

Burnt Bridge
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Contents

Poetry

Drema Hall Berkheimer - “that boy”	3
Jamie Dickson - “Continue to Bleed Normally”	9
Tara Mae Schultz - “The Night Roller”	20

Fiction

Nicholas Bowden - “Poor Visibility”	4
Molly Laich - “Stillwater”	10

Book Reviews

James Newlin - Super Sad True Love Story by Gary Shteygart	22
Matthew Martin – Memory Wall by Anthony Doerr	27

Contributor Bios	33
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Drema Hall Berkheimer

that boy

that boy come swarpping along
like he's somebody's birthday prize
yellow headed and peach fuzzed
still pink around the gills

my eyes ache from the dazzle
while his eyes glue to Delvina
ringing and twisting by but she
don't pay him no mind

it's me and him at Snider's barn
an owl stirring
something whirred

lace spiderwebs trail off my
head like a wedding veil as
we laid down on moldy hay oh
lord love a sinner i'm going to hell

i do not care i do not i

gulp his smell into my lungs
hold it in like weed and get high
as a kite on that boy who's
wishing i was Delvina

Nicholas Bowden

Poor Visibility

“You see, this never would’ve happened if that damn weatherman had been right. It was supposed to be cloudy and cool, but instead, the sun was glaring down on me and making good visibility near ‘bout impossible. That’s why that pregnant lady ended up dead. I didn’t bring my shades because I thought I wouldn’t need ‘em.

“‘Bout two years ago, the tool and die plant in my hometown got closed. Downsizing. We blamed the manager for not going to bat for us, he blamed upper management for pissing away our 401K, and management blamed the economy. Personally, I blame the Democrats as far as the government goes. It’s getting so that a man can’t earn a decent living in this country, but he can get one for free if he’ll prance his fancy ass down to the welfare office once a month. Anyway, I lost my job, and so did most everyone else. Soon enough whole packs of people were moving away. Just up and leaving their homes and everything.

“I’d been out of work for a while when my old woman really started riding me. I couldn’t sit down without her jumping all over me to get up and do something. That’s what she was always saying, ‘Get off your sorry ass! I ain’t got but one good bra to my name!’ or, ‘There ain’t nothing to eat! No bread, no chips, no nothing!’ So one day I go out for a beer, and when I get home, she’s gone. Took my dog and my truck. A woman that’ll take your dog’ll cut you.

“Wasn’t long before I lost the trailer, too. Just built a

red wood deck on the back. A couple of men in ties came and told me to get out. Where the hell was I supposed to go, huh? I had to move back in with my mama. I fought in Fu Bi, for Christ's sake.

“I was feeling ‘bout as low as a snail in a salt factory. Didn't even feel like getting up to go to bed most nights, so I just slept in the Lazy Boy. Didn't even go outside for days at the time. And then one day I was watching the evening news because I just didn't wanna get up and change the channel, and who do you think I saw? Q. Percieval Geldenfater, owner of Geldenfater Tool and Die. He and a bunch of others were standing around in suits just a smiling, shaking hands and having their pictures took with their pretty blonde wives. Old Percy was gonna start up an indoor football league. Now I ain't got nothing against indoor football, but I was wondering how come he had enough money to do that, and didn't have enough money to let me keep my trailer?

“That's when I started cleaning my rifle a lot and listening to Johnny Cash.

“A month or so went by, and then I heard that Percy was gonna be given some award by a hospital over in LummoX. I didn't really think about that when I bought that telescopic sight for old Blinky, though. I just kind of did it. I suppose I just kind of bought that ski mask, too.

“Well, Percy's big day came and I walked into the hospital that morning with Blinky disassembled in a duffel bag along with the ski mask and the yellow rubber gloves Mama uses to wash dishes. I didn't have a speck of trouble. Everyone was getting ready for the speech and everything. I went up to the roof, sat down and had a sandwich, then got

ready.

“I was in the perfect spot, too. With that scope I could pop him right in the chest with one shot. I practiced aiming at the stage and the microphone, but just as the whole thing started, the sun came out, and since I didn’t have my shades, there was an awful glare. It was getting hot, too. They had to do it at noon, I reckon. Couldn’t have done it in the morning or later in the day. They all just had to have lunch together. That mask was sticking to my face something fierce, and I could hear my hands getting squeaky in them gloves. I hadn’t thought they’d be so small. That weatherman was full a shit.

