

Time and the Fabric of Immensity

An Editor's Note

The title of this editor's note seemed simply to bash into my head one morning this May, while I looked out into the thunderstorms that were scheduled, themselves, to bash this wheat-belt region of the country for the next five days at least. It so happens, I was re-reading *Don Quixote* and, un-Quixote like, pondering where this magazine should be headed, given its 2008 National Magazine Award for the Essay. The magazine industry, itself, including other editors of top-tier literary magazines, seems to consider this award best in the field; and I am, at this moment, happy to accept that assessment. Don't think too much, Quixote might say, but do stand for some value. From him, we might learn principles of life, mission, and vocation. "He rode on his way," Cervantes tells us, "going where it pleased his horse to carry him, for he believed that in this consisted the very soul of adventure."

The very soul of adventure. What did it mean, then, for me to say in my acceptance "speech" to the audience at Lincoln Center on May 1st, that the mission of a literary magazine differs in quality from that of many other, even other fine, magazines? I know I said that because friends who were present tell me so. I actually remember only a few things: jumping from my seat and screaming when awards presenter, Charlie Rose, announced the winner, "*New Letters*"; Thomas E. Kennedy, our winning essayist, giving me a hug and then

screwing on his trademark leopard-skin, pill-box hat; all of us on stage shaking hands; and then me, staring at the microphone and taking a breath to speak. What came out, as far as I know, was gibberish; but friends who were present tell me I said that the mission of a literary magazine is to advance literary art itself.

Who did I think I was? In the audience were some of the great editors of our time, including Lewis H. Lapham, Katrina vanden Heuvel, David Remnick, Tina Brown; yet, evidently, on I plunged, asserting the value of our peculiar task. Fortunately, Thomas Kennedy's essay "I Am Joe's Prostate" offered the solution, variously described by the American Society of Magazine Editors as "wince inducing," "outrageously honest," and "wickedly funny." I described the essay as terrifying and hilarious. Any time writing can be described only in paradoxical terms, we're approaching literary art.

So it is, we move forward on principles that set true literary writing into the category of adventure, meaning that we almost cannot prepare for it. It sets us off in a new way. One of the writers in this issue of *New Letters*, Robert Olen Butler, states in his own book about writing, *From Where You Dream*, a basic principle of literary art, which he takes from film director Akira Kurosawa: "To be an artist means never to avert your eyes." Theoretical writing, full of concepts and ideas, softens experience into tidy abstractions. Writing of direct experience—no matter how distasteful or unusual—enlarges our stature, gives us life.

Do not look away, then, from part III of Inge Genfke's "Testimony on Torture"; do not look away from Nathan Englander's investigation of Argentina's cemetery of Jewish pimps and whores; and do not look away from the quirky story here by Janset Berkok Shami, which begins, "Recently I had a slightly retarded lover." Many of our readers averted their eyes from "I Am Joe's Prostate," and referred to its topic as "sketchy" (in the sense of being unsafe or not right), in the sense of being

out of place for a literary magazine. I know. I did not accept that essay quickly, despite the power of its writing. I needed to ask myself the big question: Is it literary? Then, as now, I had to assess what I mean by literary.

So I turn to Quixote: “The Knight-errant . . . endures the fierce rays of the sun in uninhabited deserts, the inclemency of wind and ice in winter.” The storms this May tell me of the immensity of one life. “Lions cannot daunt him nor demons affright nor dragons, for to seek, assault, and overcome such is the whole business of his life, and true office.” Take a look at the poem “Woodbridge” in this issue, by Mary Crockett Hill. It understands time and immensity as a quality of value, but its language . . . its language is the soul of adventure. It looks directly at what’s there.

In that way, our National Magazine Award tells me—which is something I am told I tried to tell the audience at Lincoln Center—that we at *New Letters* have also to thank good fortune—the good fortune that Thomas E. Kennedy sent this particular essay to us. Good, literary writing trumps everything. It carries us along and expands our scope. We readers merely need to have courage equal to that required to write it. Didn’t we laugh at Quixote, also? Yes. His story is terrifying and hilarious. It’s literary.

—Robert Stewart