

REVIEWS

Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow, Vol. One: Fever and Spear*. Tr. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: New Directions, 2005. 400pp. \$29.95

Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow, Vol. Two: Dance and Dream*. Tr. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: New Directions, 2006. 288pp. \$29.95

Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow, Vol. Three: Poison, Shadow, and Farewell*. Tr. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: New Directions, 2009. 556pp. \$24.95

In an essay a few years back, the editors of *n+1* wrote:

Just as the '90s witnessed the American canonization of one important foreign writer—W. G. Sebald—the current decade has seen the same happen to the wandering novelist and poet Roberto Bolaño. . . . Bolaño's canonization has taken place so rapidly and completely, and with so little demurral, that one can only reluctantly pile aboard the bandwagon.

Anyone with a hint of contrarian feeling had to sympathize. But rather than blame Bolaño for his hype, the editors recognized that he was “the real thing, as urgent, various, imaginative, and new as any writer active in the last decade.” Instead they turned the problem inside out: “The question is: why *not* canonize anyone else? Why reserve for him the once-in-a-decade beatification?”

Among the books lost in the swells of Bolañomania, I can think of none that proves the wisdom of that question so well as *Your Face Tomorrow*, a three-volume, slow-motion spy novel by the Spanish writer Javier Marías. Marías is hardly an unknown—his books sell in the millions abroad, and he counts among his high-profile admirers Orhan Pamuk, J.M. Coetzee, and John Ashbery. But while *Your Face Tomorrow* collected a handful of admiring reviews in the U.S., it never broke through in the way it could have—or, frankly, should have.

At the start of *Your Face Tomorrow*, Jacques Deza, the novel's protagonist and the author's alter ego, attends a cocktail party hosted by his old friend Sir Peter Wheeler. Wheeler is an eminent Oxford Hispanist and a spy, one of the founding members of a small and mysterious subunit of British intelligence. He introduces Deza to the group's current chief at his party, and by the end of the first volume, Deza has a new job.

At first Deza thinks he's been hired as an interpreter in the traditional sense. He learns quickly enough, however, that "in reality or, rather, in practice, I was of interest...and was taken on as an interpreter of lives." Like the other members of the group, Deza has been selected for his gifts of observation and discernment, which lie somewhere on the spectrum between psychoanalysis and divination.

Until the final volume, when Deza's estranged wife claims center stage, the plot of *Your Face Tomorrow* turns on his dealings with the mysterious group. Deza is never exactly sure whom it works for, or to what larger end, though it seems to operate as a clandestine consulting agency, sometimes vetting candidates for government posts, other times assessing external applicants for assistance, still other times freelancing for private clients. In one early encounter, Deza is asked under what circumstances a pop star would kill; in another, whether a reptile-booted Venezuelan has the mettle to execute a coup.

Mariás has said that he wanted to put "everything" into *Your Face Tomorrow*, and this great-book ambition shows itself in extended meditations on love and death, friendship and politics. At its heart, however, *Your Face Tomorrow* is a novel about violence. Treachery, war, and the secret brutality of everyday life fuel the narrative and inspire much of Mariás's best thinking and writing.

Certainly some of this violence is the obvious kind. Mariás uses 150 pages of the second volume to narrate a ten-minute near-execution involving a sword, and in the final volume Deza awkwardly settles a score with the help of a handgun and an iron poker. Two of the novel's unshakable images are a woman being raped by a horse and a man being killed like a bull in a ring.

Generally, however, the violence in question is more obscure. When Wheeler describes the talent he shares with Deza, it's impossible not to hear the definition of an ideal novelist:

It's a very rare gift indeed nowadays, and becoming rarer, the gift of being able to see straight through people, clearly and without qualms, with neither good intentions nor bad, without effort, that is, without any fuss or squeamishness.

And later Deza will make the link explicit: "To guess at...probabilities, to predict...future behavior, it was almost like writing novels." You can read this as a joke, or a nod at metafiction. But there's something more serious at stake here: in aligning writing and espionage Mariás is asking us to consider not so much the interpretative nature of the latter as the potentially bloody ramifications of the former.

