages of examples of lists in Jorge Luis Borges, Aristotle, James Joyce, Hesiod, Italo Calvino, Rabelais – a great deal of Rabelais – Victor Hugo, and Walt Whitman.

Let me be clear about what the reader should expect from this book: it is an anthology with an essay threaded through it. By even the most generous estimate, only about a fifth of the book is actually Eco talking about lists. The remaining four-fifths is devoted to excerpts from various works of literature and pictures of paintings. Essentially, *The Infinity of Lists* is a list of lists, with commentary by Eco.

Now, this commentary is quite good, when it does things other than simply introduce the anthologized material. It is of course a list of various historic kinds of lists, as well as a list of the reasons for lists. Eco's thesis, insofar as he has one other than his cataloguing, is that a poetic or artistic list is greater than the sum of its parts: it implies meaning beyond its boundaries, perhaps even creates meaning in a way that nothing else can. And that's a fascinating claim, and one well worth investigating.

The anthologized literary excerpts are also quite good, though of course they are literally nothing but occurrences of literary lists

throughout history, and some of them are thickets of impenetrability. Others, however, are marvelous: Thomas Mann's list of musical instruments, for instance, or Borges' list of animals (which includes subcategories such as "suckling pigs", "those that have just broken the flower vase", "those that at a distance resemble flies", "etcetera", and "those that are included in this classification"), or Calvino's list of the cities in the Khan's atlas, or – my favorite – Edmond Rostand's list of the many and various modes in which the Viscount de Valvert should have insulted the nose of Cyrano de Bergerac, delivered by Cyrano himself.

The principle weakness of the book is the art – which, while gorgeous and varied, is much less connected to the rest of the book than it could have been. Far too often, it seems to be merely illustrating the text, rather than the argument. For instance, when Eco uses Ausonius' list of the characteristics of various fish to demonstrate the "topos of ineffability", the corresponding illustration is a mosaic of fish, with no apparent link to the ineffable. Since the book is supposed to be as much about the list in the visual arts as in literature, the persistent degradation of the visual arts to illustration rather than a parallel argument hurts the book as a whole.

So what's the final verdict? That depends. If you, like Eco, easily enjoy lists of the names of angels, the imports of Tyre, mythological medieval beasts, the physical characteristics of women ugly or beautiful, the streets of Paris, alchemical materials, or the things Roland Barthes likes, then this is the book for you. If on the other hand you, like me, are ashamed of your secret impulse to skip the non-dialogue, non-plot portions of books, then this book will be slow going, and certainly impossible to digest in one sitting – which is not to say that the book is worthless for such people, but you'll want to take it a little at a time. If you do that, you'll find it a fascinating and rewarding look into a mostly unexplored aspect of literature and art.



# CONTRIBUTORS

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**Philip Fried**, a New York-based poet and little-magazine editor, has published four books of poetry: *Mutual Trespasses* (1988), *Quantum Genesis* (1997), *Big Men Speaking to Little Men* (Salmon, 2006), and *Cohort* (Salmon, 2009). In 2011, Salmon will bring out *Early/Late: New and Selected Poems*. Fried is also the founder of *The Manhattan Review*, an international journal that for three decades has published the best in Anglophone poetry and translations.

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