

A Daughter's Ghostly Recreations of Her Late Mother's Old Photographs

By Eren Orbey
March 25, 2019



"Setshwantso le ngwanaka II," 2013. Photographs by Lebohang Kganye

A few years after her mother died, in 2010, the South African photographer Lebohang Kganye searched their home in Johannesburg for keepsakes. She found dated family albums and, in an old wardrobe, many of her late mother's most familiar outfits: a pleated pink frock, a ruffle-necked black blazer, a pair of high-waisted bluejeans. With her grandmother's help, Kganye identified the settings of a number of the

snapshots—a fenced churchyard, a wedding procession—then set out to re-create present versions of the portraits, donning her mother’s clothes and attempting the same poses. In the resulting series, “Ke Lefa Laka: Her-Story” (“It’s my inheritance,” in Sotho), Kganye superimposes her re-creations atop the original pictures to create a spectral set of double exposures.



“Ka 2-phisi yaka e pinky II,” 2013.

The portraits amount, at first glance, to a poignant memorial, honoring the grace and brio of a mother who dominates most every frame. But they also literalize the artist’s mission to situate herself within a complex political history. Kganye’s reënactments of the family scrapbook took her across the country, to visit uprooted relatives who, along with millions of black South Africans in the second half of the twentieth century, had resettled in response to apartheid-era policies of forced removal. Her larger project, which includes oral histories from these relatives, constitutes not simply a celebration of heritage

but a fraught autobiography. One of Kganye's most pressing questions concerns the spelling of her surname, which appears in several variations on the birth certificates of her forebears—presumably modified by the relatives themselves, in an attempt to assimilate, or else warped by negligent law officials, in the updates of government ledgers. Apartheid cleaved countless fathers from their families, forcing men from rural households to the cities in which they toiled as migrant laborers. Kganye's grandmother raised six children alone until they were able to join her husband, Kganye's grandfather, in the city; Kganye's own mother was also a single parent, and "Ke Lefa Laka" doubles as an ode to the miracles of matriarchy, linking the artist to her past through generations of women.



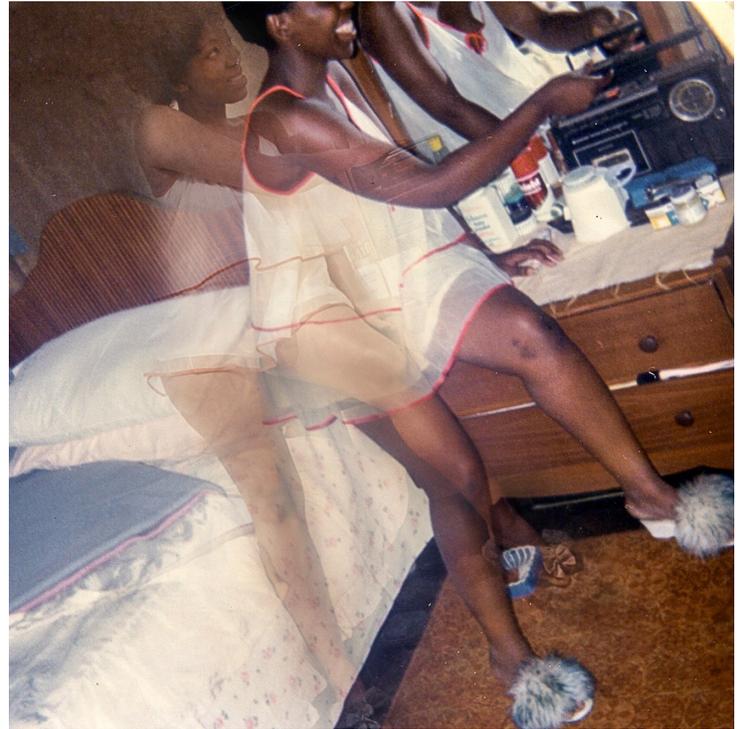
"Ka mose wa malomo kwana 44 II," 2013.

The photomontages cast Kganye as her young mother's longing doppelgänger, intruding on many memories that precede her birth. In one image, at a back-yard barbecue, she stands beside her mother and serves herself an identical helping of lamb chops. In another, she sidles up to grinning party guests, raising a plastic glass beside her mother's to join in on a toast. Quotidian but gripping, the images show an ardent daughter peering over her mother's shoulders at an open book, copying her box step on a

classroom's makeshift dance floor, and shadowing her perambulations in a sunlit garden, behind the teathed leaves of an agave plant. In the group portraits, Kganye achieves a convincing inconspicuousness, her figure a natural addition to crowded family gatherings. The series' true beauty, though, materializes in the images of mother and daughter alone, which induce a moving double vision. Slight differences between the two women—the extra swell of Kganye's Afro, the shortfall of her smile—affirm her mother's inimitability and, by extension, the lasting ache of her absence.



"Ke le motle ka bulumase le bodisi II," 2013.

