Table Talk

"WHAT ARE you *doing* here?" the poet demanded.

It was a good question.

The reading had been interrupted by "a danger alarm," the student in charge of the university-owned townhouse explained. He seemed to feel this would reassure us. We should just stay seated while…

Several company's worth of firemen burst past him, many wielding medieval-style pikes and staffs. We made for the door, waiting on the sidewalk while the distant bell continued to toll.

The poet, who had been interrupted in mid-stanza, was understandably suspicious. She found out I did not write poetry myself and wondered what brought me to such a hermetically sealed event. Everyone else was either a colleague or student. They all seemed to know each other. I glimpsed the makings of a severe pecking order: grandees, priesthood, aspirants. Or so it seemed to an outsider.

"I like…poetry," I shrugged, managing to sound both ashamed and insincere.

Yet it's true. When I go to the library and cruise the stacks, it is poetry, not prose, I end up bringing home. Perhaps this is a simple act of self-preservation. If I really took in how many novels there are in the world, with hundreds more appearing on the shelves each week, I might legitimately question what I am doing, what I have to contribute by trying to tell yet another story. I think there is more to it, though. I think it has to do with poetry not being written in sentences. I deal with sentences in the tens of thousands. I am made dizzy by them. By the end of a book, I know each one, its history, its transformations. My brain teems with their rhythms, their placement, their brothers and sisters, their opposites. At the final rewrite I fantasize or fear I can recite them all, in addition to their rejected alternatives, the way a professional chess player reels off not only the moves but the analyzed variations, the near-infinite possibilities, of a recently completed game. Particularly a game he lost.

But in poetry the unit is the line, which strikes me as fundamentally different. In a line, words are suspended like particles. Their individual properties are revealed, their chemistry. Some pulsate like stars. Others vibrate in a magical stillness, flaunting their crystalline structure. When they do interact, there is not the rush of a sentence but two creatures encountering each other, unsure if they are the same species, or if the other is even alive at all. Given such space and weight, the words invite me to expand in a similar fashion. Instead of being swept along, my reading mind disengages, loses its sense of forward and back, reaches all around, exploring a hitherto unimagined space. Poetry is a way *in* for me, though to what or where I still can't say, which is why I keep coming back to it, hugging armfuls of slim volumes from the library's Newly Published section, turning the pages with far less certainty of what I will find than in most novels. Poems (some, not all) contain a nutrient my mind instinctively hungers for. They inform what I do.

Of course I told the poet none of this, which is why I am trying to explain it now. Other people came to talk to her. I drifted off. After half an hour, the bell stopped. We filed back in but took—why?—different seats. I found myself behind a young woman wearing a backless dress. The poet picked up where she left off. I stared into skin.

—Thomas Rayfiel

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A FEW YEARS ago, I enrolled in a one-day (lunch included) workshop with a Los Angeles–based bookbinder. Held in the instructor's home, the class took place around a large worktable where the seven of us were first shown examples of books our teacher, or her friends, had bound.

It was an impressive display of craft. There was even a volume bound in the difficult ancient technique of hand-embossed leather. And yet, as these works were passed from hand to hand, I noticed that, with one exception, all the pages within the bindings were absolutely blank. The exception was a commissioned collection of large photographs. Otherwise, not even the arduously bound leather book offered anything more than its exceptional cover.

We actually did make books that day. Each of us made our own small oblong book, perhaps three by five inches, with eight pages. The book had a sewn binding, front and end sheets, and front and back cardboard covers, which we decorated. Our books were nice little books.

Of course, my small book was blank, but then it was only a work piece, a template to emulate if I decided to incorporate bookbinding into my larger life. Still, the instructor's pile of empty books was troublesome. Perhaps it was because I had begun to feel that one should have a book's content in hand, or at least have its content in mind, before creating a binding. Also, genuine bookbinding requires a good deal of equipment that in turn requires a considerable bookbinding investment. It was a dilemma, but one I soon solved: rather than become a binder of blank books, I would become a rebinder of books that already existed.

At the time, a friend of mine was studying Italian, so I offered to refurbish his shabby Italian dictionary. It was a paperback, but I was able to remove the cover and re-glue the binding while incorporating some stray pages. After reinforcing the covers with light cardboard, I created a new cover montage made up of torn strips from an Italian newspaper.

I tackled a number of my own battered cookbooks, and then began to work on frayed books from my more literary bookshelves. The book that gave me the most trouble was a worn hardback reprint of W. H. Auden's wonderful volume of poems *Look, Stranger!* After mending the binding, I created and glued on a cover design that I quickly decided was all wrong. As I ripped it off, I discovered the far better cover design for these tense poems lay in the shards of paper that remained.

Some of my books I will not touch. I collect books about the northern Arctic—not the now-vanishing one, but the Arctic that used to attract an assortment of adventurers. The oldest of these books, written by the early Arctic ethnographer Knud Rasmussen, is a sturdy ten-by-six-inch volume published in 1908. The book's pages are still a creamy white, the margins are generous, and the print is so dense you can feel the words with your fingertips.

There are books that should be left alone.