Thus it happens that while Deza's new boss tells him early on, "Here we have no interests.... We merely give our opinion and only when asked," it quickly becomes apparent that "mere opinion" is a weapon of enviable reach. It kills in Franco's Spain, in Churchill's Britain, in present-day London and Madrid, and by the end leaves us tempted to concede the weary wisdom of the novel's opening words: "One should never tell anyone anything."

And yet Mariás also insists that the alternative isn't much of an alternative: silence, too—especially when enforced—can be its own kind of terror. After showing Deza a collection of wartime posters warning against careless talk, Wheeler says,

I don't know if you quite realise what it meant, Jacobo: people were warned against using their main form of communication.... It made an enemy of what most defines and unites us: talking, telling, saying, commenting, gossiping.... If there's one thing that they do or we do which is not a strict physiological necessity, if there is one thing that is truly common to all beings endowed with free will, it is talking, Jacobo. The fatal word. The curse of the word.

Mariás's privileged example of the destructive nature of silence is the legacy of the Spanish Civil War and the Fascist regime that followed it. For three decades after Franco's death, a *pacto de olvido* ensured that crimes committed under the regime would be neither investigated nor prosecuted. It wasn't until 2008, a year after Mariás finished the final installment of *Your Face Tomorrow*, that a Spanish prosecutor declared that the pact of forgetting would no longer protect Francoist criminals. In *Your Face Tomorrow* it is Deza's father (like Mariás's own father, a Republican journalist during the war and a persecuted intellectual afterward) who personifies this legacy.

The plot of *Your Face Tomorrow* may be conspicuously spare for a 1,274-page spy novel, but as in all real literature the glory of this novel is its style. Mariás's prose is not the high-wire act of Nabokov, Gaddis, or Amis: his writing never prances or preens, only rarely does it dazzle or dismay. Nor does it share much with his contemporary Bolaño, whose dust-dry sentences shun metaphor and stay resolutely on the surface of things. Introspection is the sea in which Mariás's fiction swims, and the voice of the novel, Deza's voice, is discursive, loquacious, and erudite. To meet the mood Mariás lets his meditations drift along the currents of thought, working metaphors and raveling digressions sometimes for pages at a time.

The ruminative spirit of *Your Face Tomorrow* is incarnated at the formal level in sentences that wind, wend, and sprawl. Clauses are revised and re-

peated, often in the compass of a single page-long sentence. The best efforts of Henry James and David Foster Wallace notwithstanding, Englishers have never been very confident about the conjunctive possibilities of the humble comma, but Margaret Jull Costa, Mariás's talented translator, has wisely chosen not to break his sentences into smaller units. Here is a shorter example:

Books speak in the middle of the night just as the river speaks, quietly and reluctantly, or perhaps the reluctance stems from our own weariness or our own somnambulism and our own dreams, even though we are or believe ourselves to be wide awake.

In *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño has the architect Joaquín Font lecture on literature from within the padded walls of a mental clinic. The calm reader, Font explains, is “cool-headed, mature, educated...leading a more or less healthy life... This man can read things that are written for when you're calm, but he can also read any other kind of book with a critical eye, dispassionately, without absurd or regrettable complicity.” The desperate reader, meanwhile, “is an adolescent or an immature adult, insecure, all nerves. He's the kind of fucking idiot...who committed suicide after reading *Werther*... He can only read the literature of desperation, or books for the desperate, which amounts to the same thing, the kind of person or freak who's unable to read all the way through *In Search of Lost Time*, for example.” Font laments that Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, the heroes of *The Savage Detectives*, wanted to write books for desperate readers. (“I warned them. I showed them the technically perfect page. I alerted them to the dangers. Don't exhaust the vein! Humility!”)

Reliable accounts describe the last decade of Bolaño's life as a picture of stable productivity, but there's no question that he wrote for the freaks and fucking idiots. We love the nervous, insecure, immature adolescents and adults that populate his books because they remind us of the reckless selves we were or are or want to be.

Mariás, meanwhile, is a writer that Font, Bolaño's insane advocate of literary calm, would have loved. With one exception, all of *Your Face Tomorrow*'s personalities are impressively mature; they flatter the world with their consideration. The same is true of the novel's style: the slow changes of direction, the hesitations, digressions, and meditations all conspire to force the mind to slow down and meet the rhythm of contemplation. Mariás's seriousness and style are foreign enough to be disorienting. And yet I can't help but suspect that his novel's real exoticism stems from something altogether more simple and astonishing: *Your Face Tomorrow* reads like a book written by an adult for other adults.

