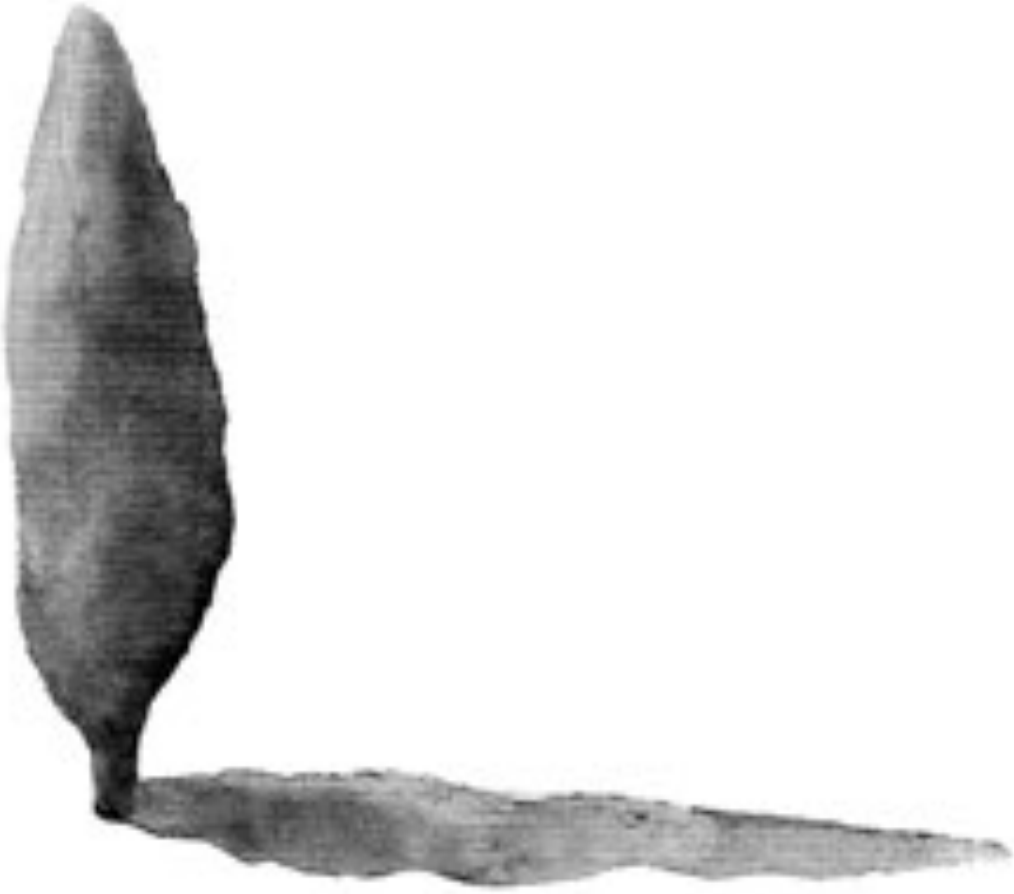

The Sigh Press

Issue 3 • Winter 2014

Note from the Editors

As anticipated, there were many takes on this issue's theme: "Forget the dog, beware of owner" and we are grateful for all of the submissions received. What we'd hoped for was an imaginative interpretation and for this, we were captured most by the richly woven post-apocalyptic tale, *The Dog Days*, by Erzsébet Gilbert.

The visual exploration of the theme comes from award-winning Florentine painter Luca di Castri whom we met in Stibbert Park during a day of art and writing, co-sponsored by The Sigh Press (Oct 2014). We are also pleased to publish a fitting poem by NYU student Andreas Petrossiants whose work we discovered during our recent participation in La Pietra Dialogues at NYU Florence.

And if you haven't met Sandro Cellini yet, you'll be introduced to this Tuscan private eye in an eerie excerpt from *The Drowning River,* British author Christobel Kent's first novel in the (so far) five-book series.

We've had a technology-focused few months at The Sigh Press as we launch an audio component to our journal, podcasts we're calling QUOTATION. We are delighted to inaugurate the podcasts with Gilbert's captivating reading of *The Dog Days*. We hope you'll find thirty minutes over the holiday season to tune in.

What's been breathing down your neck? You'll see our contributors' answers to this question along with their bios at the end of the journal.