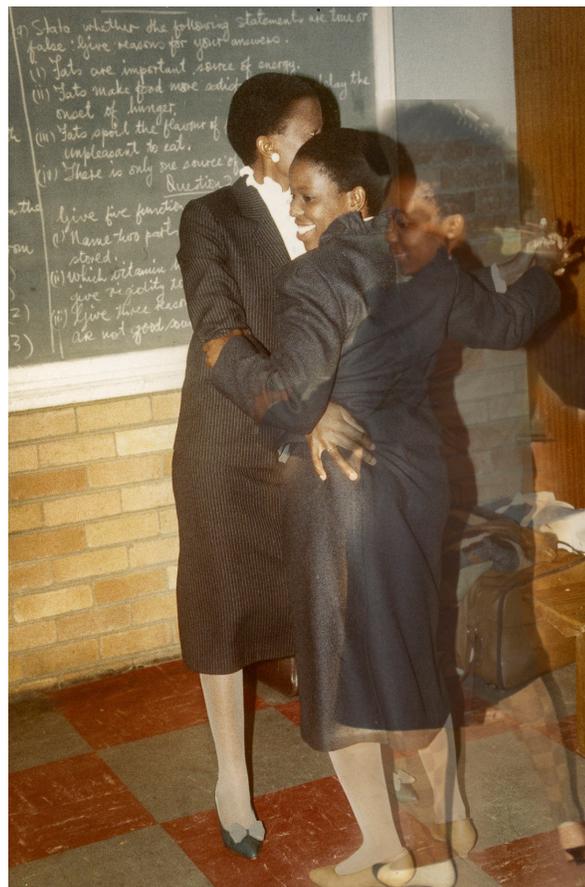


"Ke bapala seyalemoya bosiu ka naeterese II," 2013.

Kganye has characterized her series as an attempt to replenish the "paucity of memory" by injecting her living image into visual records of the dead. Her inspiration was, in part, the work of Roland Barthes, whose slim but ambitious book "Camera Lucida" serves at once as a eulogy to his late mother and an attempt to innovate new modes of observation. In her artist's statement, Kganye writes of her own mother, "She is me, I am her, and there remains in this commonality so much difference, and so much distance in space and time." A few images feature Kganye as a wide-eyed, ebullient baby, celebrating her first birthday or tottering across a lawn. The artist appears twice in these frames, once as an infant and then as an older apparition, lifting a glass to her lips or cheering on her own first steps. Placed beside the parent she has lost, Kganye appears to yield to a peace on the flip side of grief. She mourns her mother by mothering herself.



“Ke bala buka ke apere naeterese II,” 2013.



“Re tantshetsa phaposing ya sekolo II,” 2013.



"3-phisi yaka ya letlalo II," 2013.



"Ke dutse pela dipalesa II," 2013.

READINGS

[Scrapbook]

ARS OBLIVIONALIS

By Lewis Hyde, from *A Primer for Forgetting*, out this month from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

ANTI-MNEMONICS

Umberto Eco writes that “once, as a joke, some friends and I invented advertisements for university positions in nonexistent disciplines,” one of these being an *ars oblivionalis*, as opposed to the ancient arts of memory. Eco tells the story in an essay meant to prove that, from a semiotician’s point of view, no such art could possibly exist.

Others would disagree. At one point in the *Biographia Literaria*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge complains about the habit of reading periodicals, suggesting that it should rightly be added to the “catalogue of Anti-Mnemonics,” a list of practices that weaken the memory, which he had found in the work of a Muslim scholar. These include:

throwing to the ground lice picked from the hair, without crushing them; eating of unripe fruit; gazing on the clouds, and (in genere) on movable things suspended in the air; riding among a multitude of camels; frequent laughter; . . . the habit of reading tomb-stones in church-yards, etc.

“CROTHF DELETOK”

In fact, the *ars oblivionalis* (or *oblivionis*, as most would have it) not only exists; it’s more easily mastered than any of the old arts of memory, now happily forgotten. Take, for example, Robert Richardson’s description of the nineteenth-

century method for remembering historical dates as offered by a certain Richard Grey:

Grey used a table of numbers with letter equivalents. To remember a given date, one made up a new word, beginning with letters designed to recall the desired event, and ending with a date coded in letters To remember that the creation of the world came in 4004, one remembered the word “crothf,” “cr” being a tag for Creation, “othf” standing for 4004 [Th = 1,000; o being four times that, and f being the simple 4.] To remember the dates for Creation, the Deluge, the call of Abraham, the Exodus, and the foundation of Solomon’s temple, one memorized the line “Crothf Deletok Abaneb Exasna Tembybe.”

MOVING PICTURES

In 1917, a group of Dadaists living in New York—Marcel Duchamp and Henri-Pierre Roché, from France, and the American studio artist Beatrice Wood (the “Mama of Dada”)—published a short-lived journal, *The Blind Man*, whose second issue comments on Duchamp’s having submitted a urinal, credited to R. Mutt and titled *Fountain*, for an exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists:

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt’s fountain:—

1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr. Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers’ show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.

Question: How does one create “a new thought” for any object? Answer: move it around. And therein lies a problem with the “place system,” that old technique of artificial memory in which an image is committed to memory (committed!—as if to prison) by fixing it in a specific location. The whole apparatus freezes meaning, solidifies it, produces durable, fixed ideas, useful in the short term, to be sure, but what happens to those ideas when they are in need of change? Just to take the Virtues and Vices images that Giotto painted in the Arena Chapel in Padua: What if, as the centuries unfold, it turns out that the sword by which *Fortitude* is figured has outlived its usefulness? What if questions arise as to why Giotto painted *Inconstancy* as a woman?

Move it around: Duchamp’s life coincided with the birth of motion pictures, a technology

that he imported into the plastic arts as a key element of a new *ars oblivionis* for old ideas.

DISTANCE

The painter Brice Marden sometimes draws with a long stick or branch dipped in ink, distancing himself from the work and deliberately interfering with his control of the stroke. Says Marden, “[The works] start out with observation and then automatic reaction, and then back off, so there’s layering of different ways of drawing. . . . It’s the opposite of knowing yourself through analysis. It’s more like knowing yourself by forgetting yourself, learning not to be so involved with yourself.”

