

Introduction

DO PEOPLE CHANGE? The team of rivals currently competing for attention in my brain was consulted on this question long ago, but the jury's still out. On the one hand, from the early origins of Ayurvedic medicine to today, some psychologists have believed that basic temperament tends to remain unchanged, even in the worst of times: optimists in concentration camps still look on the sunny side, sour-minded cynics winning Nobel Prizes doubt their efforts have done any good, etc., etc. On the other hand, already in 1944, H. G. Wells penned a paper on the “illusion of personality,” arguing that the very idea of individuality (with its root meaning of indivisibility) was simply a “biologically convenient delusion.” Moreover, given the mess we’ve made of this planet (which may already be beyond repair), the very question may soon be moot. Better to focus on changing behavior, not feelings; if we don’t fix the former, the latter don’t matter.

One thing, thus, does seem certain: we don’t get to choose our circumstances. Whether when they change we change may not even be a logical question: if Marx was right, they are us. What storytellers do, in response, is weave meaning from the warp of events crossed by characters. And, as it turns out, this issue of the *Massachusetts Review* is packed with authors bringing to the page events that can only be described as (if you’ll pardon the expression) life changing. After a pair of Chase Twichell poems, composed in the key of no, we begin with a meditation by Vince Granata on forgiveness—though the actions prompting his essay are intimate, violent, and perhaps unforgivable. With the exception of Aleksandar Hemon’s “The Aquarium,” I can recall no other work of nonfiction that seems so simultaneously beautiful and impossible to imagine writing. Elsewhere, with his typical mix of surrealism and science, Daniele Del Giudice’s short fiction (ably translated by Anne Milano

Appel), “Shipwreck with Painting,” takes the crossing between art and catastrophe as its point of origin. And, oddly enough, both Edie Meidav’s “The Christian Girl” and Mhani Alaoui in “Anna’s House” find that origins themselves point toward catastrophe—inevitably so, insofar and as long as our deepest sense of community remains based on exclusion. Yet not all is darkness, we promise: age brings wisdom to the strictures of doctrine in Teresa Svoboda’s story “Mennonite Forest,” as it does to the ruptures of history, in Philip Metres’s remembrance of the poet Yunna Morits, and hers of Russias past. Two talented young writers close this number: Jeannie Tseng paints a protagonist bending under pressure, refusing to let ugly facts destroy her beautiful theory, and Steffan Hruby reworks one of Hemingway’s most roasted chestnuts, giving it a surprising new glaze. Behind all such changes, the wail of Gerald Stern’s horn player can be heard—as Stern makes clear, a displaced person doesn’t even have to move, not when history pulls the rug out.

Perhaps Ionesco put it best (in Donald M. Allen’s translation): after all, “I can buy a pocketknife for my brother, but you can’t buy Ireland for your grandfather.” In reflecting on change, confronted with its (im)possibility, we would do well to return to the Situationists and their reflections on psychogeography. The life and art of Jacqueline de Jong, which began in WWII, moving in and through the activism of the CoBrA group as well as the Situationist sixties, before deciding that *cultiver son jardin* was art for the twenty-first century, will thus surely be instructive. Wandering through these pages, just as I have, and simply following what you find, who knows what might happen? Change must be systematically explored.

Jim Hicks
for the editors