

# *The Toronto Review of Books*

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# Editor's Note

Welcome to Issue Six of *The Toronto Review of Books*, our charismatic first offering in a new punchier issue format. In this single-sitting issue size, we're cutting through the noise to bring you six pieces that matter. You'll attend succinct gatherings in our new short issues—the kind of conversations that are worth joining because they're big enough to be sundry and small enough to be intimate.

In Issue Six, the chat travels wide and far. Language battles in Pakistani literature come into relief in Meghan Davidson Ladly's story about Challawa, a work of Urdu lesbian erotica. Two essays look at the state of Canadian history: Michael Morden reviews 1812.gc.ca, the portal for the Harper Government's commemorations of the War of 1812, and Mark Sholdice covers the venomous struggles of politicians and academics as they bat the tennis ball of Canadian history from Left to Right. Alessandro Porco's poem puts "unused sound" and "curcles with no circumference" on display. Rob Sternberg brings us along with Denis Johnson on a dusky Californian road trip. Yaya Yao knits generations and dialects in a few syllables.

In Issue Six you'll find a smashing party with well-played syntax, a whisper in the right direction, a nod to some thoughts for the spring and the summer, a shout to the clouds that be.

*Jessica Duffin Wolfe*



*Michael Morden*

AGREEING  
ON FABLES  
AT 1812.GC.CA

A slick commercial appeared on Canadian television last year, featuring redcoats and period warships, with narrator intoning: “Two hundred years ago, the United States invaded our territory.” It’s 2013 and the invaders are long gone, but our leaders have set to work driving any ambiguity out of our collective memory. As we enter year two of an epic, multimillion-dollar celebration of the War of 1812, the federally sanctioned excitement has not waned. Its largess in an era of austerity is worthy of comment.

The commercial pushed us toward [1812.gc.ca](http://1812.gc.ca), the official Canadian website for the war and its two hundredth anniversary. “Did You Know?” asks the landing page: “Canada would not exist had the American invasion of 1812-15 been successful.” A link invites us to discover “More Interesting Facts,” interpreting the term loosely. Fact: “The War of 1812 is an important milestone in the lead-up to the 150th anniversary of Canada’s Confederation.”

Alongside lesson plans there’s a running tab for “breaking news,” like “November 15, 2012: Harper Government Highlights the Role of East Coast Privateers.” Fortunately [1812.gc.ca](http://1812.gc.ca) includes a mobile app, so the next time someone’s role gets highlighted, you don’t have to be the last to know. There are games, too. In one you outfit a rakish, mutton-chopped soldier for battle with the proper kit. The soldier’s impatience spoils the challenge, though. “Hint: My feet are cold!” He wants boots.

Across the top of the landing page are displayed steely-eyed actors: General Brock and Lt.-Col. Salaberry, Tecumseh, and Laura Secord. That's English, French, Indigenous, and female—bases covered. Travel a bit down the page to find an item on the Black soldiers in the fight for Canada. This was *our* war, see, when we the rainbow coalition secured Canada's national destiny.

Is this war a worthy myth for Canada? We successfully repulsed an invasion from a superior military force, it's true. Canada was defended, but was it worth it?

Canada was a reactionary autocratic place then. It was built as a deliberate inversion of the democratic experiment.<sup>1</sup> A colonial rentier state, it bribed its public with no tax and cheap land, discouraged the development of a middle class and civil society, censored the press with unique efficiency, and openly distrusted education for its emancipatory potential.<sup>2</sup> Traveling from the United States to Canada would have been like moving from a vague and volatile sketch of the political future to a pastoral watercolour of the feudal past.

Were the heroes of 1812 real heroes? It depends on what you're

looking for. Brock, for example, was every bit the genius commander, delivering immense strategic bang on a meager buck. He just happened to hold Canada and Canadians in supreme contempt: "My situation is most critical, not from anything the enemy can do, but from the disposition of the people—the population, believe me, is essentially bad."<sup>3</sup>

We've posthumously appropriated Tecumseh—Shawnee nationalist of the Ohio River country—as a Canadian hero. While it was a nice moment in the Native-non-Native relationship, a brief re-

turn to the old treaty order of fraternity and mutual defense, all feel-goodery was obliterated by the British betrayal at the end of the war, when they traded away Indigenous territorial claims in exchange for peace with the Americans. The Brits

abused the trust of their Indigenous collaborators so profoundly that even the contemporary English popular press was galled.<sup>4</sup>

It's hard to get excited about this particular war, in short, but no government teaches history to teach history. The history

## *Canada was defended, but was it worth it?*

[1] Allan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, New York: Vintage Books, 2010: 41. [2] *ibid*: 69.

[3] George Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada*, Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994: 53. [4] Robert S. Allen, *His Majesty's Indian Allies: British Indian Policy in the Defence of Canada, 1771-1815*, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1993: 168.

isn't the point. This 1812 celebration is really the product of two present-day intellectual currents. The first is a resurgent conservative nationalism, which celebrates military success and a foreign monarch—and seeks to overturn four decades of social history that often looked unkindly on its heroes. The second is a widely expressed anxiety that we are alienated from our national history and, therefore, from ourselves.