Each issue is individually curated and unique. The next journal will publish in March 2015. For submission details and the next issue theme, please visit www.thesighpress.com. You can now find the latest news from The Sigh Press on Facebook.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris

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The Sigh Press

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Luca di Castri

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THE DROWNING RIVER (excerpt)

CHRISTOBEL KENT

It was Sunday, so the bar was not open. During the week Tomi went in there to buy small tins of sweets at the till, and the barman was almost always nice to him. Once what he had thought was a euro was a foreign coin but the barman took it anyway. It took Tomi a long time to get across the road because there was traffic; a fire engine with the siren going went past and splashed his trousers below the raincoat; it was going out towards the Viadotto dell’Indiano. Tomi stared after it on the embankment where he stood beside the Circolo Rondinella, looking for smoke, but perhaps it wasn’t a fire, perhaps nothing stayed on fire in this rain. On the TV his mother had been watching fire engines rescue people from a mudslide.

There was no noise from the dog any more. Had someone come to take it away? Claudio never had a dog himself, not that Tomi knew about; Tomi wondered if he’d mind about this one being kept in his special place. If Claudio had had a dog, Tomi would have certainly asked if he could take it for a walk sometimes. The dog he had heard yesterday, and the day before, was not being walked. Tomi supposed it might be a different kind of animal; it had been dark when it was put there, late on Wednesday night, bundled out of a car in the dark, and the sounds it had made were not familiar to him. Toto and Patak had drunk so much they were asleep, each on his own bench, and so he’d gone to the swing under the trees, looking at the branches being swept downstream in the dark. He’d seen a car pull up, and he’d kept very still.

It was getting dark now although it wasn’t four-thirty yet; the lights were coming on all down the river along the embankments, flickering yellow.

Yesterday the lights had come on just after lunchtime because of the rain, it had been so dark; yesterday he'd heard whatever animal it was, if it wasn't a dog, banging against the side of the shack. You couldn't hear it just walking along the river, you had to know where to look.

Tomi leaned over the embankment wall beyond the Circolo Rondinella to get a better view, and he got a shock. The water was so high it had covered all the grass where Claudio had gone down. In his wallet Tomi still had the card that the man had given him, Cellini Sandro; he wondered if Cellini Sandro would be interested in the dog? Often, when he tried to tell people things, they ended up walking away, and his mother told him he'd gone on too long, they weren't interested.

The lower shacks were completely submerged, and he could see a plastic sack bulging to get out where boards had been splintered by the river pressing against them. Tomi thought about the animal inside and jerked his head back. I'd like to go home, he repeated to himself. It was what Mama had told him to say, if he got into trouble. I'd like to go home now, please.

,

Stone

Andreas Petrossiants

I didn't have time to brush my teeth, so I just
    scraped some toothpaste off the cap-less tube
and rubbed it on my teeth so I wouldn't bother her with my kisses.

Out my window and through shutters, painted green to cover years and rotten splinters,
is a small courtyard, covered in beer bottle caps, wine corks and stray pieces of pasta,
that are watched over by old Florentine statues of some un-divine goddess and two stone frogs.
The courtyard feels so safe and small, although most light is shunned by the large tree,
    but those stone beings are double agents, fighting slowly and infinitely to darken the piazzetta.
But I wouldn't get rid of them. I just look at them as I stand almost naked,
    with toothpaste on my unshaven chin, fingers tainted with the smell and residue of cigarettes,
    and a bottle cap stuck to the bottom of my foot.
I wouldn't shun them, as they try to
kill the light.
When time destroys their stone form,
    when light passing through tree branches makes their eyes shut,
when the wind rips the stone cloth covering that mortal goddess,
I won't be there.

Play on, I tell the stones, before I go to kiss her behind my rotting green shield.

“ ”

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The Dog Days

Podcast read by Erzsébet Gilbert

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THE DOG DAYS

ERZSÉBET GILBERT

The first time we attempted the domestication of the dog was, I remember, an absolute disaster. To this day I do not know why everybody thought it would be so easy, but adults have such idiot notions all the time. What should the world become, were grownups allowed to own it?

But my mothers were idealists. Or, with the tender and harrowing insight of retrospect, I suppose it was Azucena who cherished a fierce and unshakeable and unruly hope, and Iliana and Llora willingly followed in order to convince themselves that things did not need to be desperate, and because they loved her. Maybe they all needed it, in order to subsist within our homeland: the singed grasses of those indifferent plains, the brambles so torturous and tortured, the zones of sand melted unto glinting glass. I had never known the nature of a river. But when I was young I did not recognize this as desolation.

I recollect how my mothers would sit upon the rickety bench outside our home (Azucena had crafted it herself, from litter and corroded nails), each with her own particular countenance illustrating what pulsed within: Azucena with her bold cheekbones just slightly shining with confidence and that translucent blush we call charisma, and Iliana thinking, always thinking about shadowy things, and Llora so small and bronzed, thinned by sickness and selflessness. My mothers would survey the flattened landscape with a sort of weariness, wariness, eyes drifting to those mountains to the north and their crowns of the very last snows (I had never known a winter storm).

I think it's a tremendous thought, Azucena declared. We could really use dogs.