How to forget yourself: use a long stick.

“THORNY”

Jeffrey Eugenides, interviewed by Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, explains that Mitchell Grammaticus, a character in his novel *The Marriage Plot*, spends time in India, as Eugenides himself had done. Gross says that it seems to her “it would probably be very helpful to have authentic memories to draw from.”

“It’s not that helpful,” says Eugenides. “I’m not really an autobiographical writer. . . . When I actually write about myself, I get very confused. And with Mitchell, I wrote that chapter many times. It was the slowest and the hardest to write. The problem was that I remembered too much, and I put in every person that I remembered in Calcutta and everything I saw and every amazing sight in Calcutta.”

“And suddenly I had a hundred pages of this thorny fiction, and I had to pare away so much of the autobiography to finally find the proper shape for Mitchell’s story, and it just took forever, and I never knew where the spine of the story was.”

REVISION BY FORGETTING

“The supreme achievement of memory . . . is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past,” says Vladimir Nabokov.

Myself, when writing poems, I practice revision by forgetting. I write a draft of the poem, and then another and another, allowing the versions to pile up in a jumble—lines I am attached to, although they don’t belong, lines that fit but go flat in the middle, words replaced and then reinserted, promising developments that never delivered—it all sits there, a shapeless pile, clammy with fatigue.

Then I set the mess aside and ignore it for at least one day. Then I write the poem from memory. Great chunks will have

[Poem]

SOUTHERN CONE

By Carmen Giménez Smith, from *Be Recorder*, which will be published in *August* by Graywolf Press.

I wept with my grandmother when Reagan was shot because that’s what she wanted. At night, she’d tell me about a city built by Evita for children in Buenos Aires, the city of her first exile. Children went about municipal duties in the small post office and city hall to learn to be good citizens. In Argentina she sold bread pudding and gave French and English lessons from her home for money to buy shoes. She promised we’d go someday, but we never did. She’d say Peruvians were gossipy, Argentineans snobbish, but Chileans were above reproach. A little bit migrant, a little bit food insecurity, she was the brass bust of JFK on her altar, the holy card of Saint Anthony on her TV. She was her green card and the ebony cross above her bed. The lilted yes when she answered the phone, and the song she liked to hum about bells and God that ended *tirin-tin-tin-tirin-tin-tan*: miles and ages away from her story, she sang it.



Hat in the Ring, a mixed-media artwork made of found tin collaged on wood, by Tony Berlant, whose work is on view this month at Brian Gross Fine Art, in San Francisco.

fallen into oblivion, while others will have returned clarified from the pool. The double goddess Mnemosyne attends erasing as she records, drawing shape from shapelessness, dropping the discord to reveal the harmony.

FROM THE MUSEUM OF FORGETTING

Louise Bourgeois—ninety years after her father abandoned the family to enlist in World War I, eighty years after he abandoned them again, taking young Louise’s English tutor as his mistress (“the trauma of abandonment . . . has remained active ever since”), thirty years after the death of her husband, and about a decade after the death of one of her three sons—made a large, unique fabric book *Ode à l’oubli* using for pages the linen hand towels embroidered with the initials L.B.G. for Louise Bourgeois Goldwater, her married name, each page collaged with designs cut from fragments of clothing and household items, some as old as the memories of trauma themselves.

Bourgeois has said that every day you must accept the past and abandon it, and “if you can’t accept it, then you have to do sculpture. . . . If your need is to refuse to abandon the past, then you have to re-create it. Which is what I have been doing.” Except, in the case of *Ode à l’oubli*, as the title implies, for here the process of making designs out of old cloth is intended to put the past to rest.

Abstraction was, for Bourgeois, an *ars oblivionis*. To calm and relieve her insomnia (the too-much-memory disease!), she used to draw repeated, simple lines across sheets of paper. With *Ode à l’oubli* she takes a near century of memories (“You can . . . remember your life by the shape, weight, color, and smell of those clothes in your closet”) and converts them into grids and circles, pyramids, starbursts, and waves (“strong emotional motivation . . . held in a kind of formal restraint”). True, there is one oddly soiled page. In red letters it reads, “The/return/of/the/repressed,” and a long brown stain



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND AFRONOVA GALLERY, JOHANNESBURG

“O emetse mohala,” a photograph by Lebohang Kganye, whose work was on view in February at Rose Gallery, in Los Angeles.

runs across the page between the last two words. And yet, if we take the book as a whole, that unyielding stain is ten square inches of the Unforgettable, in over four thousand square inches of oblivion-by-design.

“LOOK AT A COCA-COLA BOTTLE”

At one point in *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass*, Marcel Duchamp reflects on inventing new languages as a way of getting to some sort of primary experience. In this context, he addresses the way in which memory abstracts and so impedes perception. Note 31 reads,

To lose the possibility of recognizing 2 similar objects—2 colors, 2 laces, 2 hats, 2 forms whatsoever—to reach the Impossibility of sufficient *visual* memory, to transfer from one like object to another the Memory imprint. Same possibility with sounds; with brain facts.

John Cage was struck by Duchamp’s notion. In a 1984 interview, Cage remarked that, for him, to repeat a phrase in music moves him “toward my taste and memory,” exactly what he wanted “to become free of.” He then repeated Duchamp’s “beautiful statement” about the memory imprint, explaining that from Duchamp’s “visual point of view” it meant “to look at a Coca-Cola bottle

without the feeling that you’ve ever seen one before, as though you’re looking at it for the very first time. That’s what I’d like to find with sounds—to play them and hear them as if you’ve never heard them before.”