Canadians sometimes think the latter feeling is an especially Canadian problem. We have whole NGOs dedicated to measuring our historical illiteracy disapprovingly. But nations that seem mature and fully formed experience the same fear. In a 2011 article in the *London Review of Books*, Richard Evans describes the efforts of the British government to re-establish a national narrative in school curricula. He quotes Britain's education minister calling for an end to the tragic "thrashing of history" that leaves young Brits "ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know—the history of our United Kingdom." The Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough routinely complains about how ignorant young Americans are of their creation stories, laying blame with history textbooks "so politically correct

as to be comic."<sup>5</sup> In both places there are similar movements to bolster national narratives, using public schools and public money. The insistence that citizens all read the same bedtime stories spans nationalisms.

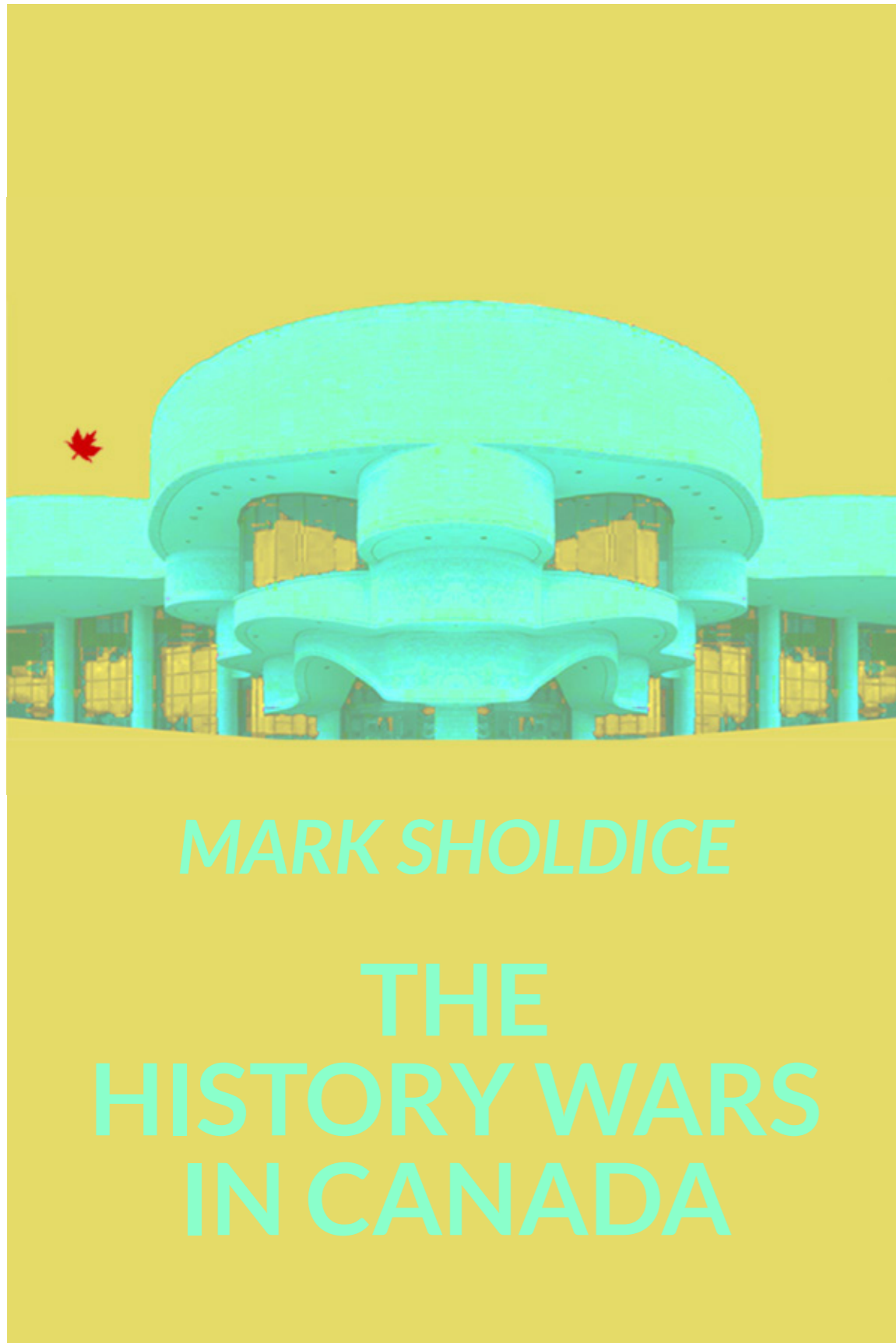
*The first new Heritage Minutes in nearly a decade should be cause for much rejoicing.*

If nothing else, 1812.gc.ca tells a few stories well. That the site is home to the first new Heritage Minutes in nearly a decade should be cause for much rejoicing. I can embrace the 1812 campaign for its celebration of stories, so long as I ignore

those who insist that some fundamental Canadian nugget exists in the memory of this war. There's no need to traffic in this folly. Canadian history isn't *one thing*. It is, like the history of every other place, appalling, uplifting, inspirational, insidious and ambiguous at once. The 1812 stories on their own tell us nothing about who we now are.

My Loyalist ancestors were among the few common-folk who cared enough about the war's outcome to turn up for the fight. One Morden lost an eyeball in the process—albeit from smallpox—establishing himself at the very pinnacle of this familial military tradition (the bar is not high). I'm not ashamed of his choice of king over republic, nor am I—are we—beholden to it. The past is another country. ■

[5] Brian Bolduc, "Don't Know Much About History," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 June 2011.



