

WATER~STONE REVIEW



Water-Stone, known in alchemy as the Philosopher's Stone, was composed of the four elements of earth, fire, air, and water. The stone was supposed by alchemists to possess the property of changing base metals into gold, the most perfect of all metals. It was thought to combine within itself matter and spirit, or body and soul: a union of opposites in perfect harmony. *Water-Stone* connotes the dynamic, transformative power of literature, as well as the search for beauty and perfection at work in the hearts of aspiring writers. The logo type for *Water-Stone* is based on a hybrid of two ancient alchemic symbols: one for the amalgam of all elements, and the second for the element of water as a pure and dynamic force. The amalgam is a reference to the multigenre, interdisciplinary nature of the graduate writing program at Hamline University.

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Writing the Past in the Future: Memoir, Fictive Nonfiction, and Graphic Poetry

MARY CAPPELLO

Half in Shade: Family, Photography, and Fate

by Judith Kitchen

Coffee House Press, 2012, 198 pp., \$16, paper

Unbuilt Projects

by Paul Lisicky

Four Way Books, 2012, 192 pp., \$16.95, paper

Pee on Water

by Rachel B. Glaser

Publishing Genius Press, 2010, 143 pp., \$14.95, paper

I.

I looked at her for resemblance. A life is enormous . . .

Rachel B. Glaser, *Pee on Water* (36)

I can never get enough of other people's home movies even though some people find the experience about as interesting as listening to other people's dreams. I wonder if it's the fact of there being no narrative arc, or the sense of a missing or anonymous author combined with highly privatized imagery that puts people off? Where home movies are concerned, it's partly those elements of drift and surprise; accident and what-was-ness; acceleration and deceleration; inchoate desire batting about the edges of family ritual; or the strange mix of obligation, compulsion, and "hobby" that holds my attention and

keeps me rapt. Then there's the grain and stock of the film, and that envelope of soothing and precarious sounds: the flapping of the film's sprockets like the flipping clothespin on a Wheel of Fortune, the whir of a fan meant to keep the whole thing from blowing up or melting down, the tuning of the enterprise to the intermittent opening and closing of our eyes.

In an age of digitally-induced assurances of time going on and on and on, every home movie has a beginning and an end, even as most are incomplete, cut off mid-stream, badly spliced, and rife with gaps. I love watching home movies of my friends' lives: recently, one that featured an otherwise undocumented Russian Orthodox community center in New Jersey circa 1958; a frowning girl set alongside a sinister uncle's blooming rosebush circa 1962; a bow-bedecked girl who grows up to be a bull dyke wrestling rather than gliding with a swing set circa 1950; a boy sans siblings set in the same corner of the same room from 1955 to 1970 where he celebrates each birthday all to himself, graduating, across the years, from cupcake and candle to real cake and candles.

Home movies might chart how (mostly) father figures of yore saw the world or wished to, and there's nothing quite so intimate as watching such films with someone who is re-encountering his or her childhood this way, as if for the first time. But I also love watching the home movies of strangers; I'm one of those people who frames and displays old photographs from flea markets of people whom I know nothing about: two women in rolled-up sleeves and summer hats maneuver the prow of a skiff; two men in trench coats stand at the base of an immense waterfall smoking cigarettes; two girls swim in a pool the size of a bathtub cut from a square in a lawn. I suppose there's a pattern to my collecting that I've not been aware of till now: still life with same sex couple and body of water.

To go looking for ourselves in other people's documents isn't only about a yen to belong. It's part of a writerly ethos to discover a secret share inside territories of the unfamiliar. I'm reminded of the extreme instances of an experimental filmmaker who made an autobiographical film essay using the found footage of someone else's family movies that she pretended was her own, or an experimental fiction writer who decided one day that she was the reincarnated, drowned son of the avant-garde Russian composer Scriabin, through whom she hoped to birth both a new self and a new writing by claiming his family as her own.