TRANSFER, TRANSFERENCE

When Duchamp writes of how we “transfer from one like object to another the memory imprint,” we might note the verb “transfer” and bring to it the memory imprint of Freud’s idea of transference. The patient unconsciously projects the memory of other people onto the analyst, whereupon, to rewrite Duchamp, the goal becomes: to lose the possibility of recognizing 2 similar persons (2 lovers, 2 parents, 2 enemies, 2 people whomsoever). To reach the impossibility of sufficient emotional memory, to transfer from one like person to another the memory imprint. Psychotherapeutic work includes becoming conscious of memory’s transfer habit and dropping it so as to experience more directly not just the therapist but any other person.

FROM THE MUSEUM OF FORGETTING

How did Agnes Martin begin a painting? She would sit and wait for something to come to mind. Once, early in her career, she was thinking of “the innocence of trees” and “this grid

came into [her] mind and [she] thought it represented innocence." From then on, her paintings were all variations on the grid.

She imagined the mind as operating either by intellect or by inspiration. Intellect is problematic. It's "the servant of ego," she said, (and "everybody's born 100 percent ego; after that it's just adjustment"). Intellect "does all the conquering." It struggles with facts, discovering first one and then another until finally making a deduction. "But in my opinion that is just guesswork, so completely inaccurate." It's "never going to find the truth about life." She added:

I gave up facts entirely in order to have an empty mind for inspiration to come into. . . . You have to practice quiet, empty mind. I gave up the intellect entirely. I had a hard time giving up evolution and the atomic theory but I managed it. . . . And I never have any ideas myself. I'm very careful not to have ideas.

THE PAINTER

Of the artist who figures largely in Marcel Proust's novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator says,

The effort made by Elstir, when seeing reality, to rid himself of all the ideas the mind contains, to make himself ignorant in order to paint, to forget everything for the sake of his own integrity . . . was especially admirable in a man whose own mind was exceptionally cultivated.

FROM THE MUSEUM OF FORGETTING, GALLERY OF ERASURES

"Frank [O'Hara] was standing there," says Elaine de Kooning. "First I painted the whole structure of his face; then I wiped out the face, and when the face was gone, it was more Frank than when the face was there."

[Reconsideration]

THEN AGAIN

By Jill Ciment, from *The Other Half*, a manuscript in progress rebutting the author's 1996 memoir, *Half a Life*, which describes her relationship with her husband, whom she met when she was a teenager and he was forty-seven. Her latest novel, *The Body in Question*, will be published in June by Pantheon Books.

What do I call him? My husband? I would if the story were about how we met and married, shared meals for forty-five years,

raised a puppy, endured illnesses. But if the story is about an older man preying on a teenager, shouldn't I call him the artist, or, better still, the art teacher, with all that the word "teacher" implies?

On the last night of his art class, I stayed after the others left to get his advice about my upcoming move to New York. He knew artists in the city who might need an assistant. In his private studio, adjacent to the classroom, he drew me to him, and I went willingly. He didn't know what to expect when he kissed me. I could have screamed. I could have slapped him, but what seventeen-year-old is prepared to slap a forty-seven-year-old man she has fantasized about for the past six months?

I fervently kissed him back. But did I have the agency to consent? Was I about to be raped in today's interpretation of sexual assault?

I've written about this seduction before, twenty-five years ago, in a memoir about my youth, *Half a Life*. I was forty-five when I finished the memoir, essentially the same age box my husband would have ticked that night. The memoir is as close as I have to a transcript:

On my last night of art class, I dawdled in the hall until the other students were finished. I heeled the wall and watched them file out. As soon as they were gone, I slipped back into the classroom and shut the door behind me. Arnold was leaning against a window frame, arms folded, eyes shut, yawning. This time I approached him without a hint of coyness, without the spark of a blush.

I unbuttoned the top three buttons of my peasant blouse, crossed the ink-splattered floor, and kissed him.

He kissed me back, then stopped himself.

I had no precedent to go on except *Valley of the Dolls* and *Peyton Place*. I asked him if he would sleep with me.

He looked stunned.

I mustered all my nerve and asked again.

"Maybe we should talk," he said.

I shook my head no.

"Sweetheart, I can't sleep with you. I'd like to, but I can't."

"I don't see why not," I said. I honestly didn't.

"For one thing, I could be arrested." He smiled, trying to make light of things.

I had no sense of humor. "I won't tell anyone," I promised.

He put his hand on my cheek. He didn't caress me; he simply pressed his hand against my skin. "It wouldn't be fair to you."

The gesture felt so loving that I began to cry.

"Shhh," he said. He tried to take me around, but I kept my face averted. As much as I wanted to be held, I was embarrassed to stain his shirt with my leaky mascara.

"I bet you think I'm a big jerk."

"It's the last thing I think."

"I've made such a fool of myself."

“No you haven’t.”

“Do you still like me?”

He cupped my head in his hands. I could tell he was choosing his words with great caution. “Jill, if you were older, I—”

“I’m old enough,” I said flatly.

So who kissed whom first? If my husband kissed me first, should I refer to him in the language of today—sexual offender, transgressor, abuser of power? Or do I refer to him in the language of the late Nineties, when my forty-five-year-old self wrote the scene? The president at that time was Clinton and

[Deliveries]

YOU GET SERVED

From descriptions of products and services provided by businesses that have launched using the Uber model. A list of the on-demand companies was published by The Atlantic in March.