At the time, I did not know precisely what a dog might be.

A good number of us were sitting round the firepit, I recall, a deathbed of salvaged wood and embers with failing hearts. We often did this, I remember, upon those sunsets when the barren skies would turn the irrevocable crimson of a slit throat. We children would scratch preposterous pictures in the packed earth, and the adults would usually talk of whether there might come a windstorm, of daily labors and how to fix a collapsing hut, of what we could find to eat the next day. They seldom spoke of memory. Sometimes one of them would strum upon the decaying banjo, the only banjo in the whole wide world. But that evening they debated the idea of the dog.

There's no such thing as dogs, Elisio said. Not anymore.

He was a man built, or maybe remade, in a sort of crooked way, as if something had caused his bones to grow mismatched; forever he obsessed over

the practicalities of the present, this filter or that broken axe, and avoided discussion of the future or of anything that came before.

What's a dog? It may have been Esteban who said this, or perhaps Pablo; they were my age, twins who each bore the cute and filthy appearance of rodents (we did not see so many furred beings, but there were the rats). The brothers were inextricable, but to this day I cannot say whether I disdained their unity, or if I in fact experienced jealousy as a proud wound.

What would we use a dog for? I have forgotten, now, who it was that said this; maybe it was Erramun, the gimcrack old man who lived in the lean-to of soiled linoleum sheets, or Mayra who had only one hand.

It could hunt, somebody suggested.

Leave that for later, Azucena said. We've made it long enough without killing. But we could have a companion, maybe.

It'll never work. You know that.

All of us looked up—even we children who knew that generally the affairs of adults occur in an entirely different and far duller language from our own—to see Marisol somehow watching all of us at once. Marisol was our strange one, our crone (though never did I know her true age, and perhaps she had grown older with something which was not time). She possessed one of those faces whose elements you will never forget, though never will all the pieces cohere into a whole. I recollect her nose, long and blemished; her jaw was a hatchet. Her teeth flashed white (many of ours rotted away, forever) and her eyes fixed upon you with a brown that turned scarlet in direct sun.

It won't work, Marisol repeated. Her voice came to us contralto, from someplace deep in her withering throat. You know how we are, she said. We've already failed before.

At this all the adults fell silent, some gazing towards the ascending moon, that pupil of radiance marred only by the vast black scar across its heart. It was around this time that I began to realize that many of them were frightened by the sky.

Azucena stood, resolute. We could herd the sheep, she insisted.

Our sheep were rather pitiful, really: a small cluster of obstinate and doltish animals who grazed upon the yellowed fields and trotted into our settlement with thorns tangled in their russet fleece. We didn't slaughter any of our nominal charges, but Llora (so gentle as to scarcely leave a footprint upon the dun dirt) learnt to milk them, and one woman, Sabela (her speech sounded like steel upon rocks, I recall, though she was kind enough) would gather the wool with a tarnished pair of shears we had found in one of the middens.

There were many of these, heaps of objects either handy or obsolete scattered about the flatland as a meaningless map; I often could not apprehend the purpose of so many puzzling things. I understood the cracked wooden cupboards and the serrated knives, and the pots and scrap metal and the hazardous chairs. We children found our trinkets and toys underneath so much corrugated tin and fiberglass—a spinning top, say, or a model of something like a metallic and possibly dangerous bird. From all these practical treasures we cobbled together the hovels of our homes; I slept beneath splinters, and it felt so welcoming to me. A windup clock we once unearthed beneath a dented bucket was how I learned to comprehend time in terms of spasms, divisions, incisions in the days.

But the middens gave us so many gifts which remained a tangible riddle in my hands. So many devices: the intricate black monstrosities which the adults called *engines*, and the circles of worn rubber and boxes whose visages were faceless glass, and the things with cords and wires (we could always use wires for something or another) and buttons with numbers and characters upon them, a sort of fading cryptography. There were corroded signs bearing symbols with no significance, directives which could govern nothing in this our home. I liked best the uncommon persistence of those globules of glass with some fragile construct within; in her melic tones (she sang to us by morningtide) Iliana spoke the word *electricity,* the captive kith and kin of the lightning which occasionally visited our dry plain. This I knew: each second there would come a bolt like the cracked backbone of our terror, and the thunderclap so forceful you could sense the potential of some unimaginable event capable of remaking everything you had ever known.

But just as the ghouls of electricity, the dog remained a mystery to me.

In truth I was what you might call a cat person. In that flatland of flotsam and heat, you could witness some scattered wildlife, mostly skittish and suspicious rarities: the lizards, those clever and bejeweled survivalists, and the scrawny wrens, the crows with their occult feathers (and sometimes one leg), and the stunted antelope who forever seemed to be fleeing something we had not yet seen. Occasionally you saw a two-headed rat, and we possessed the gnats, the lugubrious crickets, the obsessive flies. But mostly such creatures (excepting the ubiquitous and aggressive roaches) were always infrequent, unwonted, afraid.