Jack Granatstein's 1998 jeremiad *Who Killed Canadian History?* was the opening shot of the History Wars, a fierce conflict about the meaning and purpose of our nation's past. Academic historians, he satirically concluded, had abandoned traditional military and political history in order to specialize in topics like "the history of housemaid's knee in Belleville in the 1890s." The general public, taking little interest in such minutiae, became disillusioned with learning about history. Granatstein, then a professor at York, took issue with the rising dominance of social history in history departments, especially the state of historical instruction in schools and universities, and what he perceived to be a general decline of historical consciousness across the country.

Fifteen years later, according to historian Tom Peace, "[the so-called 'History Wars' are still alive and well in the Canadian public sphere.](#)" Since gaining a majority in the 2011 election, the Conservative government under Stephen Harper has made the History Wars a tangible reality through a number of decisions that take federal historical policy in a right-wing direction, while left-wing nationalists in Quebec are campaigning to shift the province's historical educational policy towards a distinctively *indépendantiste* position. In each case, historical interpretation becomes influenced by current ideological battles, in ways which are rarely noticed by the average Canadian or Quebecer.

The federal government's exact motives in this historical policy revolution are difficult to pinpoint, but it seems clear that the Harper Tories are trying to imprint their ideological stamp on Canadian culture. Jeffrey Simpson of *The Globe and Mail* [writes](#) of an overall trend in government policy:

For the Harper Conservatives, there's no sense of contributing to a new or evolved sense of Canadian identity, but rather a reaching back and dusting off of fragments of the past that suit their politics—which is why the military and the monarchy are their favoured subjects for historical attention.

While the government has spent lavishly on certain historical initiatives, like the commemoration of the War of 1812, other key funding has been sharply reduced or eliminated. Deep cuts were made at Library and Archives Canada (LAC), forcing it to lay off a large number of staff members and reduce services under the guise of digitization and modernization. Scott Staring [remarks](#) that the Conservative intervention in the History Wars is not really conservative at all; it is a radical attempt to project current concerns into the past:

The aim of the Harper government is not so much to conserve Canada's existing traditions, but to leapfrog backwards in time in hope of resurrecting long-vanished ones. From a genuinely conservative perspective there is always something dangerous about the desire to return to the past in this way. Such ventures are usually inspired by romantic ideals that are at best inchoate, and at worst tip over into a confused and destruc-

tive opposition to what exists.

Thus what we are seeing is not so much the resurrection of past events and ideals, but the use of history to intervene in present-day ideological debates.

This historical revolution is being undertaken by a small group of right-wing activists and scholars, such as C.P. Champion, who is probably the most important Conservative historian in Canada today.<sup>1</sup> His 2010 book, *The Strange Demise of British Canada: The Liberals and Canadian Nationalism, 1964-1968*, shows how the Harper government views the History Wars. According to Champion, the effort in the 1960s to produce a new complex of Canadian symbols (like the maple leaf flag) was not the outcome of a broad-based consensus, but rather “a bloodless coup d'état by neo-nationalists, overthrowing a symbolic order grounded in centuries of history.” Here we can see that the Conservatives have a well-developed notion of cultural hegemony, which allows an elite few to plan nationwide cultural change, foreshadowing future government initiatives.

The appointment last April of historians Michael Bliss and

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[1] After writing for several years for the conservative magazine *Alberta Report*, Champion worked on Parliament Hill for the Reform Party, Canadian Alliance, and Conservative Party. He was one of three social conservatives purged by Harper from the Office of the Leader of the Opposition in 2002, as they were seen to be too close to the outgoing Stockwell Day. Since earning a PhD in history at McGill University, Champion has served as Director of Citizenship Policy in the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, headed by Jason Kenney. He is also a contributing editor to *The Dorchester Review*, a highbrow journal associated with such conservative intellectuals as Rudyard Griffiths, the founder of the Dominion Institute (a forerunner of the Historica-Dominion Institute), and Xavier Gélinas, the new curator for Canadian political history at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.



Christopher McCreery<sup>2</sup> to the board of trustees that oversees the Canadian Museum of Civilization and War Museum marked the opening of another front in the History Wars. Heritage Minister James Moore announced in October that the Museum of Civilization would be renamed the “Canadian Museum of History,” given \$25 million in new funding, and would focus on Canada’s political and social history rather than international civilizations. Critics

*The Museum of Civilization would be renamed the “Canadian Museum of History”*

have labeled this an attempt to promote right-wing nationalism via a major cultural institution. Amanda Watson, a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa’s Institute of Women’s Studies, attacks this effort, particularly the

new focus on military history, saying: “It is a reorientation to Canadian history, one that promotes a master narrative in the hopes of recasting a unified Canadian citizen.”

Whether the Tories are successful in such a reorientation is

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[2] McCreery is another key figure in the Harper government’s historical policy revolution. An expert on the Canadian honours system, McCreery spent several years working for various senators, mostly Tories, after receiving a PhD in history from Queen’s in 2003. In 2010, Harper appointed McCreery to the Governor General Consultation Committee, along with a few protocol experts and conservative academics like Rainer Knopff, Christopher Manfredi, and Jacques Monet. (This committee appointed the relatively conservative David Johnston to be the successor to Michaëlle Jean.) McCreery also provided advice to the Senate defence committee, leading to the government’s decision in 2011 to rename the Maritime Command “the Royal Canadian Navy” (along with the new “Royal Canadian Air Force” and “Canadian Army”). (Notably, Granatstein also attacked the “Royal” re-designations, saying: “The idea of rolling back the national symbols to make them more British is just loony.”)

of course an open question. But it seems that after a long period of complacency, centrist and centre-left historians have realized that their positions are under threat. Yet this sort of ideological warfare is also possible in the other direction, as the case of historical education in Quebec shows.

Soon after his announcement of the Museum of Civilization’s restructuring, Moore publically called for Canadian history to be made mandatory in schools across the country. But as primary and secondary education is a provincial responsibility, few took Moore’s proclamation seriously. In Quebec, history education has become a centre for cultural conflict, and the left has taken the initiative in the History Wars. In 2009, academic Robert Comeau<sup>3</sup> co-founded *la Coalition pour l’histoire* to lead a campaign for more Quebec history instruction in the province’s schools and universities. The initiative gives a distinctive nationalist edge to historical education in Quebec, subsuming the History Wars in the larger debate over provincial sovereignty and separation.

Much like the Historica-Dominion Institute in Anglophone Canada, the *Coalition* regularly produces surveys deploring the unsatisfactory state of historical knowledge among students and the general population. For instance, the Coalition’s report from last March, “A Bleached History to Serve the Present,” (based on a sur-

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[3] Comeau is a history professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal, former member of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ), and vice-president of *La Fondation Lionel-Groulx*, a nationalist historical institute.

vey of history instructors in Quebec's secondary schools) concluded that the teaching of the province's past "was prone to exaggerate the cultural pluralism of Quebec society." Historians Christian Laville and Michèle Dagenais criticize the *Coalition's* emphasis on politics over newer developments in areas such as social history. They say that this older political history has traditionally been used to give legitimacy to *la question nationale*, which some think is "essential for fanning the flames of nationalism."

After coming to office in the provincial election last September, Marie Malavoy, the new Parti Québécois government's Minister of Education, publically mused about making changes to history instruction, especially to allow the national question to be mentioned in secondary school instruction. This proposal drew outraged protests from the *Coalition Avenir Québec* and Liberal parties, who called it an attempt to politicize the province's education system. Micheline Lachance characterizes this opposition as an attempt to keep young Quebecers in their "federalist lobster trap." On the other hand, Jocelyn Létourneau, the Canadian Research Chair in modern Quebec history at Laval, says the national question should not be "the sun around which all the planets of the Quebec past must orbit."

*Historical education will remain a centre for debate as long as independence remains an open question in Quebec's political culture.*

Historical education will remain a centre for debate as long as independence remains an open question in Quebec's political culture. The parallels between la Coalition pour l'histoire and the Conservatives' federal historical revolution are fascinating: in each case, political activists at either end of the ideological spectrum try to use historical policies to carry on their contemporary political struggles and attempt to overturn academic consensus in the process.

From recent developments in cultural and educational policies by the federal and Quebec governments, it is evident that the historical guidelines of the liberal-social democratic era are under attack. Conservatives seek to promote a right-wing narrative based on military and political history, while *indépendistes* want to use Quebec's history education policy to advocate nationalist ends. If

the centre and centre-left in Canada are to reclaim the initiative in the History Wars, there must be greater consciousness of the political roots of historical scholarship and more honesty about motives. The struggle for cultural hegemony by activists on the left and right will continue for the foreseeable future, but the results of such combat are ambiguous. The History Wars are really not about history, but rather politics. ■



Meghan Davidson Ladly

## Translating *Challawa*

Pakistani Writing Between Urdu, English and Lesbian Erotica

A small but vibrant literary scene has emerged in Pakistan over the last decade. After the events of 9/11 pushed their country into the media's spotlight, many authors wanted to write their own narratives rather than have them transposed from elsewhere. Big names soon garnered global fame. Among multiple other awards and nominations, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2007, Mohammed

Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* won a Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2009, and Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* won a Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2010 and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist that same year. Following these international successes, in 2010 Oxford University Press and the British Council founded the Karachi Literature Festival, which now takes place each February. The Lahore Literary Festival had its inaugural run in February 2013.

Though Urdu may be the official language of the country, English is the language of the nation's elite and it is literature written in English that is receiving this international and local praise and publicity. Urdu writing is often not translated, nor are works in any of the eight other languages that are spoken in different regions of the state.

Mohammed Hanif is frustrated by the privilege afforded English in his country at the expense of the regional languages. He worked as a journalist abroad and speaks perfect English, but he can both read and write in Urdu and is very much connected to the multiple facets of Pakistan. While he recognizes that there are some good initiatives underway, he thinks the writing pool is still relatively small, made smaller still by the constraints of language. Despite the fact that the Karachi Literature Festival hosts authors

in English and Urdu, as well as in regional languages, Hanif feels that the writing scenes are very divided. He cites as an example the generation currently in grammar schools or colleges, who are getting an excellent education in English but don't read in any of the local languages. "You can't cut yourself off from the languages and the literature of a place that you live in," he says.