Local produce
Bulk-size packages
Dog walkers
Veterinarians
Psychiatrists
Couches
Beds
Chandeliers
Maids
Kitchen remodelers
Bouquets of flowers
Gardeners
Lawn mowers
Snowplows
Mechanics
Underwear
Stylists
Barbers
Manicurists
Masseuses
Makeup artists
Private jets
V.I.P. bottle service
Security guards
Photographers
Brand ambassadors
Models
Birth control
Weed
Lawyers

the blue dress was in the news. Men who preyed on younger women were called leches, cradle-robbers, dogs. Or do I refer to him in the language of 1970, the apex of the sexual revolution, when the kiss took place—a Casanova, a wolf? And how do I refer to myself? In today’s parlance—victim, survivor? The words are used interchangeably but have very different connotations. Calling myself a victim implies that I had been helpless, whereas calling myself a survivor suggests I was empowered, or became so. Or do I employ the language used to describe Monica Lewinsky—bimbo, vixen? Or do I talk about myself in the verbiage of the sexual revolution? In that case, I am the coolest, bitch’n-est chick on the block because I kissed my art teacher.

While writing a memoir, the time it takes to re-create a moment from your past is usually longer than the time it took to live the actual moment. The memory of writing the memoir slowly accumulates until it usurps the life you are trying to capture. It took me days to compose the scene. The kiss itself may have lasted only seconds.

How am I so sure who kissed whom first, who had been the transgressor and who had been the transgressed? Because I daydreamed about the art teacher pulling me to him and kissing me for weeks, months afterward, longer than it took to write the scene.

I know who kissed whom first.

New York didn’t work out as I had hoped—instead of the Greenwich Village garret I had envisioned for myself, I ended up in an abandoned squat on Avenue D. Instead of painting nude models at the Art Students League, I posed naked for “photographers” at a sex parlor called Escapades. But I was no longer a virgin. (I had given that job to a boy my own age.)

I lasted four months before taking a Greyhound bus back to L.A. I returned defeated and ground down by the reality that, just because I wanted to be an artist really, really badly, it didn’t mean I would become one. All I had left of my aspirations was the memory of that kiss. I borrowed my mother’s car and went to see the art teacher. I didn’t call first.

This is how I describe the reunion in my memoir:

Arnold’s studio door was unlocked. I gave it a sham knock, a brush of knuckles, then stepped inside. He lay on his cot, asleep in a puddle of lamplight. His heavy square eyeglasses, pushed back on his forehead, doubled the lamp’s glowing filament in miniature, like two magnifying glasses collapsing the sun to start pinpoints of fire.

I shut the door behind me and slid the stubborn bolt into its rusty lock. Then I crossed the studio and stood over him. A book lay open on his chest; his arm dangled over the cot. A faint dusting of black hair silhouetted his forearm. He stirred, squinted up at me, and started to speak. I hushed him, touching his dry lips with my fingertips. Then I peeled off my ribbed T-shirt, lingered for a wooden moment in full lamplight, and lay down beside him. It wasn't hard to seduce him. The suggestions had already been implanted. My previous attempt, clumsy as it had been, must have tugged on his imagination until it unleashed tendrils of fantasies.

This scene is true in the sense that it has remained a consistent memory over the years. I'm fairly certain that it was I who seduced him that afternoon. But would I have if he hadn't kissed me first? Am I as delusional as Humbert Humbert when he narrates (*Lolita* is twelve at the time), "It was she who seduced me"?

In both scenes from the memoir, the art teacher is passive, either lost in thought or asleep when I appear like a nymph in the forest. There is empowerment in remembering oneself as the sexual aggressor, especially after modeling at *Escapades*. But I don't believe that was my motivation.

Was I protecting my husband? The statute of limitations had long ago expired.

Was I protecting my marriage? We had just celebrated our twenty-seventh anniversary.

I didn't ask then, but I have to ask now. Was my marriage—the half-century of intimacy, the sex, the shared meals, the friends, the travels, the illnesses, the money worries, the houses, the dogs—fruit from a poisonous tree?

[Discussion]

REMOTE CONTROL

From a radio interview, by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, of the Israeli-British psychic Uri Geller, who published an open letter informing the British prime minister, Theresa May, that he would telepathically enter her mind to prevent the United Kingdom from leaving the European Union.

MEGAN WILLIAMS: Mr. Geller, you wrote something of an unusual open letter—and you made a threat of sorts to the British prime minister. Tell us what you plan on doing to stop Brexit through the mind of Theresa May.

URI GELLER: I wanted her to understand that I am very serious about this, and I wanted her to know that I'm going to do everything in my capacity through telepathic powers to convince her to do a second referendum.

WILLIAMS: You're going to take control of Theresa May's mind—is that correct?

GELLER: No. You're slightly exaggerating. I'm going to beam my mind power with the help of millions of other people.

WILLIAMS: So how are you going to do this?

GELLER: Well, I chose kind of a mystical number: eleven-eleven. So I will be concentrating with millions of people in the U.K. at eleven-eleven A.M. and eleven-eleven P.M. And I will basically visualize her giving in and saying, okay, you want a second referendum—I'm giving my people a second vote.

WILLIAMS: We're talking Central time?

GELLER: Yes. I've convinced the Russians to sign the nuclear arms reduction treaty. I bombarded Yuli Vorontsov's mind—and they signed a nuclear treaty. There are dozens and dozens of these examples that I've done in the past very successfully.