“Some old man made a big speech about what a great person Percy was, and how he’d helped the hospital get all this new equipment, and then Percy got up to talk. I’d never seen him in person before. He sure was a little man. Wore big black glasses and was kind of going bald. Funny thing is, he kind of looked like me; he would a without them glasses, anyways. But I could tell by his voice that he was a real nervous kind of fella, the kind what got men killed back in the jungle.

“I planted my cross hairs square on his chest. ‘You miserable little sumbitch, I got you now.’ I said. But just as I pulled the trigger, a big one-legged crow landed right on the barrel and I missed Percy by a mile. Caught that poor old fella that talked first in the ear, though.

“That big black bird lighted on me and started pecking and clawing at my face. You can still see where if you look real hard. You’d think he’d have flown off after the shot. He was so close I could see his little nub just a kicking. You ever heard of a thing like that? I ain’t.

“I hissed at him ‘Get off me, buzzard! I ain’t dead yet!’ but I reckon there wasn’t any need to whisper. Everybody down there was screaming and trampling each other like a bunch of cattle. I knocked that bird off me and aimed again. The sun was really in my eyes by this time.

“Then somebody screamed, ‘He’s on the roof!’ and Percy looked right up at me.

“He’d dropped those big coke bottle bottoms of his, so I don’t know how he saw me, but in all that noise I could hear him screaming in a high-pitched yankee voice, ‘Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus!’ again and again. He reached over and hauled some big woman out in front of him just as I pulled the trigger. Lord, he was a nervous-actin’ fella. The bullet went through both of ‘em anyway, so I don’t know why he bothered. They both dropped, and I heard a man, I guess it was the woman’s husband, scream, ‘Becky!’ as loud and as long as he could.

“I dropped Blinky and stood up. I could feel my face going plumb white. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘time to go.’ and I was off like a shot. I yanked off my mask, leaving it and Blinky up on the roof, figuring since no one had seen me, I might not get caught. All I could think as I flew down the stairs was, ‘*Lord, I hope that woman was just fat.*’ But of course she wasn’t. She was pregnant. Never a break, I tell you. Never a break.

“Well, I made it all the way to the first floor before the fuzz got me. Must have been ten of ‘em. They rushed me and I decided to just go limp and scream ‘Don’t hit me! Don’t hit me!’ but it didn’t work. They clubbed me up pretty good. Knocked out three teeth and cut my gums up pretty bad.

“I’d forgot to take the gloves off, and they were black with gun oil, so I guess that’s what gave me away. It was either that or that my face was bleeding. Later they were able to pin it all on me ‘cause I’d forgotten to file the serial number off Blinky. I swear I thought I’d done that.”

James Dickson

Continue To Bleed Normally

The flight attendant corrected herself as her coworker giggled behind the demonstration mask. “I’m sorry—continue to breathe normally. . .” and reminded us that our seat cushions could be used as a flotation device.

The late night departure sapped life from us all. Reading lamps popped like tiny novas above the attendant’s spiel. I followed both of her instructions—slowed my respiration and watched blood pool around my just-bitten fingernail.

Molly Laich

Stillwater

The dog had ripped everything to shreds and we'd been evicted. We were homeless and drinking at Travis's parents house while they were out of town, enjoying each other's company, trying to forget. We tried to keep the mood light. Before passing out, Andy, the dog's owner had proposed a series of thought experiments concerning time travel and homosexuality that Eric, Travis and I continued.

Okay, okay, Eric said. So, let's say I travel back in time, and I give my fifteen year old self a blowjob. Does that make me gay?

I said no.

Travis said yes, and not just gay, but a pedophile.

Alright, Eric modified. What if I travel back in time and my *eighteen* year old self gives *me* a blowjob. Am I gay? What about conjoined twins? If my twin fucks a guy but I'm asleep, does that make me gay?

According to Travis, the answer was always gay. I thought it depended on whether you shared a penis. I can't say for sure when or how it turned, but it did. It turned. My friends were not readers; they were naturally gifted. Somehow the gay thought experiment led to questions of agency, responsibility, the problem of evil. Somebody, God knows who, but one of us suggested that we should move

beyond theory, and that the only rational, noble course of action for the evening was to kill Andy's dog.

Andy slept with the curled up mutt next to him on the couch in the next room. Shopping lists held to the fridge with magnets saw everything. We ate candy from dishes washed down with warm beer, and we conspired.

Eric and Andy had been my boyfriend once, but not Travis. Travis wasn't my type – too wily, high strung, the kind of grown-up boy that eats sugared cereal for dinner, but I still loved him. I loved all of them. There were others, scattered, passed out throughout the house or not there that night, a bunch of twenty something men and me, and we were more than just friends; we were a family, and that's why the three of us decided we had to do this thing for Andy.