Robert P. Baird

§

Donald Revell, *The Bitter Withy*. Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2009. 61pp. \$15.95

At a recent reading from *The Bitter Withy*, Donald Revell read “Can’t Stand It,” which begins:

I hear the elephant music
Of the playground’s rusted swings, and up,
Up higher, then down again,
Happy children take the sound.

No snakes can read.
Walking across the ocean,
Walking on flowers nowhere to be seen,
I walk on gold.

When he read the line “No snakes can read,” the audience laughed at the non sequitur and Revell smiled winningly. And though it is certainly a non sequitur, the allusion to Eden, following a playground scene, is instructive: *The Bitter Withy* is focused precisely on linking the material to the metaphysical, the quotidian to the eternal. In “Can’t Stand It,” Revell grants, “A diamond is a diamond. / A cloud is a cloud that looks like one,” but insists, too, that Heaven is actual, a place where the rusty swings of the playground are transfigured so that they “make no sound.” In “Lissen,” conversely, there are sounds only the dead can hear:

There is a sound in birdsong
Just before the song,
And you can hear it,
Though only a few,
And those are reflected on lake water
 like beautiful ghosts
Always just at sunrise,
Do.

Tell the truth exactly, it will make
 no sense.

The title’s place name is a pun on “listen,” one that extends to “no sense.” The “truth,” the miraculous, will not square with our senses. Such sentiment is peppered throughout *The Bitter Withy*, sometimes as plainly as in the statement, “What I need / Is not to look at all” (“Little Bees”), and in the strange and fine poem, “Drought”:

Eyesight is nobody.
Perspective dies before it lives,
And it lives a long time after death

Like birdsong.

When I die, I will begin to hear
The higher frequency...

This skepticism of sense data brings Revell, as ever, very close to Blake: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.” These poems do not deny materiality; they insist that everything transcends materiality, that everything that lives is holy.

To that end, Revell purchases a good deal of stock in backyard flora and fauna. Flowers and trees, bugs, birds, rabbits, dogs, predators and prey are all “parallel animals,” figures of our shared vulnerability to death and of our animal impulse toward destruction, and all holy (as in the poem “Nemesis”). In “Against This Quiet,” a moving elegy for the poet’s mother that includes phrases from John Ashbery’s “Clepsydra,” Revell imagines that a dreaming dog—at once a predator and quite literally holy—is chasing a lizard:

In the long way back out of sadness,
In new dark passages,
He accepts miter and tonsure.
That’s not right.
The dog’s really killed him.

The dog is just as able to accept miter and tonsure as we, and he is as able to kill and be killed. His experience is no different, his blessings and curses no different. This is the argument of *The Bitter Withy*, and if we accept the premise that every animal’s experience on this earth is the same, and add to it a sort of Gnostic insistence that everything contains a soul, the connection between the everyday and the eternal is hard to gainsay.

Visionary logic like this is about as far thematically from the New York School as Revell’s current home, Las Vegas, is from his Bronx birthplace. But the technique—the playfulness with language, the sharp veering, image to image, idea to idea—certainly marks him as an heir to that group of poets. Meanwhile, Revell professes to be a Christian, and his speakers yearn toward a Christian heaven, which makes him one of very few contemporary poets dealing seriously in any way with Christianity. That fact alone makes Revell’s poetry interesting: a heretical New York Schooler who is also a heretical Christian acknowledges his saints thusly (in a poem, “Crickets,” dedicated to the memory of Barbara Guest):

Saint William Blake, pray for me;
Saint Rimbaud, pray for me;
Saint Antonin Artaud, burn
New eyes into my head
With a cigarette end.
Otherwise,
I am toys
Lost on the polar ice.