Now it's true that some people *have* home movies and others don't; that some people have family photos and others none at all; that some people's family photos are more beautiful, original, and interesting than others—or is that really in the

eye of the beholder? It could even be argued that, where writing is concerned, it is sometimes advantageous to have nothing but a memory of a photo rather than the thing itself. But I think it is always the case that writing nonfiction entails the mining of an archive, whether the collection or document or evidentiary trace that drives our writing is made explicit or not.

The family of essayist and fiction writer Judith Kitchen left behind photos of astonishing beauty, and in her newest book, *Half in Shade: Family, Photography and Fate*, Kitchen guides us through an album of her own making in which the still photos, borne aloft by her gracefully calibrated voice, *move*. *Half in Shade* makes a new kind of home movie in prose, thus fulfilling Kitchen's stated desire in the book's prologue: "I wanted my words to set things in motion" (xii). Kitchen's invitation to look with her at the images she has gathered—a journey of seeking and finding or failing to find—is irresistible, and the company of her assuredly meditative voice makes a reader want to respond in kind. *Half in Shade* glows with a kind of inspirational energy that will make this book eminently teachable (A cadre of fascinating companionate memoirs or quasi-memoirs built from photographs comes readily to mind, and I'm already imagining a course that could include Sontag and Barthes' famous work on photography, alongside David Shields' *Remote*, Larry Sutin's *A Postcard Memoir*, W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, and Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip*, to name a few.).

I've said that the photos in *Half in Shade* are particularly fine. In some cases, though snapshots, they feel formally like works of art. But I have to wonder if half the beauty is the effect of Kitchen's judicious choices and canny aesthetic placement: there is nothing arbitrary here; certain photos suggestively or poignantly rhyme with others in the book, and the book as a whole unfolds like a deftly woven quilt. *Half in Shade* was ten years in-the-making, Kitchen explains at the outset. Divided into three major sections, each of which closes with a meditation on illness and mortality, uncertainty and certainty, the book draws not only on photographs but on letters and diaries, journals, and a yellowing scrapbook belonging mostly to Kitchen's deceased parents, whose families migrated Midwest and West from Germany and England. Curiously, Kitchen admits to having never taken a photograph in her life; instead, she has made an experimental documentary in which words and images neither seek to support one another nor jockey for attention, but together, and in tandem, achieve a composite art.

It's as though Kitchen takes the photos, already developed, into the contemporary Dark Room of her words, exposing them to sound and memory and wonder,

to verb tense, and to vistas made possible by language. In some cases, she restores a photo's surrounding world, granting it a before or after, but in doing so she neither completes nor explains it. Words and images instead create counterpoints to one another that question the limits of each representational mode, just as both are, in a sense, poured through the sieve of this writer's memory, ever with the hope of conjuring connection. In one photo, for example, her "father's yard [is] laid out in tidy rows: corn and carrots and onions and beets," which Kitchen interprets as the "handwriting of a generation" (51). Turning the photo in the direction of her prose, she finds her own work an analogous, field-like plain at end of day: "Now there is only the page—and the way the day stops at the brink of it" (51).

Not all of the photos that Kitchen treats and gathers here are of her family or are drawn from their archive, and even when they are, part of what haunts them is their anonymity. Late in the book, for example, an otherwise ordinary snapshot comes to life in Kitchen's gloss of it. A woman possibly dressed for church leans like "a Tower of Pisa" over daisies she's "clearly tied up so they won't fall down" (165). In Kitchen's hands, the photo serves as a commentary on the relationship between composure and composition, or the difference between writing ourselves and righting ourselves. Photography as a medium secures our being-in-time; language, on the other hand, risks our disassemblage once again:

Whoever she may be, she's all suited up, waiting for me. And what am I to make of her caught as I am in a time of my own? She's clearly not art. And not memory. She signifies absolutely nothing except that someone once put her dead center and let the angles right themselves around her living name (165).