*"You have already assumed whatever these people are saying, it is not worth listening to."*

The strong emphasis on proficiency in English within many of the state's top schools serves to further divide the upper classes from the rest of the population and, by extension, excludes whole categories of writing from discussions of literature. "If you cannot understand any of the languages this population speaks," says Hanif, "you're not going to make very sensible decisions about your life or about your literature, because you have already assumed whatever these people are saying, it is not worth listening to."

While Faiza Khan and Aysha Raja speak Urdu, they were raised in the West, and cannot read it. The two women launched a short story competition and in 2010 compiled the winners in the first issue of a journal called *The Life's Too Short Literary Review*. A nod, says Khan, to the way Pakistan is marketed and, to some extent, actually is. The *Review* would be just another literary venture among many were it based in the UK where Khan and Raja grew

up, but here it is helping to foster a literary environment that is fraught with almost as many contradictions and complexities as Pakistan itself.

“I was pleasantly surprised by the entries,” Khan says. “There were 700 insufferably awful ones, and then some of them were really expert.” Besides organizing the journal and running the short story prize, Khan, who has now relocated from Pakistan to India, writes for various publications and is also an editor. Ask her about the country’s newfound fame as a literary hot spot and she is less than enthusiastic. “Some Pakistani writers are gaining international attention and some are writing extremely good books,” she says, “but I don’t know if I would call something a literary boom if at most one book or manuscript a year were coming out.”

Her friend and journal co-founder echoes these sentiments. Raja left a career in law to work as a literary publicist and also acts as an agent for authors. She runs a chain of independent bookshops called *The Last Word* and is involved in organizing the Lahore Literary Festival. “We are limited in our characterization,” she says, “because we don’t have much to offer as yet which will show the breadth and the ground that we could cover.” She doesn’t subscribe to the idea that conflict zones produce good writing, a theory that is often applied to Pakistan. She thinks writers write well because they are naturally inclined and put in the effort, and

that the geographical and political turbulence of the state and its increased prominence over the last decade has put Pakistan under the global microscope, nothing more.

But while both Khan and Raja may feel that the literary environment in which they work is over-hyped, the two women separately migrated here to pursue their ambitions rather than remain in the UK. For Raja, there is an opportunity for literature initiatives to emerge, simply because people are looking. Khan describes the literary landscape here as inviting because it has yet to be exploited. Yet along with that percolating potential are some serious challenges that strike at the root of what it means to write in Pakistan.



Humayun Iqbal has salt and pepper hair that reaches almost to his shoulders and a mouth stained faintly red from paan. He gives off the air of an aging rock star, or a mischievous uncle. Living in relative obscurity, rock star he is not, but his work was once, and—thanks to the *Review*—is now again, famous. This is the man who brought lesbian erotica to the masses.

Despite having written many works, Iqbal is best known as the author of *Challawa*, the serialized Urdu fiction purportedly written by Sabiho Bano, an upper class Pakistani woman who has a sexual appetite for schoolgirls. Like many other erotic novels se-

rialized in Pakistan in the 1970s, it ran in journals that were widely read across class lines. It was popular mass-market Urdu fiction that fizzled out in the 1980s under the conservative rule of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. Inspired by his reading of Sappho, Iqbal set out to write a new and better type of erotic on-going story. “Nobody writes about lesbians,” he says.

*Challawa* challenges some common perceptions of Pakistani fiction. Iqbal’s piece is set apart from much current popular writing by his fellow nationals because it is written in Urdu and does not deal with the political violence and instability that some more famous works investigate. While the fact that it is lesbian erotica written by a man may raise some eyebrows, within the context of Pakistan’s male dominated literary environment this is not such a surprise. Moreover, the overt sexuality of the piece contests the common Western assumption that sex is a recent import to Pakistan. “There is a tradition of historically gay relationships being part of the landscape,” says Raja. “There was never really that Victorian reaction to it in this part of the world.”

Iqbal’s *Challawa* represents one of the largely unknown subgenres within Pakistani literature. Khan and Raja had never

heard of it, but when a friend brought it to their attention they were quickly taken with the work and wanted to republish it in *The Life’s Too Short Literary Review*. Mohammed Hanif, who feels the quality of the writing in Iqbal’s story and its focus on women sets it apart from much of the erotica of that period, agreed to translate it.

*The overt sexuality of the piece contests the common Western assumption that sex is a recent import to Pakistan.*

Drinking tea and chain smoking in his airy living room in the upscale neighborhood of Defence in Karachi, Hanif is very aware that to talk about language and literature in Pakistan is also to have a conversation about class. “If you have a book that gets published,” he says, “5000 people will read it, maybe 7000, in a population of around 180 million.” Pakistan has a 55 per cent literacy rate. Just under half of its roughly 177 million citizens cannot read and the majority of its population struggles to pay for basic necessities; books are an unaffordable luxury. So already to talk about literature in this country is to exclude millions of Pakistanis from such dialogue. Even if class and literacy do not define such conversations, they certainly affect them. And then issues of language draw the circle of inclusion even smaller.

*The Life’s Too Short Literary Review* and the competition that

provides its content will remain in English because Khan and Raja simply can't take on Urdu submissions without the ability to read them. They have also decided to run the story competition every few years rather than annually, to give the pool of talent time to accumulate. Both agree, however, that Urdu writing is a vital and untapped part of Pakistan's literary landscape. But they feel that as long as the infrastructure to translate and transmit it to the international market is lacking, the wealth of material in these stories will remain inaccessible.