Save for the cats, and it was the cats I loved most of all. Amidst the tall tawny grasses where at times one could catch a certain scent like copper, or old meat, the rustles and ripples of their motion formed an allusion to the predator; a dark tail might flicker up, then dance into the shade once again. I would venture into the wood, a place which was at once both a pleasure-ground and a graveyard. The majority of the trees stood witchy and burnt, with death-throe twigs clawing at the sweltering sky, and the briars beneath were as complicated

as history. But some did retain scant wreathes of leaves and vital chestnuts, or even the extraordinary fruit (I remember the day we found an apple, bless us all). There in the wood I held concord with the cats.

Now, you know cats: they are now as always they have been, and ever they shall be, no matter what fires are falling upon us. The cat is entirely the cat. I would move through the morbid groves to come upon them, a tabby rudely bathing itself in the crook of gnarled roots, or another perched prim and prophetic upon a stump. Briefly I would befriend the kindles of kittens, with all their adorable bungles and impeccable chins, and once, in that glade where stood the last living sycamore, I came upon the cabal of the cats. Arranged in an ellipse of pricked ears, they seemed an esoteric counsel whose meeting I was never meant to see, and backwards I withdrew as the felines regarded me with the solemn gaze of the far side of the moon.

I considered the cats my boon companions, far more than any of the other humans in our settlement, even my mothers and the children of my own heedless age. I believed myself different than the others (though we possessed only one warped and tarnished mirror, and so I did not know the precise appearance of my face or the color of my eyes). Perhaps, I think now, I placed no trust in people. I should not say I was a lonely child—after all, there were almost six dozen of us, and for reasons I did not comprehend nobody really fought.

In the outrageous heat of noon—at its zenith the sun offered no mercy, so that we were not allowed to step from our little shack of pressboard and slate and into its full force—I sat before Iliana as she tore dandelion and virulent mint into little bits to eat upon our brittle, unleavened bread, baked upon hot stones.

What's a dog?

Iliana was always teaching me things, I recall. She taught me to read—we possessed four books, a particular trove of pages containing stories I knew to be both wise and utterly unreal. Enormous animals with trumpets for noses, and nonexistent settlements of one million people and sparkling buildings so high as to grow tangled in starlight itself, people who could fly around the world: from such absurdities I learnt phonetics and the arabesques of my own name. I had

not yet learnt about the dog, though I believed that I knew Iliana could teach me anything.

My mother looked up. It's like a jackal, she said. Like one of them, but closer.

The jackals were another thing entirely. We seldom saw them, but you always knew they remained, there just beyond the wavering sheen of warmth in our acrid air. Sometimes you could glimpse a low lurking figure of tendon and sunstroke moving in the distance, almost a figment with teeth, and if you ventured far enough when gathering the day's herbs or the despairing firewood, you could stumble over a paw-print like the signature of a primeval world. You might find a splatter of gore in the dust, or the gnawed remnant of a doe's dewclaw. Upon certain nights of listless moonlight and stars who turn away from us, the beasts' howls came to you with a certain shrilling strain of what may have been intrigue, or hunger, or horror.

I was a cat person, after all, and so the jackals interested me only inasmuch as the others seemed to fear them. But when Llora might shudder at their cries, Iliana would shake her head.

They are more afraid of us than we are of them, she said.

This is nearly always true, and always justified.

As I began to understand through the slightly bored eavesdropping of all children, the grownups planned upon catching a jackal. Close enough, somebody said.

Azucena thought it a marvelous thing; when my mother came upon an idea, she clung to it, cherished it, exalted it until you could see it glittering between the decrepit huts of our settlement—gold over detritus. This was how she had built the plow which tilled our very first plot of carrots, wan and moribund slivers which seemed to bring the adults a sort of jaded bliss. It occurs to me, now, that the others adopted the notion of a dog because they were simply too tired to do otherwise. Even I knew that their days were never free of hard work.

It was Marisol, I recall, who was the only person to really protest at all—and she did so with the bitter fierceness of one who is perpetually starving and has only wormwood to eat.

It's reckless, she insisted. It's reckless like all of us were. They're wild animals. You know what will happen, she told the others. It's cruel.

Aged and ageless, Marisol's drawn face looked like ten thousand kinds of exhaustion. I see it still.