The prominence of death and Christian iconography in *The Bitter Withy* will not surprise readers familiar with Revell's work. Mortality has been a prime subject of his poems since his first collection, *From the Abandoned Cities* (1983). And his 2002 collection, *Arcady*, is an extended elegy to his sister. But while the impetus behind *The Bitter Withy* is similarly the death of his mother, the poem "The Rabbits" shows a book far more otherworldly in focus. The poem is an extended musing on Titian's "Virgin of the Rabbit." (There is a detail-within-a-detail reproduction of the painting on the cover of *The Bitter Withy*. It is a cover that somehow fails both as illustration of the poem and as a design. The poet deserves better.) It also continues the contrapuntal nature of Revell's composition, as images are repeated and expanded upon throughout the book. The rabbits appear in "Lay of Smoke," for example: "As if we were rabbits / All that's needed for any heaven / Is death and damage and a ditch." In "The Rabbits" itself, a rabbit watches as the speaker washes dishes and makes coffee, "eyes / Meeting at the kitchen window at sunrise."

Something has driven all the predators from the sky.
[...]
"Make the hawk's wings fold forever."
I cannot.
I can only tell you, although you are past hearing,
Christ's embrace of the woodlands hereabouts
Drove God out of the trees.

The poem invites a comparison between God and a predator, and further invites a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and that of the New. Revell comes down clearly on the side of the New. This continues into the sixth and final section of the poem, titled "The Vision of Saint Eustace." Once a Roman general, the story goes, St. Eustace became a Christian after seeing a vision of Jesus crucified between the antlers of the stag he was hunting. A man, once a predator, makes peace with his prey and becomes a Christian. Revell's speaker yearns for such a conversion, but foregrounds his own fallibility in doing so: "Not even drunkenness or prayer / Takes me the very little way / From murder to white clover."

One gets the sense that *The Bitter Withy* attempts a sort of transubstantiation of figures of domestic life into those of death and the afterworld. The prime example of this is in “Long-Legged Bird,” which begins, “I have a sweet house / Halfway to the top of fires...” The poem borrows its title, the image of the halfway house, and many lines in their entirety from Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli.” In “Long-Legged Bird,” the house becomes both a figure of home, and of a Limbo, a place from which Revell can look below upon the ultimate tragedy, and above see his dead restored to innocence: “My mother as a baby, my father a cowboy, / My sister, finally, after so much heartbreak, / A girl.”

If “Lapis Lazuli” is centered on art’s ability to transcend tragedy, “Long-Legged Bird” identifies the means by which this transcendence is managed on the human level: forgiveness. The ultimate figure of forgiveness is introduced in section IV with the rhetorical: “When did our sweet Jesus / Become the purview and bad pretext of jailers? / How did loving kindness / Come to devastate the world with wars?” Revell knows very well the answers to these questions. Such lines are a gambit: they risk being dismissed as naïve. Yet by enacting naïveté, they acknowledge that it is a prime quality required of innocence, the desire to do no harm, which is itself required if one desires conversion. In *The Bitter Withy*, Revell sincerely grapples with such conversion. Sincerity is risky. In an age that seems averse to that risk, these poems are welcome company.

Tim Erickson

§

B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*. New York: New Directions, 2009. 176pp. \$24.95

Like the work of his idols, Joyce and Beckett, B.S. Johnson’s most notable novel, *The Unfortunates*, first published in England in 1969 and re-released by New Directions in 2009, experiments with form in order to render episodes from daily life. Published as twenty-seven unbound (sometimes stapled, sometimes glued) pamphlets ranging in length between one and twelve pages, *The Unfortunates* is collected in a sturdy, laminated box. The pamphlets, aside from two labeled “First” and “Last,” can be read in any order.

A thinly disguised *roman à clef*, *The Unfortunates*, like *Ulysses*, takes place on a single day. It is comprised of a series of recollections occasioned by the narrator’s trip to Nottingham to cover a rather underwhelming football match; an aspiring writer himself, the narrator is trying to make some extra money as a hack sports journalist. Though the events of his trip are seemingly of little note—a watery bowl of oxtail soup is consumed, a bus is

ridden, a beer is drunk—the painful memories that the city summons differ as radically from a humdrum Sunday in the English Midlands as Johnson's fractured and fortuitous work differs from a usual book. Johnson takes the attempt to integrate form and content seriously and self-consciously; so seriously and self-consciously, in fact, that his novel ends up raising crucial questions about the promise of the innovative form in which it is written.