The readers are there, but what they will choose to read continues to develop. According to both Khan and Raja, writing that caters to the West's perceptions of Pakistan and touches on subjects such as terrorism, violence and the subjugation of women is much easier to market and sell. "I find it immensely patronizing," says Khan, "that one has to write about Pakistani issues rather than just issues." Through her work, Raja is seeing new novels published that are breaking out from the standard narratives surrounding her country: "You can see other genres developing," she says. "And maybe even every single novel that comes out of Pakistan doesn't have to be an aspiring award winning novel. It could just be good writing." That hope is qualified, however, by her observation that often it is only after a work is shortlisted for a regional award, like the Man Asian Literary Prize or the DSC Prize,

that European or North American publishers take note.

But that may be changing. Iqbal's *Challawa* certainly defies many people's ideas of the country and, of all the stories published in the initial *Review*, it has attracted the most international attention. Possibly mirroring the state itself, Pakistan's writing scene is a literary environment in flux. It is still struggling to emerge from the shadow of global perceptions and expectations of what Pakistani literature should be. The scene may be transitioning into something more cohesive and sizable, but it's not there yet. For Khan, however, malleability is good. "I hope there aren't any characteristics that define Pakistani literature," she says. "I hope that what comes of it is that people are able to write novels about whatever they want."

*The material for this piece was gathered over the period between 2011 and 2013.*

Rob Sternberg

# A LONG STRANGE TRIP

Travels through the North Coast  
with Denis Johnson



“This is not a dream, illusion, or metaphor. This is California.”

- Denis Johnson, *Already Dead: A California Gothic*

On a bright, sultry afternoon at the tail end of last August, my wife Jill and I sat at a picnic table in the spacious courtyard of the Anderson Valley Brewing Company in Boonville, California. The town was quaint and pretty. Before strolling along its main strip where a ragtime band played on a street corner, we wandered unobserved through the Boonville Hotel, admiring its wood paneling and country-chic decor. A restored roadhouse from the turn-of-the-century, the hotel was so quiet and peaceful we heard the creaking of the floorboards as we wandered; and when we spoke to each other, we felt compelled to whisper. We ate a lunch made up of local, organic ingredients and browsed the shops—one calling itself a *mercantile*—before getting back into our car and driving to the brewery on the outskirts of town, where we were now enjoying the local brew. In California, everything is local.

In the courtyard of the Anderson Valley Brewing Company, I continued to think about the chapter I read the night before inside our cabin at the Orr Hot Springs, about an hour’s drive from Boonville, due north. The Orr Hot Springs (clothing optional) lies tucked away along the Comptche Ukiah Road, a tight and curving mountain road that we accessed from the town of Mendocino.

We hadn’t planned on visiting these hot springs, or any hot



springs for that matter; our seven-day trip through the north coast, bookended by two short stays in San Francisco, was very much improvised. On our second morning in Mendocino, over breakfast—maple-pecan encrusted bacon, walnut pancakes, tomatoes that the B&B's proprietor had picked that morning—I overheard a young hippie couple from the area recommend the hot springs to an eager-for-recommendations middle-aged couple who latched onto the young hippies<sup>2</sup> after discovering they weren't tourists. "People *live* here," the middle-aged man said.

The young man calmly assured him. "Oh yes. We live up in the hills and come down for provisions."

The scene I read the night before inside our cabin at the Orr Hot Springs happens to be set in Boonville. The novel is Denis Johnson's *Already Dead: A California Gothic*, published in 1997. In this particular scene, two of its dozen-odd characters—a local constable and his new girlfriend, both of whom reside on the coast—travel inland to Boonville for the annual Mendocino Apple Festival in late September.<sup>3</sup> Johnson describes Boonville through the eyes of the constable, Officer John Navarro: "Boonville might usually have been a pretty town, but under the smoggy conditions [from a recent forest fire] it seemed jobless and tapped-out and felt to

Navarro like the kingdom of desperate childhoods. When they'd parked in the pasture outside the festival, he locked his Club anti-theft device to the Firebird's steering wheel." When Jill and I parked our rental, a white Chrysler, we hadn't even locked the doors.

For much of our trip, I'd compare the Mendocino County featured in Johnson's novel with the one Jill and I were traveling through, like someone holding up a landscape painting before its subject to check the likeness. *Already Dead* is a most unorthodox and inspiring travel guide. Johnson's long, impressionistic descriptions of the north coast capture something essential about that spectacular and mysterious landscape, to say nothing of the eccentrics who reside there.

The Mendocino County of the early nineties in *Already Dead* is "where the Haight-Ashbury dialect flourishes unevolved" and "VW vans from the sixties survived [...] inexplicably, like frail kites in an attic." Many of the people who inhabit the hills of the small coastal communities like Point Arena and Anchor Bay, where much of the novel's action is set, are themselves vestiges of the sixties, old Deadheads and "beatnik survivors and carnival types, people with self-created histories and fictitious names, tainted and used-up people."