—Irene Oppenheim

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BY OCTOBER 14th of last year I had already spent two weeks in Berlin talking to Berliners about the refugee crisis—shop owners, academics, artists and writers, musicians, anarchists, and left-leaning students who zip around town on bikes heckling anti-immigration demonstrators—German citizens, in other words, to whom bank-rolled American reporters weren't paying much attention in their rush to the borders where foreigners were losing their lives. During the previous spring, I had planned to be in Berlin with the idea that I'd work on my German, translate poetry, reconnect with friends, and cultivate the particular feeling of life in that city, which, despite gentrification and a pile-up of construction projects, still inspires improvisation within its jagged urban spaces, amid the tonal clash of cultural privilege, entrepreneurship, celebrated non-conformity, the rough glamor of ambitious down-and-outage, strong political art-making (especially, now, photography), and the city's darker histories (poverty, exploitation, surveillance, murder). But by August I knew that, given the state of Europe, my poor enrichment itinerary was impossible. To be in Germany in the fall was to be at the center of only one flashpoint in the new flaring concatenation.

On my second day in Berlin, I bought a used bike from a Vietnamese couple who had immigrated to East Germany forty years before and now ran a souvenir shop along the edge of the Humboldt University campus. On my brand-new used bike, I started to explore and make my way into Moabit, the Berlin *kiez* settled by eighteenth-century French Huguenots fleeing persecution, and still a district defined by immigration and refugees. It wasn't too long before I found Lageso, the collapsed slang for the *Landesamt für Geshundheit und Soziales,* where refugees must begin the process in their single-file campaign for asylum status in Germany. That's where I started conducting interviews with Syrians, Iraqis, Afghanis, Lebanese, Palestinians, and others who were milling about in a state of keen frustration and anxiety in the courtyard created by this compound of government buildings.

October 14th was a particularly miserable day. The temperature had dropped into the low forties, but with the clouds pushing down and persistent rain, it felt five degrees colder. The damp somehow hugged your bones. Walking twenty minutes, you warmed up, but as soon as you stopped it grabbed you again. The kind of day the word *miserable* was made for. I had already conducted a set of half-a-dozen interviews, I thought with some success. Between English and German and a few words of Arabic I had crammed on the flight over, I had managed to talk to people and they to me. They were curious about who I was and what I was doing there, and eager to tell their stories of endurance, escape, and survival. I had decided not to use any new technology in conducting the interviews, but simply to listen and write quickly in a reporters' notebook that a journalist friend had given me, lifted from the supply room of the *Washington Post*. Jimmy Olsen, cub reporter: I was certainly naive enough to play the part, though my gray hair and middle-age waist made the fit rather tight.

I headed back over to Lageso, this time on foot, the better to protect myself from the weather. Along the walk up Kirchstrasse, the restaurants were empty; the signs of gentrification had retracted like testicles hitting ice water. Beer-bellied uniforms stood outside government buildings pulling on smokes and staying dry beneath overhangs. I saw a dapper grad-student-type cut through a construction site I had been barred from entering earlier. He had the determined stride of one routinely running late. Five minutes later, I passed by him on a path that stretched the long length of the construction fence, behind which he stood, querulously looking around for an exit. My newborn little inner German grew superciliously erect. Dapper Man had broken the rules. Now he was trapped, ha ha, and would have to retrace his steps.

Lageso deepened the day's misery. The grounds were mudflats, an infernal terrestrial cream of shit everywhere mixed with the rubbish of refugee existence, churned all day with the waiting wandering feet that stamped down to squeeze some cold off the toes. People were wearing thin plastic ponchos handed out by volunteers—essentially garbage bags. And some were wearing actual garbage bags on their heads for extra protection. Others sought shelter under the eaves of buildings, standing, huddling beneath wet blankets, and squirming uncomfortably in saturated dome tents. I tried my poor Arabic words: *Marhaban…*

Kazim, a thirty-two-year-old Palestinian, worked in Damascus as an engineer. He had been waiting with his father for two weeks, having traveled to Berlin via Turkey, the Greek island of Samos, Athens, Macedonia, Serbia,

Slovenia, and Passau (in lower Bavaria). He was standing with Yasirah, a forty-year-old Syrian who worked in Damascus as a legal secretary. Her four-year-old daughter had been sick for two days with fever, but the volunteers stationed at the first-aid facility were not dispensing medication because they're not doctors. And there were other sources of distress. I had learned the words like a chorus from earlier interviews: the waiting, the guards, the slowness, the cold. I tried to ask them more about their situations in Damascus before leaving home and their respective journeys to Berlin. But Yasirah didn't speak English or German, and Kazim's English was too rudimentary to get past the static of physical discomfort, the anxiety visible in their faces. Still, there was buoyant fortitude and humor—I mistook the pronunciation of "secretary" for "security" and asked Yasirah, incredulously, You were in security? They both laughed and pointed to the security guards at Lageso, who had exchanged their red fleeces for heavy red coats and moved from the central grounds to the marginal protection of a building overhang. I turned back to Kazim and Yasirah. Their smiles were genuine, deeper than their uncertainty and desperation. What can you do, said Kazim, to help us? Now his handsome strong smile had pain in it. All I can do right now, I said, is try to make people understand; I know it's nothing. It's okay, he said, and he held out his hand. I wished at that moment for an economy that could exchange the bodily warmth of his hand for a slip of official paper. But none exists. My regret at not being able to do more, an American in Germany, was too uncomfortable. I said good-bye. I had to leave them. They haven't left me, but what can that feeling translate *into;* how and why could it matter?

—Joshua Weiner