What if we just drove her deep into the woods and left her somewhere? I think I must have suggested. Someone had to have brought this up.

Clichéd! Travis said.

Weak, Eric agreed. A pathetic dodging of responsibility.

Those boys, the silly men I spent all my time with, they were all variations on the same person. Eric was a tall, handsome man with a huge intellect, wasted on music trivia, on playing the guitar, and on truly mind-bending RPG strategy. He wore the same socks for weeks and felt incredulous about the lives of others. He believed that nobody was better or worse than anyone else. For example, (he often said) I like to gamble, drink beer, and smoke cigarettes, and well... what do other people do to have a

good time?

Travis agreed that the purpose of life was to hang out and have fun. He had a vault of half-drawn comics, films conceptualized but not produced, and a tattoo of an S shaped snake on his forearm that he often told people stood for Sarah.

That's me. I'm Sarah.

They were not bad people. They may have even been good, but the truth is that I thought I was better. I'd been accepted to a big, important school across the country. I was going to leave everything, the land of greasy pizza boxes, beer cans for ashtrays, the sick feeling in the morning that gives way to a dull ache in the afternoon, and I was going to make something of myself. I was wrong. I can see that now. All of us had dreams so precious we kept them to ourselves, and I think we all believed, sadly, that the others amongst us were doomed.

Andy was a little different. He had a gloomy way about him. He hung his head and walked into the room like an apology. We were all drunks, but Andy was somehow worse, a sad clown of a drinker. I felt a personal responsibility to make his life happier, since I'd broken his heart. I was sort of famous for it. I often saw myself walking barefoot over a path of broken hearts, sharp edges like shattered Christmas bulbs. So yeah, sue me, I thought a dog would help.

We lived in a tiny town that felt like a prison, the kind of place where everyone knows everyone, day in, day out, the old familiar grind. Some time earlier, at one of the three bars on Main Street, there sat a stranger with a black puppy

sitting on the stool next to him. Imagine a cute animal. I went to her and she put her paws on my shoulders, like a girlfriend aiming to level with me. The man introduced us. She was a girl named Charlie, found abandoned on the street. She was a good puppy, he said. He wanted to keep her but there were roommate issues. He had a small apartment. He implored me to understand.

It's just that I have so many cats, I said, but in my mind, she was already home and curled up lazily in front of a fireplace that does not, and never existed. I brought the puppy home first and convinced the other roommates second. It would make a perfect birthday present for Andy, I told them. It would make him happy.

What about all the cats? Travis wanted to know. There are three goddamn cats in this house.

Eric corrected him: there are four goddamn cats in this house.

Boys, boys, boys, I said. And the puppy was ours.

But goddamn. Turns out puppies quickly turn into dogs, and after six months of the thing spinning through the place like a top, shit in my old fashioned typewriter, financially crushing vet appointments, pseudo pet psychology, attacking strangers, barking, snarled gums, shivering, and shedding all over everything, it had all added up to the shit-storm that happened that evening, leaving us homeless and drunk in Travis's parents kitchen.

We made steady work of all the booze in the house. The plan grew legs and galloped through the living room. For Andy's sake, and yes, for Charlie's too, we were going to undo this awful mistake. She wasn't meant for this

world; some animals are just cursed with chaotic brains, not wound up right. If Charlie had thumbs she would pull the trigger herself. We would take on the guilt of murder for

Andy so he could get a nice place and a girlfriend and stop being such a sad sack all the time. Everyone agreed.

An alcoholic's dream state: you see only what's in front of you, and you think that's the entire world. Methods discussed included: poison, a bullet in the brain, bludgeoning, all rejected.

We're off task, Travis said. Does everybody have a drink? Keep drinking.

The three of us looked at Andy and the sleeping animal and then back at each other.

Eric suggested we take her out back, put her in a sack and throw her in the lake.

I mentioned that it was awful, this thing we were doing. Travis told me to shut the fuck up, and we set out blindly on our task. I don't know what else to say; we just got up and started doing it. We found a sack of potatoes in the garage. We poured it out and dozens of forgotten spuds, overgrown with poisonous spores, were left rolling around the concrete floor.

Une pomme de terre, Travis said, and then he picked one up and took a bite. An apple of the earth. It was unlike him. I wondered where he learned this pointless French.