For Johnson, Mendocino County is where hippies of the Nixonian era come to die. It's the precise locale of the decades-long

[1] The name of the B&B, remarkably, was the Didjeridoo Dreamtime Inn. [2] I've called them hippies, just to be clear, because I overheard the young woman introduce herself as Jamaica, and because her boyfriend wore loose-fitting pants and a beaded necklace. [3] We saw posters for the festival while walking along the main strip.

summer of love hangover. Johnson's central characters, however, are in their early thirties. They are either native to the north coast, having arrived there in pursuit of some "westward, golden dream," or are there expressly to disappear. Thomas Pynchon focused on those so-called "beatnik survivors" in his novel *Vineland*. Some say the eponymous fictional town is a stand-in for Boonville.

Both *Already Dead* and *Vineland* play on the notion that the north coast of the 80s and 90s<sup>4</sup> is a bastion of counterculture lifestyle choices, some more felonious than others. But while Pynchon's north coast lives under the watchful eye of the federal government and its agents, Johnson's keeps with the myths of the lawless old west: the pot growers in *Already Dead* are more affected by forest fires than CAMP (Campaign Against Marijuana Planting); the local policing unit is depicted as incompetent at best, lacking in resources and motivation; and the novel includes five murders, not one of which is ever properly investigated. The one symbol of federal presence is the US Air Force radar station in Point Arena, next to a Tibetan temple with a matching twin-domed design. The only character

<sup>[4]</sup> Reagan is an ominous presence in Pynchon's novel and, to a far lesser extent, so is George H.W. Bush in Johnson's.



concerned about the radar station's activities is a bona fide hermit.

*Already Dead* is a kind of horror story, hence the subtitle, with a few nods to the gothic genre throughout. One character's nickname is Frankenstein (he's almost seven feet tall) while another bears the Hawthornian name of Fairchild.

The wedding at the end of the novel occurs on Halloween. Yvonne practices wycca, which at some point sways even the most cynical of Johnson's characters. In a semi-circle with her followers, Yvonne channels the spirit of a man with the perfectly ordinary name of Randall MacNamarra, who has the gift of prescience. She also feeds Officer John Navarro a trout pâté laced with a natural hallucinogen called Bufotenine.<sup>5</sup> Psychedelic foreplay ensues.

And then there's the spectacular, mysterious setting, with its obscuring fog, gloomy bluffs and massive, ancient trees. Johnson's descriptions evoke the sublime, in the Romantic sense of the word. His main characters are Romantic figures, tormented and lonely souls, would-be Nietzscheans. The landscape they inhabit is not without its destructive potential—underneath lies the San

<sup>[5]</sup> Sweat from a frog.

Andreas fault, for one thing—and the same could be said for Johnson’s characters. As I wandered the bluffs of Mendocino one evening while Jill took a nap in our room at the Didjeridoo Dreamtime Inn, I couldn’t help but think of them. Mendocino, in addition to being known as a once-popular outpost for hippies and artists, is

## “*They don’t call it the Lost Coast for nothing.*”

also famous among fans of the television series *Murder She Wrote*; though the show is set in Maine, the exteriors and several episodes were shot in Mendocino.

Earlier that morning, before Jill and I set out to see the redwoods, those “monster trees,” along the Avenue of Giants in Humboldt State Park, I heard one of the B&B guests, a seasoned California traveler, bemoan the expensive, chichi shops on Mendocino’s main strip. Maybe the town seemed a bit tame. The large group of senior citizens staying at the main hotel surely added to this impression. But at dusk, out there on the bluffs, the place wasn’t tame at all—not to me at least. I wasn’t alone either. Wandering the footpaths tracing the edges of the bluffs, beyond which lay a twenty foot drop to the craggy shallows below, were others. Johnson likens them to ghosts, these “solitary, unburdened travelers”

peopling the north coast.