Once in Nottingham, the narrator is quickly reminded of two figures from his past whom he associates with the city, Wendy and Tony. He relates his relationship with Wendy, his undergraduate paramour, with a combination of idealization and bluntness—recalling for example, his casually cruel unwillingness to let her beat him at tennis, or the bedspread at a guesthouse where the two enjoyed the passions of new love. He thinks also of the dissolution of their relationship, of the traumatic mark left by that rupture, and of the inescapability of this past. The narrator's and Wendy's slow, painful dissolution is eclipsed only by the fate of Tony, the narrator's best friend, who engages in a long and ultimately hopeless bout with cancer. These two sets of memories prove to be so interwoven as to be ultimately inseparable, and Tony's death ends up shading the entire set of experiences to the point where the narrator is incapable of remembering which of the two were actually present at certain events. He recalls Tony's "parents' house, for formal tea.... I do not remember Wendy being there at all. Perhaps she was not there. Does it matter? So much of what I rehearse of him involves her, in the early days, for this first year they were not closer, they were associated, they have become more so in my mind." There is a sharp contrast between the quotidian nature of most of these recollections of tea times and train rides on one hand and the monumental fact of Tony's death on the other. Much of the novel consists of the narrator's attempt to work out the relation (or the difference) between the significant and the ordinary.

This work is also central to the narrator's drudging efforts to write about the football match at hand. He notes that the draw of a sporting event is that it will live up to its name, its promise of being an actual *event*. There is, Johnson writes,

[a]lways, at the start of each match, the excitement, often the only moment of excitement, that this might be the ONE match, the match in which someone betters Payne's ten goals, where Hughie Gallacher after being floored nods one in while sitting down, where the extraordinary happens, something that makes it stand out, the match one remembers and talks about for years afterwards, the rest of one's life.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the match proves largely uneventful, the play consistently unimpressive. The one moment of play that does resemble an event

is unintentional and therefore difficult to incorporate into a coherent narrative: the only goal occurs when the ball ricochets off a member of United and flies by chance into United's net. What is impressive, though, is how Johnson manages to transform all of this into something astonishing and artful. Rather than merely presenting the news story, Johnson recreates the narrator's writing process, capturing his internal monologue along with his real-time edits. When describing the goal, for example, he cycles through different descriptions of the erring player's mindset that might account for his unintended shot, enacting the narrator's moments of deliberation with white spaces:

Edson advanced and *stooped academically*
correctly to gather the ground shot with his body behind it, some
demon chance gremlin trog thought took over in Mull's mind that he
could stop it himself and accordingly stuck out a boot.

Elsewhere, the narrator jokingly reflects on potential legal pitfalls of sports writing: "*The referee, whose handling of the game had until now been firm enough was, no, libel, seemed to be at fault in....*" By streaming the narrator's composing consciousness, Johnson reveals both the careful decision making that goes into the creation of even the driest of journalistic prose, as well as the contingency inherent in the composition process. Turns of phrase are tested and rejected, the narrator meanwhile reflecting with bitter humor on the canned clichés routinely employed by the most famous sports journalists. Though he may aspire to write the sort of hyper-crafted prose produced by his literary idols, his looming five o'clock deadline forces compromises. Flat phrases are accepted; opportunities to interview fans are lost; interesting imagery is passed up. The contrast between the aimlessly stuttering style of the stream of consciousness narrative and the tidy prose of the final copy (which appears not in any of the pamphlets but rather printed on the interior of the book's box) parallels the contrast between the messy, mundane quality of the narrator's memories and the looming event of Tony's death (also absent from the pamphlets' narrative proper).

If *The Unfortunates* represented nothing more than a pushing of formal innovations, Johnson's book would remain little more than a graceful and moving literary footnote. Instead, Johnson seems to realize that modernism's formal experimentation, while it may sometimes equal the ecstasy of an extraordinary football victory, can just as readily prove as unsatisfying as an own goal. Thus it is in some sense misleading to concentrate exclusively on the idiosyncratic form of *The Unfortunates* at the expense of its poignant characterizations, flawless evocation of the gray drear of a cold day in the Midlands, or its brutal honesty. The novel's closing lines could be a gloss on

the relative efficacy of its formal innovations just as easily as they refer to Tony's passing: "Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us[.]" The fact of loss can resist compensation through form. Johnson arrives at this skeptical conclusion about form through a rigorous experimentation with it; this is to his credit as both a writer and a thinker.