Sometimes I did watch the plotting and the debates, the construction of the trap, the schematics scrawled in dirt, but in truth I preferred the company of myself, and of course the cats. Urgently I would volunteer to search the middens for cups and lengths of pipe, or to collect the tinder for our solace in the coming night, and return always to the deathly woods where the felines held feral court. In the presence of silence I sensed more substance than in all our converse, though I could not define it at the time. I did not want to mingle with the other children in their games of competition or a pursuit which was supposedly just for fun. Everything always seemed to me a display of strength, a demonstration of the fabulous capacity for destruction.

Once, I recollect, Esteban stomped upon a beetle with its exoskeleton iridescent as the passage into a clairvoyant dream. Pablo laughed, but I could scarcely look upon the tiny corpse with its crushed shell now fading, the demolition of a sky.

But eventually (and everybody knew it instantly, every hovel and heap of our settlement suddenly clamorous with the news) the grownups caught the jackal who was to become our dog. I remain uncertain as to precisely how—what exact mechanisms and machinations of the trap's sliding door and iron bars and dire lock—but there it was, the beast pacing over the shreds of a half-devoured antelope with a lightless hollow for its one remaining eye.

Even I joined everybody who thronged to see, gaping at those strangely frail legs you knew could nevertheless run faster than you, the plumed tail, the taut, sallow body pregnant with power and all of instinct's dark appetites. It hunched and growled with something like soot and wrath in its throat, and let out a language of disturbing yips; I recognized all that those teeth could do.

I myself could not imagine how such a creature could be a part of our lives. Some of the adults murmured their doubts and immediate anxieties, wavering between fascination and repulsion. Glancing about, I could not find Marisol in their midst, though somehow I believed I could feel her red gaze. But Azucena sighed with satisfaction, and everybody waited for her words. Everybody always looked to my mother, and could not look away from that ambidexterous hope.

Look at it! She stood flushed and sanguine, out of all of us closest to the cage. It's perfect. We'll feed it, talk to it, teach it—just wait. Just wait—it'll be a matter of weeks before it's tamed, and we'll have our very first dog.

It's beautiful, my mothers sighed.

I examined the jackal once more, trying to see what she could see. It seemed to glow from within, as if dwelling in a sunset glorious and perpetual, and it smelled of excrement and dust in flames. I wondered at the clarity in the pale and wary eyes, whether it might perceive certain forms of light which we humans could not. Yes, I supposed, the dog of our future grew more elegant in proportion to its menace.

That night as I lay insomniac and visionary between my mothers, there upon the tattered bedding which cradled our nightmares and our peace, I could hear the jackal give one baleful howl: the sound intertwined with the moonlight creeping through the cracked boards of our shack, high with omens and grief.

And then very little happened for a long while. Domestication proved more difficult than people had believed, I guessed, and many of the adults grew somewhat discouraged or disinterested, and returned to all the endless tasks of being-here and cobbling-together and finding anything to eat. But Azucena remained dedicated (with Iliana and Llora loyal at her side), feeding the jackal morsels of rats' meat and happenstance eggs, slipping a cup of our sour well-water through the bars, speaking to it of fidelity and quiet evenings.

It was only once, I remember, that Marisol stood before my mother with folded arms and severe brow. You know what we are, she said. Let it go.

At this Azucena passed into a rage I had never before seen—my mother possessed so much passion, so many aspirations to ignite our lives to come, but she never even snapped at me if I failed to grind seeds for our suppers, and never rebuked a neighbor who wasted the murky ambrosia of our groundwater.

You shut up, she snarled. You know nothing about it, nothing of how the world could be. I will not abandon our dog.

There was something in Azucena's voice which was more than anger, something that seemed to threaten her from within, and her eyes took on a certain brightness which extinguished itself. Her faith was a detonation, I think now. Marisol only darkened, and turned away.

In those sporadic hours when my mother did not attend to the jackal, having departed for suppertime or those rare, hushed moments of solitude with Iliana and Llora in our shack, the other children would approach to stare at the creature glowering, slavering, scratching at the unyielding ground. They all speculated as to the meaning of the unknown dog, and who got to own it first. Esteban and Pablo were the boldest, daring one another to draw near to the bars, bearing a bone or a sharpened stick, teasing the jackal so that its pupils contracted to reveal a fateful and pellucid desire.

I would watch the jackal at times, too, naturally curious, though I could not precisely determine what it was I searched for in its tight haunches and the minute click of claw upon iron when it rose to peer at our moving forms. At times, I noticed, it regarded me not with resentment or bloodlust or even the longing to flee unto its life of scavenging and breezes burning like an impulse, but only with an abject fear. It struck me that the creature had no name—whether nobody had bothered to bestow one upon it, or if perhaps it possessed an innumerable and unpronounceable multitude.

