Two Poems by Kathleen Ossip

The Facts

The facts sit in an ordinary room. They resemble people: stubborn and without imagination.

The facts begin to chatter: Better days coming, better days coming. They arrange themselves in the shape of a lie.

They're cheating: they only work in the past tense.

They fake objectivity. They decide unanimously.

For example, what do you call that white pointed cylinder generated by the roof on freezing days?

Hang-ice? I say.

Facts say wrong.

The facts await their moment.

In my early years, I didn't think meadows came at a cost. There are no turnstiles or box offices at the edges of a meadow.

The facts told me different. They used the word *property*. And I resented them!

Handle them: they have an activating feel.

The facts dispose like people.

They can mute us. And we can mute them.

Marriage

So much for the fighting
and the sex,
I want to be alone
with you in the next room.

Letter from Lafayette Square

Lawrence Jackson

One Sunday in February my mom telephones at eight in the morning to remind me that the bishop of Maryland is coming to Saint James at Lafayette Square, the African American Episcopal church where I was baptized and confirmed. There will be a single service at nine thirty. I debate the shower and then don the uniform that hangs on the back of the chair: pants and a sweater with a shirt inside it. My boy Nathaniel rises easily, despite having even less reason to be keen than I had at his age. In my high school class there were a dozen regulars; younger children were taught in the basement of the church, and the upper grades were instructed in a row house on Lafayette Avenue, on the border of Sandtown. Today, he is often the lone Sunday school student in his grade. Most of the time, he sits by my side for the service.

My younger son, Mitchell, remained with his mother in Georgia when I returned to Baltimore with Nathaniel after our divorce. Our new life is in a stone cottage in Homeland, one of the city's prestige neighborhoods, which was carved out of the estate of a slaveholding family named Perine in 1922 by the Roland Park Company. Homeland's quarter-acre lots and neo-Georgian houses were near

I love the Lord, who heard my cry, and pitied ev'ry groan.
Long as I live, and troubles rise
I'll hasten to his throne.

I am one of only a few people familiar with the melody. When the melancholy carol ends, we gather our wraps to leave. This testament for my apotheosis is safeguarded in my billfold. Still I whisper to my son, "This is my funeral song." He will know.

Christopher Kondrich

Floodwaters Carry Coal Ash into the Cape Fear River

because of a breach in the dam that was meant to keep them
in. That was the idea, at least. Keeping

is always the idea. Also, stockpiling.
As the stockpiled coal ash is swept from its basins

at the Duke Energy plant near Wilmington,
fish start feeding on it by puncturing

the surface of the river from below.
Pinching the surface like a tissue and pulling down

on morsels of coal ash containing the arsenic
and boron, mercury and lead that are left

after coal is burned. The ash looks edible,
drifting there. It just has to fit between their lips

for the fish to consider it food, absorb it
into their flesh like a vowel. What they don't eat

is carried off by the current. We all live downstream,
though some live more downstream than others.

That is where the coal ash is headed, not somewhere
but to you who are farther downstream

than me. Every ounce of ash I let pass by,
I let pass by. It will soon reach you

as it has been and is reaching you now.
You cannot send it back upstream.

The current is one-sided. It won't listen.

Exhaling

Emmanuel Carrère

The Others

Around me are fifty or so men, in whose company I will sit and be silent for ten days. I eye them discreetly, wondering who among them is going through a crisis. Who, like me, has a family. Who's single, who's been dumped, who's poor or unhappy. Who's emotionally fragile, who's solid. Who risks being overwhelmed by the vertigo of silence. All ages are represented, from twenty to seventy, I'd say. As to what they might do for a living, it's also varied. There are some readily identifiable types: the outdoorsy, vegetarian high school teacher, adept of the Eastern mystics; the young guy with dreadlocks and a Peruvian beanie; the physiotherapist or osteopath who's into the martial arts; and others who could be anything from violinists to railway-ticketing employees, impossible to tell. All in all, it's the sort of mix you'd find at a dojo, say, or in any of the hostels along the Way of Saint James. Since the Noble Silence, as it's called, hasn't yet been imposed, we're still allowed to talk. As night begins to fall, very early and very black behind the misty windowpanes, I listen to the conversations of the little groups that have formed. Everything revolves around what

awaits us in the morning. One question comes up again and again: "Is this your first time?" I'd say about half the group are new, and half are veterans. The former are curious, excited, apprehensive, while the latter benefit from the prestige that comes with experience. One little guy reminds me of someone, but I can't say whom. Since I'm a negative sort of person, my attention focuses on him. With a pointed goatee and a wine-toned Jacquard sweater, he's annoyingly smug in the role of the smiling, benign sage, rich in insights into chakra alignment and the benefits of letting go.