Chris Bench

§

Best European Fiction 2010. Edited by Aleksandar Hemon. Preface by Zadie Smith. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010. 421 pp. \$15.95

In *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction Since 1990*, Warren Motte commends the latest generation of French writers for being at once innovative and reader-friendly. The reputedly forbidding "writerly" texts of the earlier nouveau roman generation have given way, in this schema, to what Motte describes as an "avant-garde with a human face, an avant-garde that seems to welcome its readers with open arms, while still insisting on innovation."

If Dalkey Archive Press's *Best European Fiction 2010* is indeed what its editor, Sarajevan-born novelist Aleksandar Hemon, claims in the anthology's introduction—"a detailed snapshot of the contemporary European literatures"—then we can say that the French strain identified by Motte has gone viral and infected a continent. A book of snapshots suggests a family album, and Zadie Smith tells us in her preface that we're not wrong to see a "family resemblance" uniting the volume's varied contents, a morphology that sets it apart from the mainstream of current U.S. literary fiction. For Smith and Hemon, this European quality is expressed in the adventurousness of the writing itself—in Smith's words "a strong tendency towards the metafictional"; in Hemon's a "formal diversity" deriving from Europe's history of fragmentation and integration. The volume—the first of an anticipated annual series—brings together thirty-five stories from thirty nations, in a geographic and linguistic range stretching from Iceland to Russia and Finland to Macedonia.

Short fiction in the U.S. continues to be dominated by the "well-made story"—carefully crafted if loosely plotted psychological realism, with a clearly identified conflict at the beginning and an epiphany at the end. While Zadie Smith says that many of *Best European Fiction 2010*'s stories "seem to come from a different family from those long anecdotes ending in epiphany," at least a third of the volume's stories do follow this formula, and could successfully apply for citizenship in *Iowa* or *Missouri* or *Mississippi Review*. This

is not to say that these are not well-written, sensitive treatments of their subjects and successful on their own terms, but the terms themselves are those of familiarity rather than defamiliarization; they tend to ratify rather than challenge our expectations. Dutch author Stephan Enter's "Resistance" and Latvian Inga Ābele's "Ants and Bumblebees" are representative. In the former, a young chess hobbyist experiences the conflict of acceptance versus conformity when a substitute instructor turns out to be gay; in the latter, a dysfunctional family's outing to the cemetery becomes an opportunity for quiet reconciliation with the past. In such stories both art and life cleave to a tidy mean. Even when emotional tempests blow, as in Danish author Naja Marie Aidt's "Bulbjerg," the story's conclusion (the boorish narrator gets a surprise comeuppance from his ill-treated wife and learns to bond with their damaged adoptive child) retrospectively reveals its inner IKEA.

A majority of the anthology's stories do depart, however, from this template of "well-made" psychological realism, although it is equally the case that they rarely strain the bounds of *lisibilité*. Motté's "avant-garde with a human face" remains the preferred mode throughout: the kind of ludic—and lucid—textual gambits of which Italo Calvino and Raymond Queneau are the godfathers. French author Christina Montalbetti's "Hotel Komaba Eminence (with Haruki Murakami)," for example, imagines a breakfast with the Japanese writer at which an incidental detail metastasizes into a hysteria-producing encroachment, while in Serbian author David Albahari's "The Basilica at Lyon," the story itself acquires a gender within the first paragraph and sets off, *ingénue*-style, on a picaresque journey to the landmark of the title. Yet the moral of the story disappoints: "Life, even though it looks as though it only belongs to us, is actually a story being told by someone else." If metafiction has its own reflex of too-convenient closure, it's just this sort of gesture—after all, it's all just stories! More challenging is Giedra Radvilavičiūtė's "The Allure of the Text," in which the Lithuanian writer pairs a trip to an academic forum on contemporary literature with a detour to meet a distant relative. The story confronts subjectivity with the literariness of its own conventions, as the narrator's own epiphany, during an on-camera interview at the conference, turns out to be lifted from a prior text:

After mentioning the year, I realized that I wasn't speaking my own words. They had come from a passage in the notebooks of Lieutenant Thomas Glahn, which, in turn, came from the first page of [Knut Hamsun's] *Pan*—the book Emilia's sister was holding in her hands when she was buried here in this town.