Other photographs happened into the archive accidentally, as in the case of an image of an elderly couple that mistakenly appeared when the digitized compilation of Kitchen's family album was returned to her. An image of male SS officers and female auxiliaries from the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum hamming it up before the camera in a moment of afternoon merriment threatens to make the album fall entirely apart, and some readers might decide that this particular photo is asked to do too much work. Kitchen's text seems keen to normalize the crew and incite our identification with their ordinariness, but too much rides on the photo's out-of-place-ness. No matter whether this particular image does too little or too much work inside the book's otherwise delicate weave, it revalues the memoirist as an archivist who devises an unanticipated ordering system.

The attempt to create a humanly available “we” in the name of an ostensibly or presumed “I”-driven genre is at the heart of *Half in Shade*, and the success of Kitchen’s effort is palpable in the way she makes the photos available to our own investigation, surprise, puzzlement, or delight. Rather than lay claim to the photos culled from her family’s albums as part of a private lexicon, her presentation of them as one part conundrum, one part revelation (half in shade) invites us to read the photos along with her, or even—why not?—to make them our own. The cover photo alone, which she titles, “Young Woman on Fence,” is one such stunning opportunity: it’s so arresting, outlandish, and formally perfect—so startling a portrait of a place and of a person, you’d think it derived from Robert Frank’s *Americans* rather than from Kitchen’s mother’s photo album. Kitchen’s own reading of this image of a woman with mud-smeared hands, dressed in a suit and tie, perched atop a fence atop the spare tire she has apparently changed, is nothing short of poetry, but my point is that her prose both reads the photo and makes it wondrously available to our gaze:

The tire is an O, a zero, an egg. The day revolves around it. Oh, we exclaim, as it cuts across the great equal sign of the rails. Oh, we say, she is both man and woman, balanced at the cusp of what she might be (68).

An available gift rather than an indulgence, *Half in Shade* gives us a photo like “Classroom with Landscape,” which, like “Woman on Fence,” we might need days and months and years to ponder. Apparently a standard group shot of a classroom of girls, the photograph focuses on the faces of two girls in particular (Kitchen’s aunt, Margaret, an American studying German, and a childhood friend named Martha whose friendship with Margaret endured through adulthood). The other students are, literally, blurs to these two and their joyously contemplative sphere; the other children are pillars and posts posed by the photographer, I’ve decided, to make the light fall bounteously on these two. Margaret holds something proudly before her on her desk—a figurine? a bell? a thing she has made in school or a thing she’s been given there? a prize? Kitchen doesn’t say, as though she’s missed that detail, and that’s half the point: the photograph’s beginnings and endings exceed its placement, and *Half in Shade* continuously opens to our regard.

Light depends on shade; revelation obscures as much as it reveals, so this book’s progression is a deepening into darkly cavernous themes of floods,

cancer, and bequeathings. Significantly, the family photos are not merely brought to light but saved from a flood by a mother who “set to work scouring the sediment that [had] settled in the teacups, washing the curtains and bedspreads, throwing away soggy carpets and warped drawers” (144). Kitchen looks beyond the outdoor light of a photo to its hinted-at inner sanctum just as, alongside her aunt’s bright innocence, she imagines “the shadow of a cancer that will kill her” (34), the present but invisible cell “locked in her ovary—the one that has not yet released one egg” (34). As the book continues to drop its plumb-line in, we arrive eventually, too, at its author’s cancer and the complex reconsideration of photography that it affords. In cancer’s realm, to be pictured is tantamount to being shot through with radiation. In cancer’s wake, to be left with family photos of kin one did not know and does not recognize is one thing; not finding the self one thought one knew in the mirror, transformed by disease and its treatments, is another: “You did not expect to encounter yourself like this,” Kitchen writes, “The stark expression. The round-eyed stare. The head that curves, baby round, into the crook of your upraised arm . . . How can you not laugh at how you resemble a plant in the mirror? A dandelion gone to seed, to be precise . . .” (127/129).

Kitchen faces herself here in photos and in metaphor, in the frames of sentences and of mirrors; simultaneously, she faces a nothingness that transforms life’s finitudes—our only way of making meaning—into humbling gifts: “How dare you sit underneath this window and look out at a flat white sky and imagine yourself gone on into its limitlessness?” she chides. “Limit yourself, then. Limit yourself to the books that you love, the words you have written—the ones you still own . . . Touch your face, as though it were unfamiliar. Learn what it is that you are, now that you’ve made yourself up” (61).

II

If there weren't such strict rules of science, I would visit the dead world.

Rachel B. Glaser, *Pee on Water* (36)

In the opening pages of Paul Lisicky’s newest collection of prose pieces, *Unbuilt Projects*, we encounter the following line: In Palo Alto, “wholeness [was] the lie we always suspected it was, and we could finally get down to the business of motion, of making ourselves up again” (3). Both Kitchen’s and Lisicky’s new

collections are about making themselves up and making new forms: Kitchen, out of the pictures and scrapbooks bequeathed her; Lisicky, out of the stories he was told and his family's ways of telling them. If Kitchen's subject is the photos that remain, Lisicky's is the types of narrative that define, hold, and trap us: the life sentences—"I wanted to be more than that sad little nothing. I wanted to roll in the grass with the animals" (24); the bits and pieces of remembered scenes out of which we forge a mythology of the self—the horror/fairytale of childhood. The mud of flood in *Half in Shade* or the specifically Minnesotan mud on Kitchen's androgynous girl's hands morph in Lisicky's book into "piss" and "dung," "mud" and "shit;" into "snow" (that the "sky shat" [88]) into which one sinks with a hapless mother at the wheel of a car; into "muck" out of which a self is "pulled" until the "light in [him] gushed forth" (5).

The nonfiction writer in these books is required to play both Adam and god. Shit, in *Unbuilt Projects* (whether it be the poop left by a boy in the bushes for his playmates to see, or the interesting configuration of a dog's droppings—"stones, a paste of chewed leaves, used charcoal," 57), provides a kind of primordial mortar to build with, but also to emerge from. Who am I now? What have I become? From what did I grow? How does any of us gush forth from the muck and murk to make from it, or for ourselves, some clarity? "In light of our beginnings," I imagine *Unbuilt Projects* asking, "how does any of us manage to become something other than Swamp Thing?" Many of the tales in *Unbuilt Projects* are about the ways that people lead the narrator into or out of knowledge, or into and out of predicament. The stories, in turn, invite us "inside the shadows where the mud was soft like pumpkin" (26).

Both *Half in Shade* and *Unbuilt Projects* are collections, even curations of a sort, assembled pieces. A reader can move between and among their episodes and parts as though wandering with Mussorgsky from one room to another at an exhibition, not of pictures, but of home movies in which we glimpse a family's fault lines with or without soundtrack, or in which a splice opens a gap in time. The writer forages here for repressed matter, profiles cut out at the margins, or long-lost saturation points of color. It's a glorious thing to find a writer as important to the field of nonfiction as Kitchen reclaiming "memoir" as something other than a dirty word. We needn't pander to the way the term figures in the Pop marketplace as tell-all truth serums of trauma and redemption. Most serious writers know that, at its best and, originally, the genre that emerged as "memoir" in the U.S. at the end of the 20th century was meant to

distinguish itself from conventional autobiography, simultaneously taking nothing for granted about the place where a parent's memory, say, ends, and a child's begins. If the nature of memory and remembering is what memoir at its best constantly re-theorizes, we could categorize *Unbuilt Projects* as a memoir, too.

That *Unbuilt Projects* is categorized as "fiction" might give us pause. Four Way Books publishes poetry and fiction, which might explain this label, but not entirely. Not wholly "fictional" but *fict-ive*, the short prose pieces that comprise *Unbuilt Projects* are autobiographical meditations that reserve the right to have fictional elements, or that reserve the right to invite in a phantasmagoric or oneiric substrate: a mother who gives birth to a duck; an oak that sags through a kitchen ceiling; boys at their grandmother's funeral "[flying] about the rafters, safe there, like mice with wings on their backs" (82).