It was my job to get the victim on the leash and outside. She was sleepy but thrilled to be woken up, and then all of us were in Travis's back yard, sliding down cold, wet grass towards the water. The lake held itself out for us like a black, open hand. Eric went on about how awesome

our lives would be once this thing was over. He said we were going to get back on track. We would drink less, eat better, and start working out. I for one plan to do a hundred push ups as soon as this bullshit is done with, he said.

Our last bottle was almost gone, so metaphors about optimism versus pessimism were no longer relevant. The night stars twinkled and the full moon looked down on us approvingly. It seemed right again. I thought of werewolves and new beginnings. I crossed my chest and asked for some kind of moon goddess to forgive us. Charlie dragged her feet and whimpered, and Eric picked her up and threw her inside the boat. It was a rickety aluminum thing, no motor, for fishing presumably. I had on a long skirt that dragged on the earth, gathering leaves and grass, and now it soaked up the murky water stagnant at the bottom of the boat. We made it to the center of the lake before Travis managed to drop one of the oars. Surely oars float, but this one had a mind of its own and drifted away. He kept rowing along with just the one, until we eventually got wise to our trajectory, which was moving in circles.

Charlie whimpered and circled in the opposite direction. She feared the water collecting at her feet and barked at it, tried to murder it with her tongue and then spit it out. She made the boat shake back and forth. It occurred to us then what we were doing, that maybe we should think it through. We wondered how we'd gotten this far.

I said that it was because we were assholes, and we saw in her the things we hated about ourselves.

Travis thought that was insane. He wondered where the whiskey had gone.

We'd left it on the dock.

You mean that dock? The one way the fuck over there?

The moon reflecting off the water made a kind of humiliating daylight and we saw each other's shameful, ridiculous faces. I started crying. The guys hated when I cried, and usually I was good at turning it off. I'd discovered the secret to getting men to love you, and it was so deceptively simple I thought I should write a book: just be like them. Listen to their music. Learn about sports and Dungeons and Dragons. Don't cry. But I couldn't help myself. Charlie whined with me. She raised her head to the heavens and howled at the moon. Then she squatted down and peed in the middle of the boat, and the four of us steeped in murky urine.

Eric re-introduced the plan, and I sobbed no.

Just give me the bag, Travis said. We won't throw her in the lake. We'll just put her inside so she doesn't capsize the damn boat and kill us all.

And then what, I said. We'll have a dog in a sack, and we'll still be in the middle of a lake in a boat with one oar.

Eric said that the crying, hysterical woman had a point.

Travis pulled the sack off my shoulder and put it suddenly over the dog's head in an, aha! Gotcha! Moment. She wore the thing like a ghostly Halloween costume with no eyes cut out. She circled around panicked, got tangled in the string of the bag or something, I don't know how it happened, but it ended with Charlie in the lake, me in the

lake after her, and a tipped over boat. Keys, wallets, cell phones; all of us went under.

Drunken people drown in lakes all the time. This is a fact. I held this thought with clenched fists. I told myself to appropriately panic, to take what had just happened seriously. The water was so, so, cold, and somehow thick, like syrup. Sticks and seaweed floated on the surface and my skirt billowed around me. I thought of life flashing before my eyes, and it did, sort of, a stilted half-life in smoke, a lot of down time and missed opportunities. Weak, girly push ups. I clawed madly at the water and resolved to do better. I saw my elementary school playground. A yearbook torn in half at the spine. My father's face.

When I made it to the dock Eric was already standing at the edge, hugging himself, shivering and looking out over the lake. I knocked the empty bottle of whiskey off the side when he pulled me onto the deck. A quick survey showed only half of us had made it to the shore. We screamed and paced and looked out across the water, but it was still so dark. A layer of mist rested on the surface, at ankle's height if you were walking across. Something twinkled on the horizon that could have been splashing, or nothing.

This is the point where my memory betrays me. What happened in those panicked minutes? I've tried to repaint the picture so often the canvas is nothing but a wet, muddled mess. Eventually we climbed up slick grass to the house, shivering. What were we doing? It was the wrong direction. In my memory we crawled on our hands and knees, but there would have been no reason for that. I'm sure we walked. There's always this nagging sensation that we should have stayed longer. Jumped back in the lake.

Tried harder. Today I feel it as a persistent, dull ache, like a broken tooth. An exposed nerve.

Charlie was waiting for us in the garage, her tongue hanging out and her wet tail wagging obliviously behind her. The torn potato sack hung around her neck like a wreath decorating a prize-winning horse. She did that thing dogs do with their heads when they suspect they've done something wrong but don't know what it is. Are you guys mad at me? The dog seemed to say. She sniffed at a poisonous potato and looked up at us meekly.