North Korea?

Vipassana sessions are the commando training of meditation. Ten days, ten hours a day, in silence, cut off from everything: hard-core. On the forums, a lot of people say they were satisfied with, and sometimes even that they were transformed by, such a demanding experience. Others denounce these sessions as a sort of sectarian indoctrination. The place is like a concentration camp, they say, and the daily meeting a form of brainwashing, with no room for discussion, to say nothing of disagreement. North Korea. The duty of silence, the isolation, and the poor nutrition demean the participants and turn them into zombies. What's more, leaving is forbidden, no matter how bad you feel. No, defenders argue, if you want to go you can go, no one's stopping you, it's just strongly discouraged. Above all, the participants themselves commit to staying until the end. I was intrigued but not put off by such discussions: I feel immune to sectarian indoctrination, I'm even curious about it. "Come and see," Christ said to those who had heard all sorts of contradictory rumors about him, and that still seems to be the best policy: come and see, with as little prejudice as possible, or at least being aware of whatever prejudices you have.

A *Zafu* in Brittany

I've been married two times, and both times I made albums of family photos. Then, when you separate, you never know where these albums will end up. The children look at them with nostalgia, because they show the time when they were little, when their parents loved each other like they should, when things hadn't yet gone wrong. My first wife, Anne, and I spent the summer holidays

power in the entire region had been cut by a disaster and we risked being attacked by zombie farmers at any moment. I sat in the front next to the driver. He was a stocky guy around my age with a mustache and a friendly face, who didn't stop talking the whole way and from whom I learned, for starters, of the deaths of the cartoonists Cabu and Wolinski. Cabu and Wolinski! Cabu and Wolinski who'd been part of my adolescence, when Emmanuel Guilhen and I read *Charlie Hebdo*. Cabu and Wolinski whom I'd since lost sight of, as I'd lost sight of all my teenage friends, as I'd lost sight of Emmanuel Guilhen. And I don't know what astonished me the most: to learn that Cabu and Wolinski had been murdered by Islamist terrorists, or to discover that they were both a good eighty years old. Another thing that was perhaps not astonishing but that surprised me all the same was the familiarity with which this taxi driver from the Morvan region talked not only about Cabu and Wolinski but also about the other murdered cartoonists, although I was learning only now both of their existence and of their death. Four days earlier he'd had no idea who they were, or what *Charlie Hebdo* was, for that matter. But now it was as if, retroactively, he'd been reading it all his life. As if, retroactively since his youth, he'd gone each week to buy it at the kiosk in the Migennes train station, where they put it aside for him. And he knew who Bernard Maris was as well. When I was about to ask how he knew so much when he hadn't turned on the radio since I'd gotten into the car, he was the one who politely suggested that we listen to it. Then, when he pushed the button, it was as if the whole event redoubled in enormity. Demonstrations were bringing together millions of people across France, forty-four foreign heads of state had come to take part in a huge unity march . . . Everyone, absolutely everyone in France, knew what had happened, with the exception of the hundred or so people I'd been one of not an hour earlier. The driver wasn't particularly surprised by my ignorance. He drove people to and from the *Vipassana* center from time to time, and their bizarre practices inspired in him neither suspicion nor mockery, as I would have expected. He knew more or less what meditation was and I could well imagine him talking about Patanjali with as much fervor as when he talked about Charb or Tignous, cartoonists who were also killed in the attack. When I remarked that I found it strange, all the same, to

Tadeusz Dąbrowski

Hilltop

Returning to the very same place,
let it be a hilltop
with a view of the night city

where once you used to be,
when your "whole life"
still lay ahead of you,
when everything was before.

Returning—when it's already after:
irrevocably, decisively.
What a strange feeling it is.

As if you had the gift of prophecy
in a world without time.

Translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones