

THE SIGH PRESS

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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

This issue includes an excerpt from an upcoming novel by Irish writer Paula McGrath who was Florence Writers' "Writer-in-Residence" in October. Paula shared her thoughts on writing and more in our latest Ampersand interview at thesighpress.com. We found the photography of Bob Blesse (who relocated to Florence in 2014) nothing short of arresting. Four of his images deftly punctuate these pages. With writing by Gary Rogowski, you'll dip into a church in Paris where Chopin "moves us forward into our future."

On a lighter note, you'll get the real scoop on why JJ Piglet continues to return to Tuscany. And we've asked all our contributors if they've been naughty or nice this year; their answers in the Contributor Pages.

Our Spring Issue 2017 theme and deadline can be found on our website and we post all kinds of interesting things on our Facebook page; we hope you'll have a look.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris

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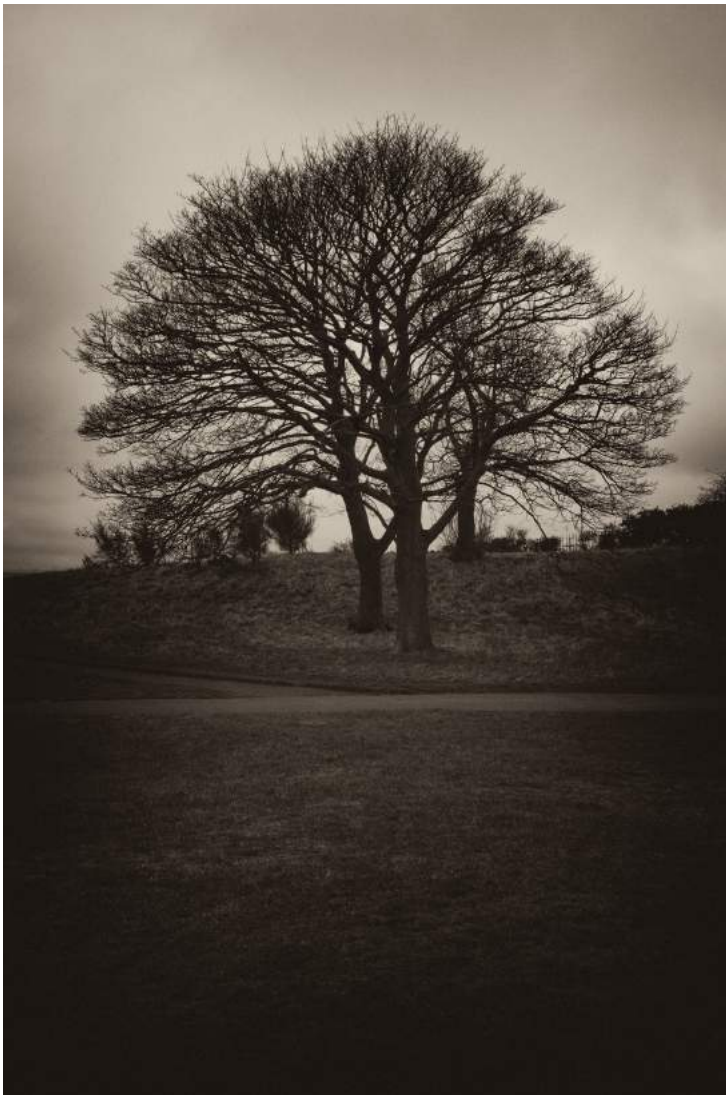
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The Sigh Press



WINTER, CALTON HILL, EDINBURGH

BOB BLESSE



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PARIS RECITAL

GARY ROGOWSKI

ÉGLISE SAINT-JULIEN-LE-PAUVRE

We all come to this foreign shore from different places. We land where and how we can, jumping off our bark quick or walking in slow, in fear, eyes wide. The penitents, lick-spittles, the scribblers, the deformed of face, twisted in spirit, the lame. Heathens, jackals and hyenas, the prey, the prayers, the priests. We are the suitors, the soothsayers, the songwriters, the somnambulant, the scratchers. Some come to worship, some to loiter, some to twist in agony. The grey lady sits a few seats away in my almost empty row of wooden and rush chairs. As the piano unfolds each petal of its story, she pulls herself over, clutching her legs first, her stomach, writhing in her place, in tune with her music.