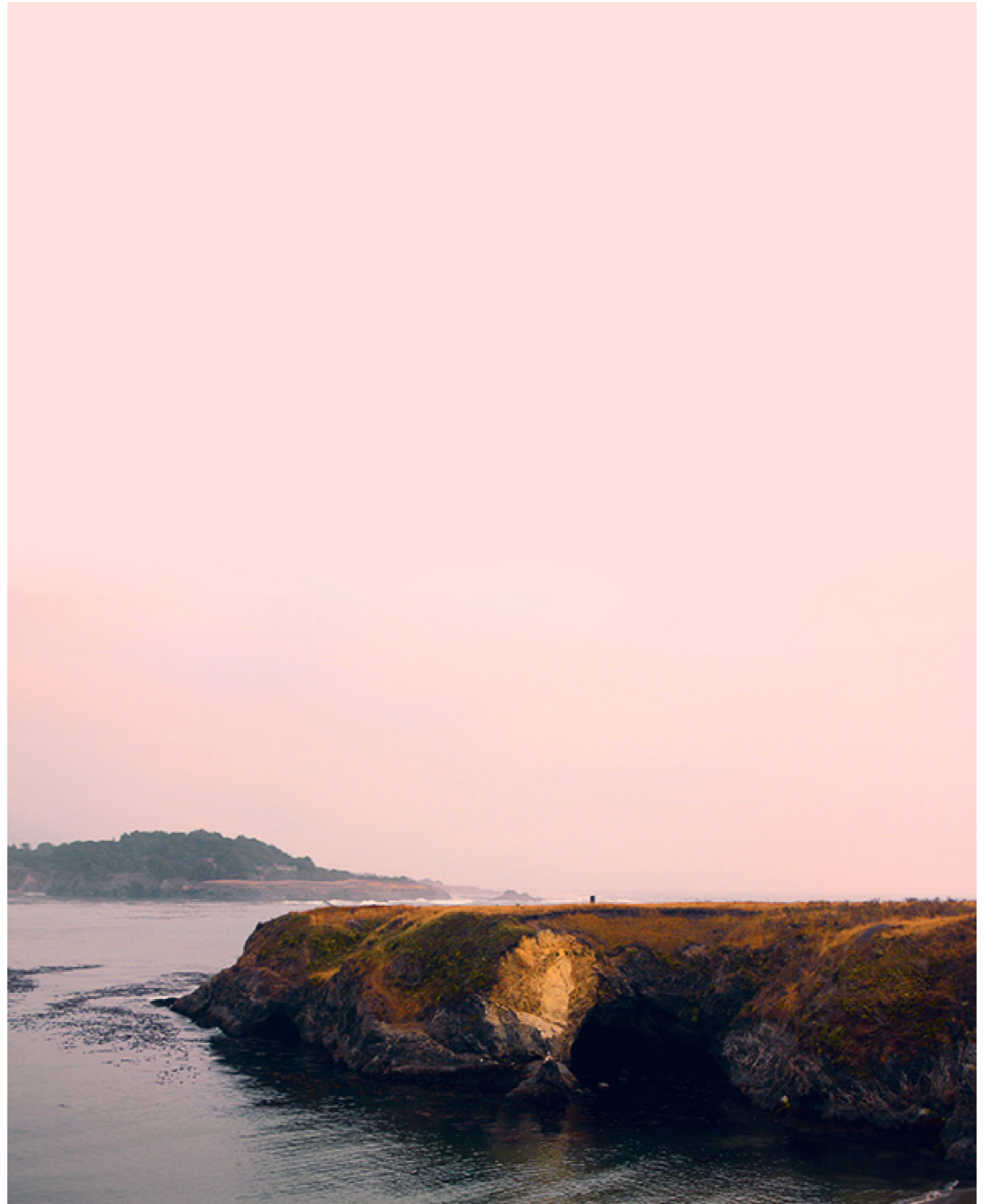
Walking back through town, I passed a green-and-red Chinese Taoist temple, which I discovered dates back to 1854 (older than another town landmark, the Presbyterian Church). I passed a number of seemingly “rootless dwellings,” dilapidated shacks with boarded-up windows and tireless cars on cinder blocks out on their unkempt lawns, perhaps “some Deadhead’s last burrow.” Later, Jill and I had dinner at a bar called Patterson’s. Just before two young folk musicians took the stage, an old hippie freak walked in with his entourage. His tie-dyed T-shirt barely covered a pot belly of epic proportions, and his thick ratty dreadlocks reached all the way to the floor of Patterson’s, which that night was covered in peanut shells. He had a burnt-out air to him.

One of the more poignant metaphors in *Already Dead* concerns the Lost Coast, an isolated section of coastline disconnected from major highways. After I asked how to get there, one local said, “They don’t call it the Lost Coast for nothing.” For Johnson, the Lost Coast represents a place of no return: to venture there, to even desire to venture there, is a kind of death wish. Though his novel is borne along by an elaborate, impressively-spun plot involving five murder schemes motivated by—what else?—greed, Johnson is largely interested in the interiority of his characters, all of whom have lost direction. Choosing to live in the north coast is

a resignation to that reality. To seek out a place even more remote and deserted is a sign of hopelessness.

Back at the Anderson Valley Brewing Company in Boonville, Jill and I were finishing our beers. Beside us lay a section of the *Anderson Valley Examiner*. On its front page was an article memorializing two Mendocino men murdered one year ago after crossing paths with a man who'd been squatting on private timber land, living in a makeshift bunker and growing opium. The murderer was eventually captured after a thirty-six day manhunt through the backwoods of the county.

It was time to move on. We planned to spend the night in wine country and hadn't yet secured a room. The following day we were due back in San Francisco to return the rental. Jill didn't take to my half-hearted suggestion to turn north again in search of the Lost Coast, and I guess I couldn't blame her. I was reaching for any reason to remain where we were, even if it might cost us our souls. As soon as we got back into our white Chrysler and headed south out of Boonville, the north coast was already feeling like a distant memory. ■





# Alessandro Porco XVII from The Minutes

Let's begin:

Come man know your span sing  
wilde curcles with no circumference  
where even the birds cannot pass  
an emptiness that contracts to a point  
no count is sure, there is no point  
to the act if you already know  
what will come to pass passes, bird-  
brained song man you know too well  
accounted for contracts the self.  
Odi et amo— Carolina

Jessamine & honeysuckle—  
lanceolate feelings— itchy contra-diction— sappy,  
swell!

You're as rare  
as a world  
of sound  
in which  
things occur  
unused in  
relationship  
you occur as  
the unused  
sound of  
things  
in relationship  
to a world  
in which  
you occur  
as the world  
of sound  
in love  
unused  
which  
is rare.

The facts are not strange to each other.  
I'm a fact no stranger to you  
than am I for you.  
Meeting adjourned.

Yaya Yao  
Hokkien Lesson 1:  
The Granddaughter's  
Phrasebook

*ang mo*  
red hair

*jin sui*  
very beautiful

*wah pah de leao see*  
I will beat you to death

*wah zaiiyah*  
I know

*wah gaiigee*  
I can do it myself