WILLIAMS: You know, I think many people would argue that these examples that you're citing have nothing to do with paranormal activity.

GELLER: Well, you know, Megan, you might have a point. I don't deal with skeptics.

WILLIAMS: There are many issues that are urgent and arguably far more urgent than the consequences of Brexit—what's happening in Mozambique now. I mean, why aren't you focusing your telepathic powers on helping people be saved from catastrophes?

GELLER: Megan, how do you know that I don't?

WILLIAMS: But you've made a public statement on this issue, and you've asked thousands and millions of people to help you.

GELLER: Megan, I'm doing other things that I don't talk about.

WILLIAMS: Now you have—I assume—started your telepathic work on Theresa May. When will we start seeing some results?

GELLER: Megan, I have no idea.

WILLIAMS: Aren't you telepathic? Shouldn't you know whether it's going to work or not?

GELLER: There are certain things that even I don't know.

WILLIAMS: I've just written a number down on a piece of paper. What number have I written?

GELLER: Yeah. You're trying to be kind of cheeky with me. Don't do that. You know how many interviews I have today? At least seventeen or eighteen.

WILLIAMS: Actually you got the number. I wrote seventeen.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY, CHICAGO

All the While I Thought You Had Received This, a painting by Maia Cruz Palileo, whose work was on view in March at Monique Meloche Gallery, in Chicago.

[Fiction]

THE TORTOISE AND THE HEDGEHOG

By Khalil Sweileh, from his novel *Remorse Test*, which was published in 2017 in Lebanon and won the 2018 Sheikh Zayed Book Award for Literature. A translated excerpt was published in April in *Banipal*, a literary magazine based in London. Sweileh is a journalist, novelist, and poet from Syria. Translated from the Arabic by Jonathan Wright.

Remorse? Maybe it means a belated apology for acts we committed at a time when we thought we were doing the right thing, or for acts we failed to carry out at the time we thought about them. Like me putting my arms around your waist at the junction of Firdaws Street and Mutanabbi Street on that October afternoon, on the grounds that the rain called for intimacy. What there was between us was expected to end in the Picasso restaurant

when we had a meal of chips with mayonnaise. On the way, you told me firstly that you were hungry, secondly that you were vegetarian, and thirdly that you loved potatoes. I had to look for a place that would meet your requirements. All the tables and chairs were red. That was significant pretext for delving into the derivatives of that color in the domain of desire and deciphering our mysterious relationship through ambiguous flirtatious remarks interspersed with fleeting references to the blood feuds that the war left behind, which also featured the color red. You had been going to put off your second visit to Damascus because of the heavy rain in the south. I didn't pin great hopes on this visit and I couldn't seriously imagine any special reason that would bring us together again. Maybe boredom was one of my reasons, but I did see your unexpected visit as a good omen or as a time-out that relieved the boredom of days that were all much alike. Offhand I had told you that your phone call that morning had greatly reinvigorated me and that you were like a sudden rain cloud that had slaked

my inner thirst. A late-night chat on Facebook dispelled my expectations of loss, since writing in cyberspace gives us a dose of courage that enables us to come out with things we cannot say face-to-face. Similarly, evasive eloquence using enigmatic expressions, references that are open to interpretation, or lines of poetry borrowed from popular blogs will gradually break down the barriers of reserve through slips of the tongue that at first appear to be unintentional. You were setting random traps for me too, but not as vigorously as I was storming your impregnable walls and trying to probe into dangerous areas and murky waters that you were wary of exploring—those that challenged the limits of modesty. To be more precise, let's say that you lit the fuel with an invisible match, then put out the fire with a counter-expression that had nothing to do with the firewood the two of us had gathered in the nearby forest of beguilement as a kind of escape or as a declaration of surrender. Our first acquaintance came about through a phone call from you, exactly five years ago. You were somewhat flustered. You told me there was something in your life that concerned me and you would explain what you meant when we met. I didn't take much interest, or I forgot about it completely. Five years? It's practically equal to the years of hell that haven't finished yet. In that stormy period, there was someone who shook the branches of the tree and the fruit fell around it, then other people came and crushed the fruit with their heavy shoes, and then burnt down the tree.

What happened later wrecked my plans completely.

In a telephone interview I had told a journalist that my next novel would be about love. I told her this with full confidence, like a tennis player who has finished his warm-up exercises and only has to rush onto court. The fires of war threw my thoughts far away, and it was no longer conceivable that I would write about "carefree love affairs" amid the daily hell and the news of the dead and the debts of hatred that we had to pay to the barbarians every day.

But first I had to answer you on the question of hatred, not on the question of remorse. Hatred that was wrapped in rotten chocolate and buried resentments with a taste as bitter as gall and poisoned daggers in the back at the moment of embrace. Hatred that abandoned the guise of forgiveness in favor of revenge.

The first move in this imaginary game of chess came when I suddenly moved my knight into the square that belonged to you, by making an unexpected remark that overstepped

the bounds of caution. "The smell of you invades my isolation," I said. The reserved nature of our previous nocturnal chats meant that we could not handle such a sudden change. I was testing how flustered you would be when faced with a sensual remark of this kind. I was so fed up with wandering around in the paradise of spiritualities where you had entrenched yourself in order to save yourself from straying into my domain of expressing myself candidly.