Subsequently, Lisicky's allowance of the fictive into the nonfictional beautifully complicates the status, and the stasis, of the nonfictional "I." In Kitchen's book, the decision to move between pronouns, from *I* and *you* to *we* and *they* and *she*, occasionally induces confusion that might prevent a reader from following or immersing in the prose. Sometimes I had to reread passages in order to determine who was being referenced and what relationship these persons had to Kitchen. Granted that an intermeshing of subject positions is partly what's at stake in Kitchen's book, one still needs to know who is who in the familial matrix for the book's affective intensities, attachments, and withdrawals to make sense. The clearly fictive brush-strokes in Lisicky's prose arrangements, on the other hand, encourage a reading of nonfiction in which the "I" of the prose can be understood as a product of the writing rather than its antecedent.

Freed from having to connect the dots between pronouns and their real-life referents, a reader gets to watch what happens when the writing's "I" assumes now one mantle, now another. Late in the book, a section titled, "Face," reads as the consummately sentient, rye, and poignant culmination of Lisicky's unbuilt project, and it is told from the point of a view of a dog. "I'd love to pull you all the way down to the bay till the leash blisters your hand" (93) the dog tells his owner. Knowing he's coming to the end of his life, the dog speaks from some future place. "Still, it's not exactly heaven," the dog muses:

I miss a piping cold morning: the hard divide between day and night. (That's the payback for never having to die again, this middling state where the light stays the same). And the food's a little wholesome. I'd give anything to come upon a dropped frankfurter (*not* hot dog), seasoned with pencil shaving, cobweb, and rock salt. But nothing was ever perfect. As always, we make the best of our lot (93).

Something happens in the voice, and perfectly wrought imagery—"Our lungs are large, as open as suitcases" (93), says the dog; in the brilliantly intoned wants of the dog; and in the imagined scenario of the dog and his human that has not been available between the people in the book—especially parents and their children—as if the feeling sought by the boy in so many of childhood's interrupted journeys is finally felt and given form.

The literary marketplace demands that we name what we are doing according to an ever-narrowing suite of categories, and the search engines and finder's guides of the contemporary moment are bound to render invisible all those targets that fall short of their arrows: invented forms. *Half in Shade* is, aesthetically speaking, a form of prayer best placed in the company of Zen koans, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Doris Grumbach. *Unbuilt Projects* is a collection of interior monologues and, in some instances, prose poems that require suspensions of disbelief. But it is also exactly what its title says it is—a collection of unbuilt projects that theorize themselves as such.

An epigraph from the work of Lydia Davis is immediately telling: "The house does not seem big enough to hold all the people who keep appearing in it at different times," leaving us to wonder if an unbuilt project could actually be more capacious than a finished home. Working inside of short forms, Lisicky's unbuilt projects are nevertheless roomy; they are testaments to what language in the right hands can do if the "city [is] already ruined" (25) and you have to dream the landscape back into being.

Numerous unbuilt projects literally haunt the book: for example, a childhood science project that warranted an F for daring to imagine a future rather than establish proof of the dictums of the past. Lisicky's answer to Mr. Science is a type of storytelling with admittedly missing parts—those bits a reader would wish to fill in to finish the story and finish off a personality: "he finally did escape the body," the narrator remarks of a young lover who habitually harmed himself, "though not in the way you're thinking" (41). People have died in tragic circumstances, including the writer's uncle and namesake, Paul, his mother's twin, but he's not going to give the details—even though "you probably know his ending had something to do with a car" (17). Dramatic, traumatic imperatives sapped the childhood imagination and drained the landscape of color and life. "Then wires were just wires, birds were annoyances," the narrator laments, "and the lake on the other side of the trees was only something you could drown in" (28). *Unbuilt Projects* fills the drowning

lake back in with a bay rebuilt as “Just a blue tranquil mirror intended to lengthen and stretch” (54).