The question of the priority of sign or referent is here left undecided. The narrator feels a sudden compulsion to tell her interviewer about this long-

dead relative of hers, insisting “it would have been a truly personal impression and anecdote—from prior years,” but opts instead for the inscrutable gesture of smearing locally produced honey on the camera’s lens.

Stories such as Radvilavičiūtė’s circumscribe the horizon of difficulty in the volume, within whose compass the reader’s experience will be rather like a nice European vacation—sufficiently “different,” but not too taxing or disorienting. All the locals speak some English, the signs are bilingual, and most of the restaurants have menus you can read without consulting the phrasebook. It is a literary economy geared for the visitor, to the extent that a number of the stories appear to have been selected for the very familiarity of their “foreign” formal idioms or topical themes. The sunny Iberian peninsula, for instance, yields stories in identifiably “Latin” modes: Valter Hugo Mãe’s “dona malva and senhor josé ferreiro” features a magical-realist ghost, and Julián Ríos’s “Revelation on the Boulevard of Crime” bears a clearly Borgesian stamp. The Victor Pelevin tale chosen as the Russian offering is a brilliant absurdist spoof on what is most people’s idea of Russia, i.e., oligarchs and organized crime. The volume includes a trio of dystopian fables dominated by familiar contemporary themes—Slovakian Peter Kristúfek’s “The Prompter” depicts the *reductio ad absurdum* of a European capital locked down and tarted up for an international G8-style summit, while both Bulgarian Georgi Gospodinov’s “And All Turned Moon” and Dutch–Belgian Peter Terrin’s excerpt from *The Murderer*, in their different ways, respond to issues of environmental catastrophe and demographic decline (the so-called “graying” of Europe). There are in fact a relatively high number of “issues” stories—sex trafficking and deindustrialization also find room—but the sensibility governing their presentation is largely that of the educated, liberal urban professional—the same cohort likely to read such a volume on this side of the Atlantic.

The book does provide a limited critique of the assumptions of its likely readership. Estonian Elo Viiding’s memoiristic “Foreign Women,” for example, recounts the condescending patronage of “progressive” female visitors from the West during the Soviet era who failed to grasp how privilege conditioned their own cherished liberties. Croatian writer Neven Ušumović’s “Vereš” and Polish writer Michał Witkowski’s “Didi,” on the other hand, offer disquietingly contemporary glimpses of a Europe seen “from below,” with the latter story, in particular, standing out for its focus on a truly abject figure. Europe’s literature of abjection is a distinct strain, but in this anthology it emerges only in “Didi,” with its echoes of Céline and Genet. Witkowski’s character is a runaway from Slovakia trying to survive by hustling on the streets in Vienna. A “rent-boy” whose professional name is Milan, Didi’s identity remains in question throughout; in her world an

ostensibly stable and unified identity (and by implication “identity politics” itself) is a middle-class luxury item. From the literal underground of the filthy metro men’s room where she turns tricks, Didi/Milan surveys a Grand Hotel Europe of migrants and vagrants—Polish, Russian, Czech, Romanian—pitted against each other at the lowest reaches of the economic food chain. Higher up are the Austrians themselves, who all strike Didi as “deformed by wealth.” At the nadir of her trials, writes Witkowski,

Didi realized that the entire West was like an electric amusement park wired on high-voltage. The little lights kept blinking regardless, whether you were having fun or biting the dust in the metro, dear Milan, you lovely, beautiful angel. Perfectly indifferent. Forever happy. As long as the plug stays in its socket. And Didi was a hair’s breadth from turning into a Socialist that night.

“Perfectly indifferent” and “forever happy” refer to the wired West, but the immediate antecedent is Didi/Milan, who is neither. This syntactical confusion effectively reproduces the disconnect that both constitutes and rends her existence. Epiphany’s ideological function is the ratification of “human” interiority, yet here humanity is precisely what is denied: in Didi’s realization, the only way to participate in Western society is as a commodity (Milan). The alternative, remaining Didi, entails not humanity but the garbage heap. The evocation of socialism is similarly equivocal: as a specter, it is historically defunct in its “really existing” version; yet as a utopian horizon, it continues to haunt.