Over those weeks of chores and dust devils, the season marked by Sirius and solar haze, I could see the fatigue creep over Azucena. Though she still met the rancid gusts of our dawns with the smile of a heroine, a sort of dingy violet seemed to encircle her eyes, and she fell silent more often than ever before. Nonetheless my mother maintained her optimism, at least aloud, and with manic announcements of progress and play she would describe the felicitous biography of our future dog. Iliana and Llora exchanged shaded, sorrowful glances. It wasn't a dog, and it was no longer a jackal: it was just a structure of bone and artery and frustration, a captive life, an occasional cry at the abscesses of the moon.

Still I could not quite fathom the probable nature of a dog, whatever lay at the nucleus of my mother's ambition. As far as I could divine, it was a wild thing which came to *belong* to you, and it was something to be loved.

Once, I recollect, Llora sat cross-legged at the threshold of our broken home, the falling eaves made almost heavenly by the sinking of the sun through a sandstorm to the west (where lay those swaths of silvery earth you were not supposed to touch). My mother was sewing, I remember, mending something I cannot recall with dozens of variegated bits of thread; she grew tangled in the weft of it all, and bled excessively if the needle slipped.

And Llora started speaking, before I even asked a single callow question as children do.

I had a dog, you know. Even as she said this my mother did not look up from her prosaic webs.

Or I think I did, she went on. Things were very different, when I was young, so that sometimes I am not certain that any of my memories are real. I remember so many green things, and my parents' laughter, and so many toys. I think there was a dog, which slept at my feet.

Llora said no more. That night I dreamt. Or, I speculate now, it may have been a different night, a different evening beneath the same agonizing stars (after all, we possessed no calendars). By now it has grown difficult for me to determine the membrane which divides the facts of my childhood from its frenzies, but I believe it is the dreams which I can see still with the most limpid clarity. I lay with the moonlight falling like a mendicant outside the door, and within slumber I saw the clouds—they rose up from the defeated earth in a spectacular column such as I had never seen, and blossomed into the atmosphere. It was beautiful, I felt, because it was improbable and unbearable, and then came the flare of blinding light, bright with excessive dark, and the wind hit you and came to know every particle of your blood. People dissolved as if we were nothing at all.

Soon enough I grew bored by the entire affair of the possible dog, and increasingly strayed into the wood where at least the cats made no pretense other than their own sinuous mystery. With an unspoken intuition, I was beginning to apprehend the sheer extent of the world beyond our flatland, beyond the blistered plains and boreal peaks and the atomic horizon—empty and ethereal places I believed impossible to map. I did not know whether I might someday visit them. I wove through struggling growth and charred matter to the trees' edge, there before the expanse of the wastes. In the distance the glass deserts gleamed with the scorched image of the sky, and I could see new middens whose troves I had not yet discovered.

I visited one, looking for something (I did not know what this might be, nor do I know now). Scrambling over planks and ledges of downy and graceful asbestos, through suffocations of ash deep as my skinned knees, I sifted through the heap of remnants. The air smelled of tetanus. Familiar were the bits of aluminum and the unstable crates, the mallet and the unusable scissors and the bottles gleaming weakly from the dirt, but I uncovered too more alien artifacts,

the trinkets of phantasms: a little black hulk bearing keys upon which the letters of the alphabet faded into dead fingerprints, and a square with checkers upon it, a pendant in the shape of man spread upon crossed staves which seemed to me only the pretty glorification of cruelty. I found something, this cold something with a long pipe concluding in a wheel of six chambers; there was nothing left inside.

And there was a sign—and bless the grownups, who gave me the literacy to comprehend it—and bless all of us who cannot help but read all things as the sign of something else. *Beware of Dog*, went the words upon its punctured tin, fading into rust and residue. I did not wish to know what this might mean, though I believed it to be somehow connected to the long cold something; somebody had wanted to keep other people away.

I have learnt to recognize, now, that we lived in wreckage, in revenants, junk and the offerings of the dead. But I was only beginning to understand this, at the time. I know now that our home was a reliquary.

Our failure happened shortly after the day I glimpsed the sign (of which I told nobody, only burying it beneath tumbleweeds and the bare, poisoned earth). Or rather I think the two events occurred in short succession. But how is a child expected to comprehend the ordering of history? I do remember the scream.

I believe everybody is capable of making such a sound: it was high, involuntary, composed of shock and hidden ligaments. Everybody in our settlement heard it, and dropped their conversations and their makeshift tools to run towards the jackal's cage. I was returning from a foray into the wood, bearing an armful of thorns, which I cast aside to hearken to the noise.

The jackal was cornered now, driven against a hovel's wall by Azucena and a host of people with staffs and sticks upraised. There was blood blasted across the quiescent dust, and nearby Pablo was crying, cradling his arm and wailing like the baby Sabela had birthed two years before, which died.