We come for succor, maybe surcease at last. We come for peace and for our piece of the pie, for pause and for prayer. It is our one chance for rhythm, toe tapping, a tingle, susurrations and silence. We sit alone, hoping in our quiet misery for shelter from the storm, staring at the other devotees, the mute, the restless. We wonder if miracles do arise out of nothing, arise simply from sound.

Chopin wraps us in his arms, consoles us, makes us want to weep, strums our heart strings and then hurries off stage. He returns to carry us like a babe in a father's arms. We listen, thrilled and alert. He moves us forward into our future, cognizant of his genius alone, uncertain of all else, but like him willing to ask for one more chance, one more try at beauty, another futile grasp at the enormity of life.



NATIONAL MONUMENT OF SCOTLAND, EDINBURGH

!

an excerpt from
A HISTORY OF RUNNING AWAY
PAULA MCGRATH

MARYLAND, 2012

The deck chair is close to tipping point, but I straighten my knees another fraction until I'm leaning right over the gap between the pier and the boat. I perfected this art of hovering between land and water when I was a kid. Though I fell in plenty of times too. Maxie passes the fat joint he's been rolling and I reach for it carefully; at this angle, the least movement is all it takes, and the water below is black and greasy. I take a toke. What's the plan? Maxie wants to know, and I see him glance at the urn on the ground next to me as he asks. I inspect the joint, hoping it might offer some kind of answer, but the tip just smoulders and the ash hangs there, suspended. I bring the feet of the chair back down, right as the ash falls. I hand the joint back.

—Tell you the truth, Maxie, I don't exactly have a plan.

—You want any help with...?

—You did plenty already, you know, coming with me to...and everything...

I don't exactly have the vocabulary for this conversation, but Maxie's nodding like he gets it anyway.

—Do you think she'd like if I took the boat out in the bay and, you know, sprinkled...?

Mom liked to get out on the water as often as she could. When it was real mellow out there, she couldn't wait to take the boat out. But it was also what she did whenever there was something she needed to figure out, some problem to solve. Or when we got in a fight about something. *Let's take it out on the water*, she'd say, meaning the disagreement as much as the boat. By the time we'd get back we forgot what it was even about, because out there you have to work together, and you're way too busy to fight. But it's more than that. It's how helpless you are in your little boat against the hugeness of the ocean, makes all the other stuff seem, I don't know, trivial.

But Maxie shrugs at what I'm suggesting. I get why he's not into it. It's because Mom wasn't into making big deals out of stuff. She sure as hell didn't leave instructions for this eventuality. In the movies, dead people already have music and poems picked out. Always seemed control-freaky to me, but hey, what do I know? Maybe I'll do all that shit myself when I get old. But it wasn't Mom's thing.

—No relatives?

—Not that I know.

Maxie lets that one sit there. Most of the long-timers down here have stuff they either don't know, don't want to know, or don't want you to know. Which amounts to the same thing. You don't pry.

—Well, that simplifies things, he says finally.

—I guess so.

Neither of us says anything for a while. Which is cool.

—All right, Ali Baba. He hauls himself up. —You just let me know if you need anything.

—I don't need anything, I tell his retreating back as he shuffles off up the slipway.

It's true. I've been here alone plenty of times before. And apart from that first night, when Maxie and Jess refused to leave me by myself, I've been staying on the boat alone. The trick is not to think too much, because no amount of thinking can change what happened. And nothing could've prevented it, either, because Mom would never have wanted to live anywhere but the boat. That makes it easier.

But this morning was way tough. I didn't see it coming; I figured seeing her in the morgue was as bad as it could get, all yellow and swollen, not even close to what she really looked like, except that it was definitely her. I ran out of there and ugly-cried all the way back to the marina in Maxie's car. But this morning was even worse. Just a handful of us in some room that was not a church but was like one, all soft music and those big, stinking lilies that she hated. She'd of preferred to open all the windows and let the air in. Then I remembered the coffin, and how she was right at that moment being shoved into a furnace and burned. That's when I had kind of a meltdown. Maxie got me out into the parking lot where we hung out by his car smoking weed until I was able to calm down.