Unbuilt projects are stories Lisicky chooses not to finish because completed stories are doomed to repeat themselves—“If only that were the end, and the story didn’t insist on telling itself again” (9), the narrator remarks in a segment called “The Boy and His Mother are Stuck!” Unbuilt projects are the fragmented stories that a mother tells after dementia has compromised her ability to remember, breaking through decorum; they’re the space between the way we tell stories and the way we write them; and they’re the things we make or fail to make after someone has died.

We’ve all been startled at one time or other by the sudden understanding that a poetic “stanza” is a room, but I’d never really thought about the fact that houses are literally made of “stories” until reading Lisicky. Following the death of his father’s mother, Lisicky and his brothers were relieved to hear him talking about “putting on an extra story to the house. Maybe even building a maze in the backyard” (82). The father never built these things, but they were fantasized as consolatory. When, in the end, the children feel “cheated out of something large,” however, it’s not these unbuilt projects but the father’s large love for his mother, larger than the love he showed their mother, and perhaps, his boys. *Unbuilt Projects*, poignantly, is also a collection of mourning songs without end, written by Lisicky for his mother, in lieu of adding another finished story to the family house.

And yet for all of the beautifully inventive shape-shifting that we find in both *Half in Shade* and *Unbuilt Projects*, each circles around the same domestic conundrum amounting to preoccupation, a kind of indissoluble content that even the most adventurous life-writing apparently falls heir to. Not the piano recital as ur-scene of childhood success or failure, though it was strange to find that trope operating in both. What persists as a hiccup is an emphasis on mothers as ciphers whom children need fill.

Half in Shade is punctuated by an unusually long segment on a diary that Kitchen’s mother kept in which she documented a trip to Europe between the World Wars. The idea of trying to imagine a parent’s being-in-time long before s/he brought us into being, or long before we grew to be the person who would read them, is on a par with all that is poetic in *Half in Shade*. But one is hard-pressed to know what is to be gained by bemoaning one’s mother’s emptiness, or in Kitchen’s mother’s case, her lack of an interior life, according to Kitchen. “I have the impulse

to give her more than she seems to have given herself" (88); her diary is filled with lifeless lists (92); her mother is a "cliché" (93); her mother lacked desire or hid her desire or gave up desire once she married. Her daughter will give her "the romance [she] felt she hungered for" by seeking and finding a mystery lover named "Trueheart" inside her mother's diary (106).

In Lisicky, mothers "ache" and "starve"; they are archetypically, not merely individually, unfulfilled as sketched in a segment titled, "Mothers in Trees":

Most often we rush beneath them, thinking only of the rabbits who bounce away when they see us coming. But raise your head sometime. Whole households live up there, old mothers, young mothers, in-between mothers, always watching, always making sure we wear our windbreakers, or rinse our cups, or douse the fires we start in the marshes. Every once in a while one comes down in the form of a bear, and we hide inside our bathrooms, trembling as she looks for sweets in our trash (96).

I suspect that all people have inner lives, be they mothers or not, and that our mothers, those humans, desire, in fact, without our company or our approval. Thus, we're left with the question of why these richly investigative and wholly original books turn in the direction of the not-good-enough-mother, or absent mother, or mother as site of our projections about desire, half-empty or half-full. Are we back at the ground zero of woman-as-lack, as hole or whole?

The question this raises for creative nonfiction generally is an even harder one that each of us might want to ask. I'm wondering when, or better, if, we ever stop writing about our parents and start to write the extra-familial in life-writing's name? Can the reach of autobiographical narratives extend beyond the confines of the domestic unit and the crib?