He shouldn't have gone near! somebody said.

Boys will be boys, sighed another.

Esteban was kicking at the dirt, his own face alight with tears. It's my fault, he mumbled.

Erramun spat, glaring at everybody as if all along each of us had lied about our names. Who was to know the cage was unlocked?

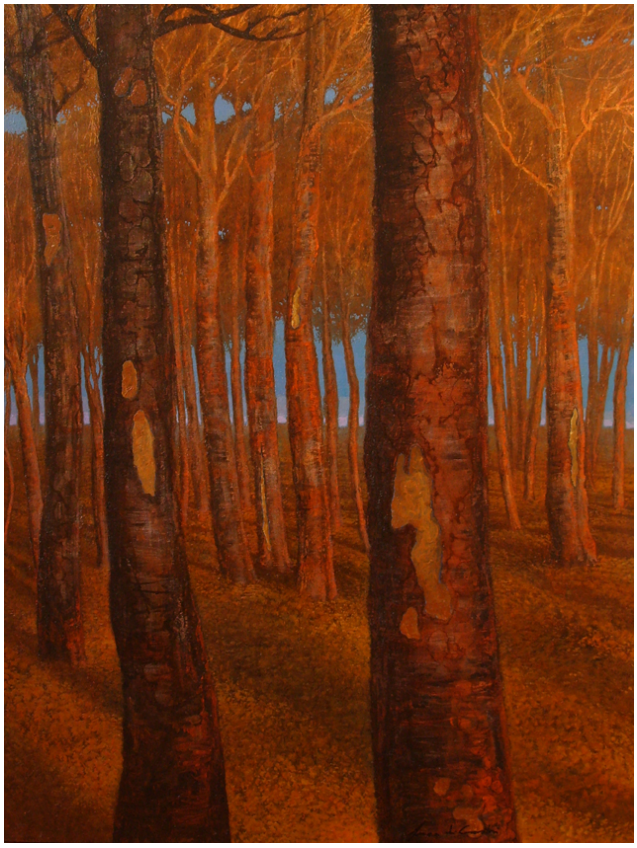
You knew what we are, Marisol said. Her eyes flared, fell to the blood, and she turned away.

My mothers told me to leave, when Azucena began to shudder (the only time I witnessed my mother weep) and selected a blunt log from the firepit, approaching the jackal against her own will. I obeyed, for surely, surely it is our parents who know best. And so I saw nothing of what followed, though I believed I heard a whimper before the hush. In secret, then, I feared the adults far more than the beast with its exemplary urge to kill, the virtue of the *Canis aureus*.

It was around this time, I remember, that I found my first kitten. It was later than I was actually permitted to go out, when I went to wander the wood; the moon's glow seemed as an elegy for light, and the deathly boughs signaled the end of the world. Between luminosity and gloom the cats' eyes flickered, winking, wincing, as if they knew.

I heard then the noise, a frantic mew tiny as a pinprick, and so I traced its source to one of those spectral trees just upon the wood's brink, standing sentinel before the wastelands of jackals and cinders which that night seemed to possess no bounds. The kitten was up there, in the notch between two bare branches, stranded in what must have seemed to it a terrifying and infinite sky. Kittens can be such fools, for they do not yet understand the world.

I knew well how to climb trees, and finding footholds with a child's gut premonitions I clambered to sit beside it upon whispery bark, and took the creature into my cupped hands. I shivered, and the kitten twitched and fought with excruciating little claws, but then it mewled softly and nestled against my breast, for the heart is warm.



And for a time I remained there with the kitten and the stars—remote, nameless, irreconcilable pieces of hydrogen—looking out into our homeland's emptiness. It was then that I caught the other sound, a discordant howl from a damaged throat. I thought perhaps it might be a jackal, but by now, I cannot be certain of this; all I knew is that there was a body out there, a voice crying to the bombed moon.

Wrestling with Nature

Kate Drynan

As the festive nights approach and we embark upon the season of goodwill and general merriment, it is always a horror to find that some of mankind forego a simple act of kindness and can't clean up after their pets.

It was on a very recent trip to France that I found myself gambolling down the street, high on the joys of life and seemingly insouciant of my footfalls when I recalled *mais oui, le poop* is not so often scooped in Paris (and not often, let it be said, *a Firenze*). And so watching my step, I keenly averted disaster, foul stench and general upset for the duration of my visit.

That was until early into my last evening, I ventured outdoors to smoke when something splattered on my shoulder. Horror-struck and disabled from action by the burning ember in one hand and Fendi in the other, my former smugness evaporated. And then, as my night began to crumble, there he was, one man, extending his own simple act of kindness—a tissue.

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What animal speaks to you in your dreams?