I'm okay now. I can handle it. I just have to figure out what to do with her ashes. I'm thinking I'll put the urn below deck, at least for starters,

and I'm dragging myself up out of my chair when I notice the car pull up. It's not a fancy marina by a long shot, and we don't get fancy cars up here too often. This one is long and shiny and black, and the driver has wound down his window to talk to Maxie. Max can't have told him much because he only stops for, like, two seconds, but when he's leaving he glances towards me, like a sort of warning. I figure he's got it wrong, because what would someone in a car like that want with me?

It takes them forever to get out, and then I see why. One of them is an old woman with a walking frame, and the other one has a stick. The driver, who looks older than Maxie – and Maxie is old enough to be my granddad – is guiding them along the sidewalk and onto the pier. He's clutching a folder under his arm, and he looks like he can't decide which one of them needs the most attention, so he scurries back and forth between them. It's kind of funny, so I stay where I am to watch, the old leading the ancient, all of them wearing expensive-looking black clothes, which look way too warm for the day.

Duh, the clothes were the clue, but I missed it. I even smile as they make their way towards me; Maxie was right, they *are* coming to see me. When the young-old guy spots me, he hurries ahead with his arm stuck out in front of him the whole way down to the boat.

—Philip Goldman, of Goldman, Zimmerman and Boyce, he announces when he gets close.

I say *Hi*, ignoring his hand until I hear what he has to say.

—We're—

He checks on the ancients' progress; they're about halfway down the finger.

—We're looking for Ms Alison Dougherty. Are you she?

I shake my head. He looks disbelieving.

—This is number 24, is it not?

I shrug, instinct kicking in too late to tell me to be wary. But he's not about to be put off that easily. He leans back on his heels and squints at the slip number, which is just about visible on the board beside my chair.

—Twenty-four. It says it right here. Your *friend* agreed that you were Alison.

He says it like Maxie's something unsavoury he has to hold away from his nose. I'm starting to get a bad feeling about all this. By now, his two companions have arrived. They look from him to me expectantly.

—Are you Alison Dougherty or not? he demands, losing patience.

—I am Alison, I am not Alison Dougherty, I tell him reluctantly.

The old lady can't contain herself any longer. She edges her walker forward and peers into my face.

—Yes, yes. It's her. She must use Delahunt, the mother's name. You're Alison Delahunt, aren't you?

I nod. She seems to know everything anyway.

—I knew it, she says, sounding satisfied.

—I am your grandmother, Moira Dougherty. And this is my husband, Richard, your grandfather.

I don't know what to say. I didn't know I had grandparents. I guess Mom let me think that they had died somewhere down the line, like her parents had. Or had they, really? I'm starting to doubt all kinds of stuff when the guy with the folder clears his throat.

—I am under instruction...

He pulls a paper out of the folder and waves it, like I'm supposed to be able to read it like that. Then he's talking a lot of stuff I don't understand. The old pair look excited, or at least, the woman looks excited. Old Richard looks like he'd prefer to be just about anywhere else. I know how he feels.

—Do you understand? he finally asks. He's their attorney. I caught that part.

—No. Now if you'll excuse me.

I need to get away from them. Something's taken a turn, and it's not a turn I like the sound of. I pick up the urn, but I'm starting to feel like its contents are the cause of all my new problems. Your mother, he kept saying, while he waved his paper around. I caught a glimpse of a signature on it that I recognised. My mom, who liked to talk about living with nature, off nature, off the grid, but who, it seems, also had legal representation.

—You're coming to live with us, the old lady cut in again.

I'm shaking my head as I step onto the boat deck.

—I live here.

The attorney intervenes again.

—You are a minor, and your mother has made provision. Your paternal grandparents are now your legal guardians.

—You're crazy, I tell him. I'm not thinking straight, but I'm thinking straight enough to start untying the boat.

A shiny black shoe plants itself onto the rope.

—Hey!

—I'm afraid you must come with us. Now. The courts have already issued the order.



FISHERMAN, ELBA



JJ PIGLET AND ME
THE TUSCAN CONNECTION

"So, JJ, are you coming down to Tuscany next spring?"