Lisicky conjures a fantasy of a parent getting a phone call of his death in an airplane accident; Kitchen's fantasy is from the point of view of an adult, but it seems analogous: it's of her grandchildren looking at photos of her after she is gone and trying to imagine her youth. When I was a child, I would occasionally play dead, hoping my breathless body would get a rise out of my mother. Gazing at family photos of my deceased relatives, I, too, have imagined how or if others will receive the trace of my ghost on celluloid, how little their recipient will know of who the girl in the photo once was, and how little or much she got to know herself. If we write about our parents more than we write about our friends, or better yet, strangers, maybe it's because parents are expected to return our gaze; they're expected to have something to give us, and we regret it

when they don't or can't, when, according to the Freudian dictum, all they've given is the life we owe them but can never repay.

III

A family runs at different intervals, though a family tree would have you believe everyone stays, waiting the whole thing out.

Rachel B. Glaser, *Pee on Water* (30)

There's a street not far from the funky neighborhood in which I live (the "Armory District" on Providence's West Side) made up of converging apexes where the city plans to install an outdoor fountain, maybe to invoke the *piazze* of Italy. I don't know if people will gather at the fountain as they do in the mother country, or if it will encourage Providence's citizens to saunter and stroll, because the streets that it straddles are a postmodern mish-mash of styles and modes. To one side of the future site of the public fountain, some of the city's original 18th century cobblestones pave the street where a 1950's style "soda fountain" still exists, advertising "cabinets" (the local word for "milkshakes") on its faded sign. To the other side, a tiny, swank restaurant offers a bento box menu amid faux *art nouveau* murals of mermaids fishing for pearls, while a few doors down from this, a storefront missing its store advertises, in broad daylight, for those willing to notice it, the kind of club that is fictionalized in *The Sopranos*. In another old store front where a corner grocer used to be, I recently encountered the extraordinary work of Rachel B. Glaser. She was reading in this newly designated art-space in local poet Kate Schapira's Publicly Complex Reading Series to a small audience of Providence regulars, and to various passersby who exited as quickly as they entered (at least two people came in off the street, ate some of the free potato chips and homemade chocolate chip cookies, then left, while another mistook the venue for the meeting place of the neighborhood chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous). Discovery is grand, whether what we unexpectedly encounter is an old home movie or a new writer.

Glaser picks up where the young Lisicky's unbuilt science project, "What Life will be like in the 21st century," leaves off.

"William felt for his cellphone because there was a noise it had to make" (99). "He pushed his burning Powerbook from his lap. Running windows on a MAC made him love the anonymity of windows" (98-99). William is a medical student in one of Glaser's stories ("Infections"), who can't study because "the

internet is so distracting” (97): “He mixed up mentencephalon and myelencephalon. Whenever he heard pancreas he thought about pancakes. I’ve been dizzy. Studying makes me dizzy” (97). When William’s medical school essay based on the idea that “sometimes being sick is interesting” (95) earns a failure, he assumes it is because “the paper must have been in the completely utterly totally incorrect font. Maybe eyes wouldn’t have been able to comprehend the font, maybe. Possibly it was just a wrong font” (100). His conclusions about illness are uncannily original. Studying his own infection, he reflects that, “His body had made something that needed him . . . His body had made him something” (100), and this yields the idea for his thesis on illness as “a creative capability of the body” (95), an idea no medical textbook can afford to entertain.

Pee on Water’s publisher, Publishing Genius Press out of Baltimore, publishes poetry, fiction, microfiction, and my favorite category, “other.” *Pee on Water* is listed as “fiction,” but it poses similarly interesting generic challenges as *Half in Shade* and *Unbuilt Projects*. I’d describe *Pee on Water* as graphic poetry, with or without images. It’s a prose that gave me a feeling I don’t think I’ve ever had while reading another book. I felt as though I were watching sentences produce animations but without their accompanying drawings (they weren’t necessary). Words and sentences give rise to figures with uncommon life in them, sometimes on the order of cartoons and other times on the order of clay-mation figures. The opening story, “The Magic Umbrella,” is a sort of adult fairytale in which fire is imagined as a creature made of sticks who “walks with a snapping sound,” extinguishes himself in the ocean, and says things like, “I have two styles . . . on fire, or just sticks” (4). The ocean, too, is suddenly, disarmingly, charmingly new in Glaser’s hands. Tinged with delightfully insightful registers, a mode I’ll call “a philosophy of innocence” runs through Glaser’s book:

The ocean always seemed capable of teaching a lesson, but really it was just busy water. It didn’t know you from anyone. It had never walked the streets. It hadn’t started out a baby or gone to school. The sea had a lot living in it, a lot riding on it, but really it just washed itself, and sounded independent (6).