Stories such as these, in which Europe is seen from a vantage point closer to Viiding’s Western progressives or Witkowski’s Austrians, stand out from the rest of the anthology. The story that is most symptomatic of the volume’s strengths and silences in this respect has to be “Zidane’s Melancholy,” Belgian author Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s restaging of the notorious headbutt that capped French footballer Zinedine Zidane’s career in the 2006 World Cup final. Toussaint construes it as a sort of Badiouan “Event,” a break in the historical continuum that defies representation. The narrator’s only access to the “truth” of such an event is to recast it as a fiction, in which Zidane becomes a kind of alter ego whose spasmodic gesture reflects both resistance and resignation to an undertow of the artist’s *Weltschmerz*. The story—originally published as a very short novel—is an intertextual tour de force, mixing narrative, lyrical, and philosophic-essayistic modes, footnoted citations of soccer lore and the European literature on melancholy, and, in a self-reflexive turn, allusions to Toussaint’s own work. “Zidane’s melancholy is my melancholy,” writes Toussaint, and thus his Zidane becomes a form-giving artist in the medium of football.

Readers on Toussaint's side of the Atlantic are familiar with a quite different version of the event, in which the footballer's motivation has been depicted as more choleric than melancholic. A French citizen of Algerian and Muslim descent, Zidane had headbutted his opponent in response to a slur that was quite possibly racist. Toussaint's terse retelling manages rather breathtakingly to avoid this particular content. Among the layered allusions we find no mention of Zidane's ethnicity nor of any insult—racist or otherwise—from a member of the opposing team. In a “World” Cup contest that had already been winnowed down to two European national teams and held on the neutral ground of a third (the match took place in Berlin), a set of references that might have described a fault line through this terrain—evoking the burning of the *banlieues* and the Jyllands-Posten cartoon controversy (both of which had occurred less than a year before)—is wholly elided; a metaphysical drama of the lonely artist struggling in an ahistorical void unfolds in their place. As Toussaint explains in an interview excerpted in his contributor's biography at the volume's end, “I invented Zidane, I appropriated Zidane, and what does it matter if that's connected to reality or not?” It wouldn't be the first time someone writing in French has appropriated a North African for a role in an existentialist drama, but in this case there might be a saving ambiguity: the proximity of the two versions in most readers' minds (outside the U.S., at least), suggests that the work can be read as a sly autocritique of its own European narcissism.

Much of the rest of *Best European Fiction 2010*, however, can be read less ambiguously under the sign of this exclusion. Other than the deracinated Zidane, characters of North African or Middle Eastern origin who appear in its pages are limited to a nameless Arab who preys on Didi/Milan in a Vienna washroom and “the motley inhabitants of the alleyways: Armenians, Arabs, Persians, and Turks,” who populate the otherwise wholly Jewish Levant of George Konrád's “Jeremiah's Terrible Tale.” Nor do we find any significant Black presence. (Curiously, if nonwhites appear in a story, they are invariably Asians of the Pacific Rim—Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai.) In its selection of writers and nations, too, the anthology skews heavily north and west; the political capital of this Europe is certainly Brussels (home of the European Union) and its economic capital is the UK (the volume was primarily funded by an Arts Council England grant and contains five stories from the British Isles, all unexceptional save for Julian Gough's send-up of Irish cultural nationalism in “The Orphan and the Mob”). To be given two stories from Belgium, for instance—one by Dutch–Belgian Peter Terrin and the other by the French–Belgian Toussaint—might show admirable respect for the region's multilingual history and current political differences, but when it comes to actual cultural differences a greater span no doubt divides Northern Italy (home of the single Italian in the book, Paduan Giulio Mozzi)

from the Mezzogiorno. The collection does not, in fact, have a particularly Mediterranean feel to it at all: we have a story from Lichtenstein—why not Malta instead, if we are honoring the diminutive principalities?—but no stories from Greece or Cyprus. Moving further east, we find no stories from Moldova, Ukraine, or Belarus, or from the Caucasian republics, such as Georgia and Armenia. A case could be made for the inclusion of a Turkish author—regardless of whether Turkey is a member of the EU.

Of course the makers of anthologies have a built-in riposte to any questioning of their selection—“It would have meant a volume of 1000 pages!” In the case of a collection of European fiction, such questions bear an inevitable relation to those of identity and inclusion that continue to define the continent itself. Fortunately *Best European Fiction 2010* is only the first in what Dalkey Archive Press intends to be an annual series. It will have more opportunities to show its readers that other Europes are possible.

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