Why is Charlie all wet? Andy wanted to know. He was awake, standing in the doorway. She ran to him and he bent down to cradle her in his arms. She whimpered and cried and bit at his face. It was slowly fading into day. We watched an Oldsmobile turning around the corner, its headlights cutting through the morning mist like daggers. It was Travis's parents.

Andy set the dog down. Where's Travis?

I stared down the car's headlights as they turned into the driveway. My mouth tasted blue. Eric ran around the side of the garage and puked in the bushes. I heard car doors open, the ding, ding, ding, of a turn signal left on, and Andy's voice repeating my name: Sarah. Sarah. What happened to Travis?

That was a long time ago. We suffered police reports and funerals, the hushed whisperings of locals; did you hear what happened to that boy out on the lake? It never stops. Eric got married and left. Andy lives in someone's basement, his stepfathers, an uncle, I don't know. I heard he takes medicine that keeps his brain ticking the way

hearts are meant to keep beating. As for me, the school thing fell apart. I wade through this place, the water knee deep, high enough to hold me here, anyway, and I am mostly numb. Dogs used to make me wince, to hear a chorus of them barking in the distance, but not anymore. Now it's just like anything else.

Tara Mae Schultz

THE NIGHT-ROLLER

After I dress Albert in his pjs
and settle him carefully into his twin bed,
he somehow struggles his way up,
sits in his wheelchair,
sets his weak legs into the foot plates,
and rolls out into the evening.
He calls it night-rolling
and when he returns the next morning,
I make eggs for him and don't ask any questions.

I hear one morning about delimbed trees—
Owners walking out in the crisp morning
to discover their gorgeous oaks or dogwoods
missing all of their branches,
the trunks left bare and scarred.
The cops can't file a report,
but they rule it as some sort of prank.
That evening, as I undo Albert's shirt collar,
wood dust sticks to my fingers.

When I open the door in the morning,
he can barely hold his head up
and his left hand,
curled inward like a newborn
from his arthritis, bleeds.
As I pick wood splinters from his cuts,
I ask,
What do you do all night?

I'm trying to eat my way to Heaven.
I let him rest through the day.
Two more neighbors file reports.

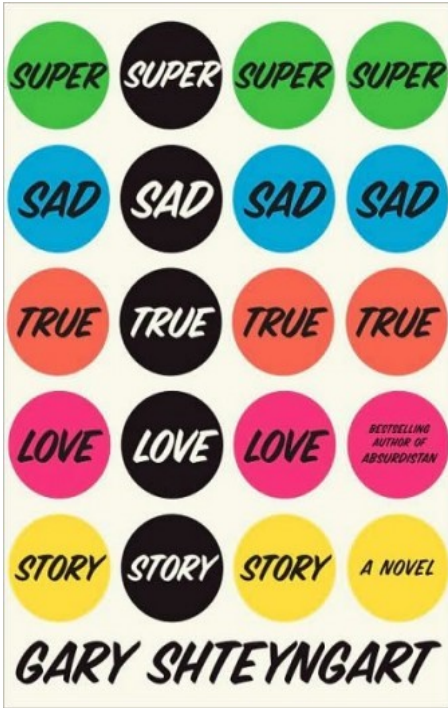
He sleeps for days after that.
When he wakes, the furrows in his olive skin
seem softer, his dark eyes clearer.
He tells me that an aged body needs bark.

Then he doesn't wake up at all.

The night after he dies,
I dream a tree unzips its limbs
with a great shudder,
and one by one,
Albert eats the branches
and becomes young again.

Super Sad True Love Story – Gary Shteyngart

Review by James Newlin



Perhaps it is best to start with the title. As with Dave Eggers’s career-making memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, the name of Gary Shteyngart’s new novel, *Super Sad True Love Story*, is less a Genettian threshold for the text than a half-serious contractual guarantee. As a love story, one can take Shteyngart at his word: the doomed May-December romance of Lenny Abramov and Eunice Park is certainly both super and super sad.

As a work of Pynchon-style satire, the title’s trueness is naturally less literal, though for plenty of readers—particularly those of a leftist persuasion—it’s no less resonant.