Contributors

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Luca di Castri is an award-winning Florentine painter whose work has been exhibited in Tuscany and beyond. 2015 exhibitions are planned for METIS ArtForPeople Onlus, Milan, and Gallerie Pyramide, Strasbourg, while previous venues include: Ex-Stazione Leopolda, Florence; Symbolica, Studio E. Riotto, Pietrasanta, Lucca; Nuovo Umanesimo Galleria Logos, Roma; Viaggio nel contemporaneo, Saragiolo, Siena; Nuove Conexion, La Plata, Argentina; Innovative Tradition Art & Design, Milan. Di Castri's work is collected privately and publicly.

http://www.lucadicastri.com/index.html

Scusami scusami. [I'm sorry.]
Perdonami se non ti ho amato come avresti desiderato. [Forgive me if I haven't loved you as you wished.]

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CHRISTOBEL KENT was born in London in 1962 and grew up in London and Essex, including a stint on the Essex coast on a Thames barge with three siblings and four step-siblings, before reading English at Cambridge. She has worked in publishing and TEFL teaching, and has lived in Modena, in northern Italy and in Florence. She has written ten novels, with five so far in the Sandro Cellini series. Her first novel set in England, *The Crooked House*, will be published on January 8th, 2015, by Sphere. She now lives in Cambridge with her husband and five children. The Sigh Press excerpt is from *The Drowning River*, published by Minotaur, and under the title, *A Time of Mourning*, by Corvus/Atlantic.

SNICCOLO.TUMBLR.COM

DEATH IS WHAT BREATHES down my neck: doesn't it everyone's? Not dying—although I imagine that is what it may narrow to somewhat later—but the extinction of consciousness. We might call it something else, like the future, or posterity, or our children or even the state of our windowsills and skirting boards, but what we're talking about is the world when we're gone. At seven or eight it jumps out at us: what we see from behind our eyes, no-one else sees, what we think, no-one else thinks, and one day the blood and nerves and electrical impulses that keep us observing and recording, will cease to function. The world will continue, but we won't be watching. That knowledge, once absorbed, will never be eradicated: you might step around it, or push it a little further off, but the breath is at your ear for the duration. It's why you write it down.

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ANDREAS PETROSSIANTS was born in New York to immigrant parents from Moscow in 1994. After spending much time in Italy, he returned again this year to continue studying contemporary art culture and the sociological trends within art movements and communities. He is currently working on his undergraduate thesis at NYU in Florence. He is a rapper and drummer with groups in New

York and joins musicians on stage often in Florence. Babbling thinker and pensive onlooker.

HTTPS://ANDREASPENNAME.WORDPRESS.COM/

AT SUCH A YOUNG AGE, expectations, either my own or those thrown upon me, often get the better of my thinking. Expecting or predicting have shown themselves, however, as unnecessary acrobatics in prophecy. Breathing down my neck is a fabricated vision of a future self that I seem to be unable to ignore. He speaks to me and tells me what to do, but I find it comforting when I can ignore him and walk down the opposite street he might ask me to take.

"…" & !

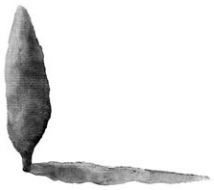
ERZSÉBET GILBERT: I'm honored to list this as the second chance I've been given to contribute to *the Sigh's* work, as well as my second year of living in Tuscany and my thirtieth year orbiting this particular sun. I studied the History and Philosophy of Science at Colorado State University, which was solely for my own pleasure; I've also published one book, entitled *Logodaedaly, or, Sleight-of-Words*, which was released in the U.S. by Wolverine Farm Publishing, won the IndieFab/ForeWord Reviews' 2011 Nonfiction Book of the Year, and was terribly fun to write. As an author and as a person, I am concerned with memory, cats, (un)meaning, and stars, or more generally, with love.

HTTPS://INDIEFAB.FOREWORDREVIEWS.COM/BOOKS/LOGODAEDALY-OR-SLEIGHT-OF-WORDS/

SHE MURMURED INTIMATIONS in my ear, and glanced about as if the world were in motion perpetual; she clawed me, and against my neck her breath came to me uptempo like "It Don't Mean A Thing." And I wondered how it feels to be a kitten, perched upon somebody's shoulders in the great wide world.

KATE DRYNAN lives in London, has lived in Paris, and is more than happy to travel around Italy when time allows. While she is not working in publishing, she tries to write the odd piece of fiction, fact, or account for whatever she stumbles upon in her travels.

YES, "MAN'S BEST FRIEND," our canine companion, requires us to give something back…into the bin that is. Designer shoes were not made to trod in it.



Issue 4 • Spring 2015 will be published in March.

The issue theme can be found at www.thesighpress.com.

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