From virtual reality dating, the search for love in a techno-wilderness, and a reality video game that traps its lonely user into assassinating John Lennon for a second time (“The Jon Lennin Xperience”), to a story about a family’s ritual creation of totem monuments to a dying grandmother (“The Totems are

Grand"); from the inner life of a teenage boy who has gotten his girlfriend pregnant ("Doodle Face"), to a heady meditation on the ousting of originals by copies or "covers" ("Iconographic Conventions of Pre- and Early Renaissance Italian Representations of the Flagellation of Christ"); from a Hopperesque (both Dennis and Edward) sci-fi soliloquy on loneliness ("The Sad Girlfriend"), to a tale told from the vantage point of outer space ("The Monkey Handler"), we arrive at the title story: a *tour de force* that recounts the history of the world in five pages, charting evolution in terms of the first chocolate factory, the first personal ad, and the invention of the flush toilet. "Pee on Water" is marked by the same de-familiarizing illuminations that characterize other tales in the book but compressed into a kind of list poem in prose that riffs on the keynotes by which one might describe the history of the world: "Two people say the same thing at the same time and laugh"; "Dust gathers between VCR remote buttons"; "Every famous person born finds the time to die"; "The newspaper isn't on paper"; "Scientists are still trying to make pain less painful"; and the now everyday but, retrospectively, odd moment in which "Everyone begins to pee on water" (140).

Pee on Water paints the interiors of lives people tread inside i-Pods, telling us it's not *all* virtual. In a style both sly and sardonic, fantastical and surreal, this emerging writer reinvents the world in ways that make me want to see her read alongside Lydia Davis, Angela Carter, and Bruno Schulz. Glaser even offers a dark and bracing, humorous critique of parenthood: "It gives you a little high. But then it gets tired. It keeps going and going. You go to sleep and they're alive. You wake up, they're alive. Even later when you die, they're still alive" (109).

In the future-present of Glaser's tales, point of view can be changed by "pressing the select button, but usually [it] was locked" (18); human beings are described as "pixeled and low quality" (103); and god is a sorting mechanism that out-Google Google using "her patented PageRank technology" (48-49). *Pee on Water* is writing that is ready for a world in which Michael Jackson is set to go on tour as a projection manufactured by a Victorian-era technology easily confused with a hologram, and in which Tupac already has. A world in which the structures of kith and kin, by which we understand the family and the self will require rewriting in ways we can't even begin to imagine. A world in which authorship might be tantamount to the groups of strangers who design video game software, "the meaningless names of animators, assistants, advisors, interns, actors,

researchers, archivists, singers, fabricators, programmers, designers, musicians, producers, lawyers” (27), and in which reviews such as this will cease to exist, too. Because isn’t it just a matter of time before new repetitions oust reading and responding as we once knew it? “She checks g-mail. She checks g-mail. She checks g-mail” (85).

In what sense will photographs and family stories “remain”? It is certain that both will change according to the apparatuses available for reading them, for sorting and finding them, for hearing and transmitting them, for telling them. “The world has already ended,” the narrator of “The Sad Girlfriend” remarks, “It ended when Chris Columbus peed on land. When Jesus died and everyone got obsessed with him. In 2000 when everything was going to fuck up and then nothing fucked up at all” (87). The world as we know it may be coming to an end, but a new world in writing begins. Either we await a writing, or we make a writing, that can meet the predicaments of the present, while imagining our future’s pasts.