Shteyngart’s dystopian vision is set in a near future where the “overblown spire of the Freedom Tower” mangles the New York skyline, citizens are constantly monitored and monitoring one another on iPad-like devices called *äppäräti*, and where Lenny, the book’s protagonist, labors for the Post-Human Services department of an

enormous conglomerate, marketing actual immortality to the rich (here dubbed HNWI's, or High Net Worth Individuals). *Super Sad*'s portrait of an empire on the verge of collapse is filled with so many rich details that, as a reviewer, it is tempting just to list them. "Credit Poles" line the streets, broadcasting the credit rating of each passerby to every other passerby. Glued to their apparatus, characters are perpetually shopping for TotalSurrender panties, Onionskin jeans, and JuicyPussy cocktail dresses. The aversion to books (or "nonstreaming Media artifacts") by everyone except Lenny is so strong that characters gag at the pages' very smell; Lenny pitifully sprays his beloved collection of the Great Works with Pine-Sol in preparation for a visit from Eunice.

Shteyngart proved his gift for wordplay and invention in spades with his masterful debut, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (it was routinely compared to Nabakov). The *Handbook*'s follow-up, the flawless satire *Absurdistan*, was even better, and it is probably still his finest hour. *Absurdistan* skewers Halliburton and the collapse of Eastern Europe far more acidly than *Super Sad* takes on the death of (traditional) literacy and the new recession. But if *Super Sad True Love Story* is less dazzling than Shteyngart's first two books, that may be because it's far less delirious. *Absurdistan*'s Misha Vainberg, the 325-pound son of the 1,238th richest man in Russia, was an explosive, Rabelaisian creature, whereas Lenny Abramov is meek and bookish. *Absurdistan* began with Misha's hilariously inept free-styling ("I like ho's / Sniff 'em out / Wid my Hebrew nose"). By contrast, Lenny opens *Super Sad* confessing that "slightness is my curse in every sense," and finding a twin soul in the "unattractive but decent" Laptev from

Chekhov's novella *Three Years* (as opposed to, say, Ice-T). Still, though Lenny is a far more modest literary figuration than Misha, Shyeyngart grants him some sense of gravitas that is both recognizable to anyone who's ever been in love and unique to this particular apocalyptic nightmare: "For me to fall in love with Eunice Park just as the world fell apart would be a tragedy beyond the Greeks."

The dorky Lenny meets and becomes immediately enchanted with the "very young Asian Audrey Hepburn"-like Eunice at a party in Rome, though the bulk of their courtship takes place in New York City. In the near future, Staten Island is hipper than Manhattan, and Eunice is disappointed in Lenny's 740 square feet "atop a red-brick ziggurat" on the East River. But as she grows more comfortable with and more affectionate towards Lenny, *Super Sad* follows the example of any number of other Gotham love stories by becoming as much an ode to the city of New York as it is to romantic bliss:

Noah told me there's a day during the summer when the sun hits the broad avenues at such an angle that you experience the sensation of the whole city being flooded by a melancholy twentieth-century light, even the most prosaic, unloved buildings appearing bright and nuclear at the edge of your vision, and that when this happens you want to both cry for something lost and run out there and welcome the decline of the day.

Shteyngart, who teaches at Columbia, writes most lovingly of New York when Lenny speaks nostalgically about what is actually, for the reader, the present. As we also recognize details that are familiar because they are timeless (such as Lenny and Eunice's discomfort meeting

each other's parents) and others that are familiar because they are uncanny (such as the GlobalTeens stream, clearly modeled on Facebook) in a work of, technically speaking, science fiction, these poetic reminders of the Good Ol' Days of our own not-so-good days seem more chilling than wistful. Despite the novel's exaggerated images of this bleak future-world—from the chuckle-inducing brand-names to the riots in Tompkins Square Park—Shteyngart is a master of tone, deftly linking End Times-dread with romantic melancholia.

Similarly, post-modern goofiness is blended seamlessly with canonical heft: *Super Sad True Love Story* takes the mode of the epistolary novel as its structure, excerpting Lenny's handwritten diaries and Eunice's GlobalTeens emails and chats in alternating chapters. Considering the novel's concern with the extinction of print—I wonder if Kindle users are missing a joke that those of us clinging to our non-streaming media artifacts catch—it is surprising that Eunice's GlobalTeens sessions enchant in a way that Lenny's verbose, old fashioned diary entries do not. Shteyngart, who recently wrote a *New York Times* op-ed on the questionable virtues of the iPhone, fills his novel with a half-loathing, half-adoration for the omnipresent äppäräti, recalling Philip K. Dick's bemused treatment of technology. Yet if connecting to äppäräti disconnects the characters from actual human interaction, that same detachment works for the author's advantage. Though Shteyngart clearly sympathizes with Lenny's fetish for the written word, Eunice's typed ones make for the richer portrayal. The minimalist, Burgessian slang of Eunice's GlobalTeens messages and chatroom sessions leave enticing blanks that Lenny's loquacious diary entries always