"Of course."

"Fascinated by arts and culture. Duh?"

"They're great."

"Moved by fine weather and witty people?"

"I like it and them. All of the above and, yes, yes, the witty company and sparkling wit everywhere."

"They are descendants from Etruscans, a very ancient unique civilization."

"Oh, really?"

"I presume you will position yourself somewhere in the sun along the river Arno under a big pink umbrella to paint the landscape."

"I am a geologist not a painter."

"A rock star, eh-eh."

"Idiot."

"Then, what does really tease you to Tuscany?"

"Wines."

"JJ, did you know that wine had a god in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome? His name was Bacchus."

“I am sure your Bacchus had many followers in Tuscany, too. Speaking of which, ehem, my glass is empty.”

?

How does the setting choose what to tell the rising?



MOONSET AT SUNRISE, CRODA ROSSA D'AMPEZZO, DOLOMITES

CONTRIBUTORS

BIOS & TSP QUESTION

TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS: *Tell The Sigh Press if you've been naughty or nice this year.*

*

BOB BLESSE was director of the Black Rock Press at the University of Nevada, Reno, for thirty-three years. He taught book art courses, and designed and produced books and broadsides published by the press. He was also head of the library's rare books and manuscript department for twenty-five years. He has an M.A. degree in English Literature from California State University, Chico and a Masters of Library and Information Science from UCLA. He and his wife have lived in Florence, Italy since 2014.

I am fascinated by the natural beauty of our world and try to show this through my landscape images. I view my photography as artistic creative interpretation, rather than the recreation of static visual elements. I present nature as seen through my eyes, offering my vision as a creative composition, which I hope elicits a positive emotional response from the viewer. I also create monochrome images, which I believe are thought provoking, with positive energy and visual tension.

NAUGHTY OR NICE? I've never been a big fan of the word "nice," but I always tried to be pleasant, kind, friendly, and polite with friends and everyone I met this past year. I don't believe I've been particularly "naughty." *Keep a steady keel and avoid naughty, bad behavior* is my motto. However, if naughty behavior reflects self-indulgence, then perhaps I'm a rather naughty eater at times. But I do watch what I eat—at least until it's gone.

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GARY ROGOWSKI is the nom de plume of the fictional writer, Giga Roodski. Giga, as he is known only in Paris, has taken to haunting the streets near his favorite restaurant, the little known Pizza de Venise on Rue Montreuil to catch a glimpse of the past. It eludes him as he sits in the copious smells from the oven.

CHARCOAL? I have found in my stocking old orange rinds, scraps of newspaper clippings, a small plastic rhinoceros, and a password to a forgotten door. No, no charcoal. The dust of years has settled in there comfortably but no charcoal. I must have been nice or forgetful.

!

PAULA MCGRATH lives in Dublin. Her first novel, *Generation*, was published in 2015. Her second, *A History of Running Away*, is

forthcoming in 2017. She has a background in English Literature and is currently a doctoral student at the University of Limerick. In another life she was a yoga teacher.

PAULAMCGRATH.COM

MY HUSBAND SAYS nice, which is nice. Feedback from my kids was more mixed, however, but when I reminded them that I'm in charge of their Santa lists, they revised upwards.

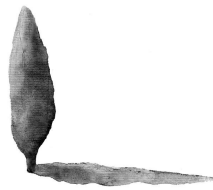
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JJ PIGLET & JOHN GERARD SAPODILLA: This year I haven't had any time for burlesque and one of the heels on my shoe is loose. I can't possibly walk in it, let alone tango or climb steps. If I tried to put washing outside it would blow away and end up in the North Sea. Maybe the North is ok for good girls, and I was always brought up to be good. I always wanted to sunbathe on the bridge of a yacht, so long as it isn't too hot. (I have freckles and burn too quickly, besides I don't like caviar.) I am always good. I know you are always naughty, John Gerard. That is quite a good combination. The Yin and Yan of the Florence writing club.

Enter Befana and her Agent BX.

"So, Agent BX, what about J G Sapodilla? has he been good or naughty during the year?"

"Ma'am, people are complicated."



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