Right after reading some of your poems, I had advised you to liberate your diction from the morass of ready expressions that didn't add a single apple to the orchard of desire and to purge your obscure feelings of the overinterpretation that weighed them down. I added an improvised phrase that somehow suddenly popped up in front of me like a squirrel: "We can't go into the intensive care unit without a stretcher." By way of explanation, in response to the exclamation mark you then sent me, I said that writing is the moment that separates life from death, or the white stretcher that takes us to the intensive care unit, where we can breathe in enough oxygen to survive. So we write in order to convert carbon dioxide into oxygen and to convert coal into wild fruit with a sharp taste, and to tame the pains and sins of the body.

She tried to suppress the phrase "the smell of you invades my isolation" by not responding with a decisive phrase of her own. Instead she chose a ready-made emoji from those available on the menu—an emoji with eyes in the shape of little hearts. But this attempt did not last long. Three days after that chat the dialogue box lit up with the words "I miss you," and, after evasive comments by the two of us, she ended her chat with the words "have a good night, with love in the morning."

At this point I realized she had started to sink into the quicksand of iniquity, leaving the teachings of our master Jalaleddin al-Rumi far behind her. She had abandoned forever the lexicon of Sufism, which, like a tortoise's shell, had concealed her feelings. The game we had been playing, with her as the tortoise and me as a prickly hedgehog, had been amusing, maybe exciting. She had been sticking her neck out a little and then withdrawing, while I displayed my hedgehog prickles.

You had chosen to be a butterfly in the language games we played in times of boredom. I likened you to a gazelle when I commented on a picture you sent me, with you spreading your arms on top of a rock in the mountains, and then among the ruins of a castle abandoned a thousand years ago, with

long curly black hair, as if you were embracing a nearby cloud. But you insisted on flying with the wings of a butterfly.

In a later comment with no particular context, she wrote: “Do you prefer my hair or my poetry?” It took me some time to find an appropriate response: “Your poetry needs the madness of your gypsy hair.”

Her hair really was gorgeous, and I very much wanted to bury my fingers in its curls while she was busy devouring what was left from the plate of chips in front of her. I imagined the scene again as we had tea in the Trattoria Café in the Shaalan district, this time inserting another detail—a beauty spot at the bottom of her neck that I discovered when she turned her head to watch Whitney Houston singing an old song, broadcast at

high volume on the TV screen. Then my eyes moved down toward her cleavage, where I noticed faint freckles in the shape of an upturned pear. But I did not have any great expectation that our relationship would develop any further than that, since she shied away like a gazelle from any ambiguous flirtatious expression. At sunset on that October day, as we left the café, I asked myself: “What is remorse?”

On our way to the bus stop, I was telling her the plot of the film *Repentance* by the Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze, as an interim response to her question, though what she wanted was a response to the question of whether she had been wrong or right when she chose to leave her husband after seven years of love, then jealousy, then slow death. Half of those years had been an intolerable hell, judging by the events she described to me in the café. A man selling chestnuts from a cart at the wall of the Madfa Garden disrupted the scene a little: she made asides about her passion for chestnuts. I was trying to describe the scene in the film in which the mayor’s corpse keeps reappearing after every attempt to bury him. It was a stupid idea to bring up the Stalin era in all its cruelty and violence at an intimate moment, but I was carried away and finished describing the whole plot of the film. My hands were stained black by the chestnut shells—the hot chestnuts she was consuming with relish, absorbed and listening to the rest of the story:

“One of Stalin’s victims, a woman, lives near the house. She was the person who dug up the grave and took the body out every night, kind of in revenge for the killing of her parents on orders from the general who had no scruples. Because such a man, weighed down by sins, rancor and brutality, did not deserve the dignity of burial, she said. After the woman was detained and put on trial, she asserted in her testimony that a man who had massacred innocent people should not be buried. For his part, the grandson was shocked when he found out how cruel his grandfather had been, although the son denied the charges made against his father. But the woman insisted on her position that a criminal could not be buried until his crimes had been revealed in public, because burying the past meant forgiving the people who had destroyed the lives of others by brutality, cruelty, and savagery, so the grandson went and committed suicide in remorse for his role in a fabricated version of history, while the son had to throw his father’s body off the cliff that overlooks the village.”

[Paraphernalia]

DANGEROUS MINDS

From titles of books and periodicals that are banned, or of which issues are banned, in Louisiana state prisons.

Pinterest for Business
Smart Moves Beyond Mutual Funds
O, The Oprah Magazine
The Prada Plan
Lady Gaga: Extreme Style
Damn Girl
Bare Arms
Leg World
She Comes First
Sex & Love for Grownups: A No-Nonsense
Guide to a Life of Passion
Drawing the Clothed Figure
Classical Painting Atelier
Surrealism
The Complete Book of Zen
Mother Earth News
A Witches’ Bible
Faeries and Other Fantastical Folk
Who Are the Illuminati?
Self-Hypnosis for Dummies
The Danktionary: An A–Z Guide to Stoner
Slang
Marijuana Law
100 Years of Lynchings
Prisonworld
Outdoor Life



"Frieze," a photograph by James Nizam, whose work was on view last month at Gallery Jones, in Vancouver, British Columbia.

She gasped several times as she listened and thought about the metaphor of remorse and the meaning of silence about similar crimes, even if it was about the sins in an abortive love story that ended in separation.