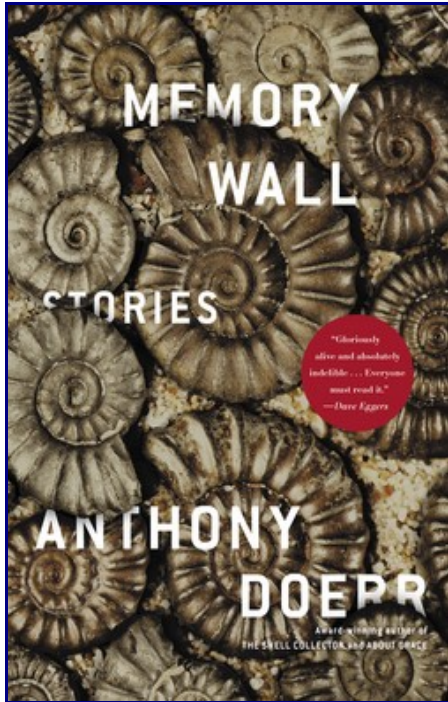
insistently fill in. Eunice remains a cipher, even as we're privy to her thoughts as she falls for Lenny, fears for her family's safety, and then must choose between the two following the events referred to as "The Rupture."

Here again Shteyngart can't help but invite comparisons to his masters, as he did in the opening of the novel by linking his protagonist to Chekhov's. One of *Super Sad True Love Story's* loveliest scenes takes place when, after their *äppäräti* cease working, Lenny reads to Eunice from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Skimming Milan Kundera's philosophical prologue, Lenny writes: "For Eunice's sake, I wanted him to get to the plot, to introduce actual 'living' characters—I recalled this was a love story—and to leave the world of ideas behind." It is a testament to Shteyngart's skill that the titular love story is never severed from the elaborately inventive world of ideas, but rather entangled with, enriching, and intensifying *Super Sad's* political homily. Shteyngart's great gift is his knack for making satire seem so *real*.

“Constantly and Continuously, the World Remade”

A Review of Anthony Doerr’s *Memory Wall*

by Matthew Martin



The worst that can be said about author Anthony Doerr is that he’s a man who cannot escape his loves. If anything, Doerr is hogtied to his passions: he adores science and distance, the limits of knowledge, precognition and the supernatural, geology and time. Like many of his protagonists, Doerr is a collector, a researcher, a writer-down, an author who clearly can’t stand not knowing things;

just as he researched conchology and clairvoyance in his first collection *The Shell Collector*, and hydrology and carcinology in his novel *About Grace*, here he studies cryptozoology and neurology, and more than anything else, memory.

Memory Wall is about memory’s ineluctable loss and methods of preservation. The collection contains four short

stories bookended by two novellas, and all deal with what and how we recollect. The novellas, where this theme is the strongest, are linked by their protagonists, two elderly women trying to “defy erasure” by saving what they can of their recollections; described in the latter story, they are “glowing atlases dragged into graves.” The collection begins with a quote by Luis Buñuel from his autobiography *My Last Sigh*, to a similar effect: “You have to begin to lose your memory...to realize that memory is what makes our lives... Without [our memory], we are nothing.”

As in *The Shell Collector*, these stories travel the globe, from Wyoming to Korea to China to Lithuania to Hamburg, ending up in Doerr’s hometown of Cleveland. The stories’ scope, also seen in the author’s geographically restless novel *About Grace*, best show Doerr’s principal strength: his ability to zoom in and out so well, with such deft rhythm.

Because the worst that can be said about Doerr is also the best: He has boundless curiosity and imagination—his stories textual outpourings of a mind spent with too many enthusiasms—and an ability to find within his farflung settings the intimate humanity of the inhabitants there. His stories flit through time seemingly heedless, Doerr choosing the most intimate and integral moments of his characters’ lives and illustrating them before jumping forward another three months, another half-year. Time in *Memory Wall* is often an antagonist, in the loss it signifies: as it moves forward without apology or hope of deterrence, it swallows what it takes with it. “What is memory anyway?” the narrator of the eponymous novella asks. “How can it be such a frail, perishable thing?”