That evening the minibuses on the Muhajireen–Bab Touma route were crowded with passengers. They all went past without stopping and, after twenty minutes waiting, she still wasn't able to find an empty seat, so she decided to hail a taxi so that she wouldn't be any later than she already was in getting to Jermana, where she was staying temporarily with her friend Jumana Salloum, who worked as a photographer at a government news agency, and so that she could avoid the crowds waiting to be searched at the military checkpoints that were common at night all the way there. Through the back window of the taxi, she waved to me with the complete works of Giuseppe Ungaretti, the greatest Italian sculptor of words, like polished

marble, as I had described him to her. She thanked me again for my valuable present. I was trying to undermine the rigid concept of poetry she believed in by offering her a counter-conviction, my belief that poetry flourishes in another seedbed, not in the one she was used to in her readings. I told her that as a butterfly she should try nectar from all kinds of flowers and breathe in the secret smell of all plants, not drown in the mummified texts imposed on the Arabic literature syllabus by the academics at the university. "Listen, poetry means imagination gone mad and running riot, just as it is an archive of sense data, from al-Mutanabbi to the latest dropout poet no one has yet discovered." About ten minutes after she'd left the place, as I was looking in my jacket pocket for the key to the door of my building, my mobile phone rang with a call from her. As I went upstairs, with again another power cut, and using my lighter to find a path through the darkness, she told me she was listening to Umm Kulthum sing "It's

Too Late” on the radio in the taxi. She put the phone close to the speaker to prove to me she was telling the truth, and also to point out the coincidence. We had been talking about regret a short time ago. I had a terrible headache so I took a Panadol, then I relaxed, fully dressed, on my chaotic bed. I put the earphones of my mobile phone in my ears and scanned the radio stations for the song. Umm Kulthum was still singing in full throat: “What use are you, remorse? Oh remorse, remorse.”

Around noon the next day I was waiting for you to call, either under your assumed name, Amal Naji, or your real name, Asmahan Meshaal, before you went to your village in the south. I was unbearably bored by the conversation of the people sitting at the table in the Roda café. I no longer had the patience for talk about dead people, shells, displaced persons, or the state of the weather. I had told you that over the past five years I had tried to be patient in all kinds of ways, and I didn’t fully know how I had put up with the arrangements for the movable feast of killings, massacres, mass graves, famines, and lethal violence. It makes me feel uncomfortable, and my spirit has been worn down by the enormity of the loss. I want to breathe different air, but there’s no haven other than this café. When I lost hope of you coming, I left the place so angry that I left my packet of tobacco and my lighter on the table, which often happens to me when I’m upset.

Without any preliminaries, she sent me an email that night: “A woman wakes and sings/Wind follows and entrances her/And stretches her upon the earth/And the true dream takes her./This earth is nude/This woman is a paramour/This wind is strong/This dream is death.” I read the lines, from the poem “Bedouin Song” by Giuseppe Ungaretti, several times, trying to work out why she chose these lines rather than any others. Was it an overture to seduction or just a random choice from the book? The sensuality was obvious here, and it might have been a clear hint that she wanted to enter a tempestuous phase in our relationship, going beyond our original agreement that we would be just friends without any emotional baggage and that I wouldn’t begrudge her my advice on her writings. “I will be your pet cat, sit close to your feet, and listen to your valuable advice,” she said. I objected to the idea and promised I would read her writings seriously and then sort the flowers from the weeds. She immediately wrote: “Very well, my teacher and master.” I replied that I didn’t want to hear such words from her again, or anything associated with the idea of subjugation.

She sent me her writings almost daily and I read them as personal messages, confessions or

expressions of pain: over time I noticed a different tone intruding on her language, with blatantly sensual words and phrases that suggested sighs of deprivation and a hidden lasciviousness that wasn’t common in her previous writings. She finally seemed to have realized that poetry operates in another domain, where all the senses are mobilized and where one “takes pleasure in violating language” as I wrote to her in a philosophizing vein, with the intention of inciting her to explore terrain that needed more aggressive treatment—“with an axe and not with a wooden stick.”

“An axe!” she wrote in amazement and disapproval, and then added cunningly: “How could a butterfly like me put up with such cruelty?” I improvised another phrase intended to fill in the gap further: “Writing about love needs fangs too.” Once again, she disapproved of the word “fangs.” At this point I realized the depth of the chasm between us. She had long lived in isolation in a forgotten village that no shell had touched throughout the years of war, keeping herself busy discovering varieties of wild plants—marjoram, sage, lavender, and rosemary, as well as birds, reptiles, and insects, drawing on the walls of her room by day and testing her determination to silence the howling wolves of desire in her breast at night, while I was wandering around the south of the city, burying the dead in funeral processions every day, maybe every hour.

Yes, an axe, I replied, thinking back to dozens of scenes where an axe had been raised over the neck of someone who’d been forced to kneel, or of a decapitated man whose body was hanging from an electricity pole in a square in a city a thousand years old. Of course, I meant our need for an aesthetic lexicon that explains how to combine on a single page the weight of a sharp axe left over from the Middle Ages and smart-bomb technology, in the same way as those barbarians found divine fatwas for killing people with axes, swords, or suicide belts. In case I got carried away with other examples of violence, she asked me, “What are you reading now?”

“*The Writer and His Ghosts*,” I said.

“Damn ghosts, axes, and suicide belts! Who’s the book by?”

“Ernesto Sabato, an Argentine physicist who turned to writing to confront the brutality of the world and to accelerate the disaster that’s staring at humanity, as he puts it. He thinks a writer’s mission is to ‘vomit up his inner world.’”

“I don’t know any other Argentines, except for Maradona the footballer, and maybe some yerba maté brand names. Oh yes, now I remember Borges. He’s Argentine, isn’t he?”

Then, without any breaks, she added: “I miss you.”



+pentium II" +400mhz" racconti erotici_SATAI, a painting by Petra Cortright, whose work was on view in December at Soci t , in Berlin.