That story, winner of the 2010 National Magazine Award for Fiction, began as an assignment for McSweeney's. The literary journal asked several writers to "travel somewhere in the world and imagine life there in 2024." Inspired as well by a study of memory by neuroscientist Terrence Sejnowski in John Brockman's *What We Believe but Cannot Prove* (and with similarities to Charlie Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*), Doerr chose Cape Town, South Africa, for his 2024 story of widow Alma Konachek. Alma keeps a wall of cartridges in her house, each containing a memory she can plug into her head, many having to do with her late husband Howard, a paleontologist, and his discovery of a "gorgon" skeleton. The story braids Alma's life with that of Luvo, a young man who sneaks into Alma's house to find the cartridge with the lucrative paleontological secret. Each of the two characters are racing, Alma to keep what she remembers, the young man to find the gorgon. Here, as in many of his stories, Doerr uses the tactic of suspense, letting dread paralyze his characters even as they push inexorably onward.

The story is beautifully written, deeply imbued with poeticism and concern for the emotional reality of its characters. Memory emerges ubiquitous: Early in the story, Alma visualizes it as "Water in a vase, chewing away at the stem of roses. Rust colonizing the tumblers in a lock. Sugar eating at the dentin of teeth, a river eroding its banks. Alma could think of a thousand metaphors, and all of them were inadequate." Even as Luvo excavates Alma's memories in their cartridges, he tries to remember his own, being a fifteen-year-old orphan with few glimpses of his past.

Doerr recently stated in an interview that “the path to the universal is through the individual. Only through the smallest details, through the sights and smells and sounds of one person’s moment-by-moment experience, can a writer convey the immensity that is a human life.” In “Village 113,” a Chinese hamlet is scheduled to be flooded by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. The story, far from a political statement, is a study of the difficulty of retaining familial bonds: a seed-collecting mother wishes to stay in the village instead of being relocated to a far-away city to live with her son, a dam engineer who quietly attempts to persuade her to leave. Again, memory is key: the woman feels she is being asked to forsake the wealth of her memory for her son, to move someplace foreign and sterile, someplace to which she has no kinship, and so she remains as her village evacuates. Here reality becomes metaphor as memory “is a house with ten thousand rooms; it is a village slated to be inundated.”

Memory crops up everywhere: The very short (for Doerr) “The Demilitarized Zone” is a largely epistolary story about a son stationed at a garrison in South Korea and his letters to his father. Again, far from advancing an agenda on global politics, the story concentrates on the lives caught in these situations: During the son’s containment, his father and mother have separated, and the father struggles with how to be a two-way conduit of painful information, his son unaware of the separation, his wife unaware of the containment. Further, the father fights to reconcile his own father’s memories of the Korean War with his son’s being stationed there now.

“The River Nemunas” is about an orphaned fifteen-year-old girl named Allison who flies from Kansas to Lithuania to live with her grandfather. There, she befriends an old Russian woman who fishes with Allie on the Nemunas for a mythical sturgeon. The sturgeon becomes an allegory for her grandfather’s loss of memory—the more he claims it’s not there anymore, the harder she looks for it.

Memory is a precious and ephemeral privilege here, characters holding on to what their minds allow them to keep, and this is best shown in last story “Afterworld,” about Jewish refugee Esther Gramm in her final years, as she remembers her childhood orphanage friends and their escapes from Holocaust death camps. The story is informed by Doerr’s own grandmother’s battles with dementia, framed around Esther’s grandson struggling to document his grandmother’s memories as they slip away from her.

It’s in this last story that Doerr surprises with another of his habits, so often unrepresented in modern literary fiction, and that’s to write a positive ending where a positive ending is warranted, to not give in to dour inevitability or easy fatalism. Always at one with his themes, he closes “Afterworld” on a note of hope: as “every hour...all over the globe, an infinite number of memories disappear,...during that same hour, children are moving about, surveying territory that seems to them entirely new. They push back the darkness; they scatter memories behind like bread crumbs. The world is remade.”

Anthony Doerr has won three O. Henry Prizes, a Pushcart Prize, the New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award, the Rome Prize, has been anthologized extensively, and is a current Guggenheim Fellow who teaches at the Warren Wilson College in Boise, Idaho.

Contributors

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Tara Mae Schultz is a second year MFA poetry candidate at the University of Memphis. She is also the senior poetry editor for the award winning literary journal, *The Pinch*. She has work published or forthcoming in *Touchstone Literary Journal*, *Di Mezzo Il Mare*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Southern Women's Review*, and *Connotation Press*.

Burnt Bridge wishes to thank all our contributors that helped make this inaugural issue possible. We wish you all well in your future endeavors and hope you remain in close contact with us.