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The Good Books

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Art

- The War on All Fronts* and *Tower of Babble* by Brian Dettmer
Projections by Jenny Holzer, photographed by Attilio Maranzano

to produce brief, biting pieces of social satire. His reports are savage in their brutality. You like this very much.

Lost in this new country, in Reagan's America, you think about buying the book that afternoon because it will be a handy guide to achievement. That is how the middle-class soul, conscious of the forbidding cost of the hardcover, begins to rationalize the purchase. If there are any doubts in your mind, they quickly dissolve when on the first page that opens under your thumb you read: "Dedicated to the memory of Saadat Hasan Manto, who was never to see any of his work translated during his lifetime . . ."

Later, you read the stories and are pleased. But either right away or during later rereadings you discover that you can't always guess what the words in the original were. You know the titles of the individual stories and you write the original names on the page where it says "Contents." But the stories themselves, that is to say the language of the original, the words in Urdu, cannot be recovered. Memory is failing you. Everything around you is in English. You speak in your language mostly on the phone, when talking to relatives and friends. The stories that were to take you back home become reminders of a different complication. That is important, too, this discovery that you have become a translated man.

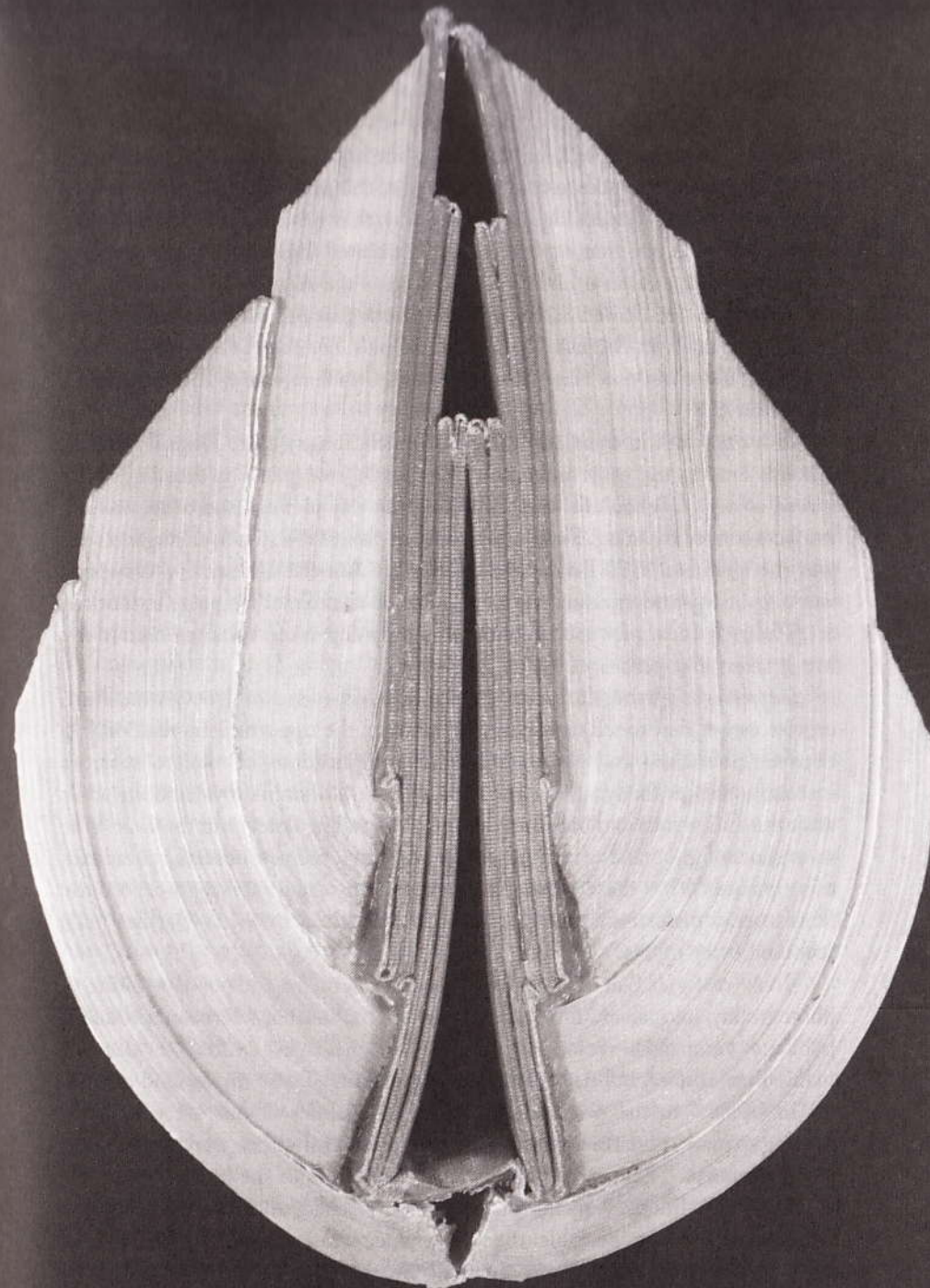
THE ESSENTIAL HAIKU | AIMEE BENDER

I'd bring Robert Hass's *The Essential Haiku*. I guess the Gideon Bible's presence here sparked this choice; if I were to swap it out of a hotel room, I think these haikus might do very well as a substitute, for a traveler groping in a drawer for a little insight or comfort. Each poem is a gift of stillness and awareness, and reading them actually does calm the mind. Hass highlights three writers in particular, three historical masters of the form—Bashō, Issa, and Buson—and they are at times profound, hilarious, and intensely vivid.

My friend Chris has quoted this Bashō poem often:

Even in Kyoto—
hearing the cuckoos cry—
I long for Kyoto

And isn't that kind of longing a reminder of something inexplicable about traveling and newness and also familiarity and stability? There are hundreds of such gems in this book.



Opposite and pp. 26 and 70: Brian Dettmer, *The War on All Fronts*, 2010, altered books (set of five), 7-3/4" x 8" x 6". Images courtesy of the artist and Saltworks.

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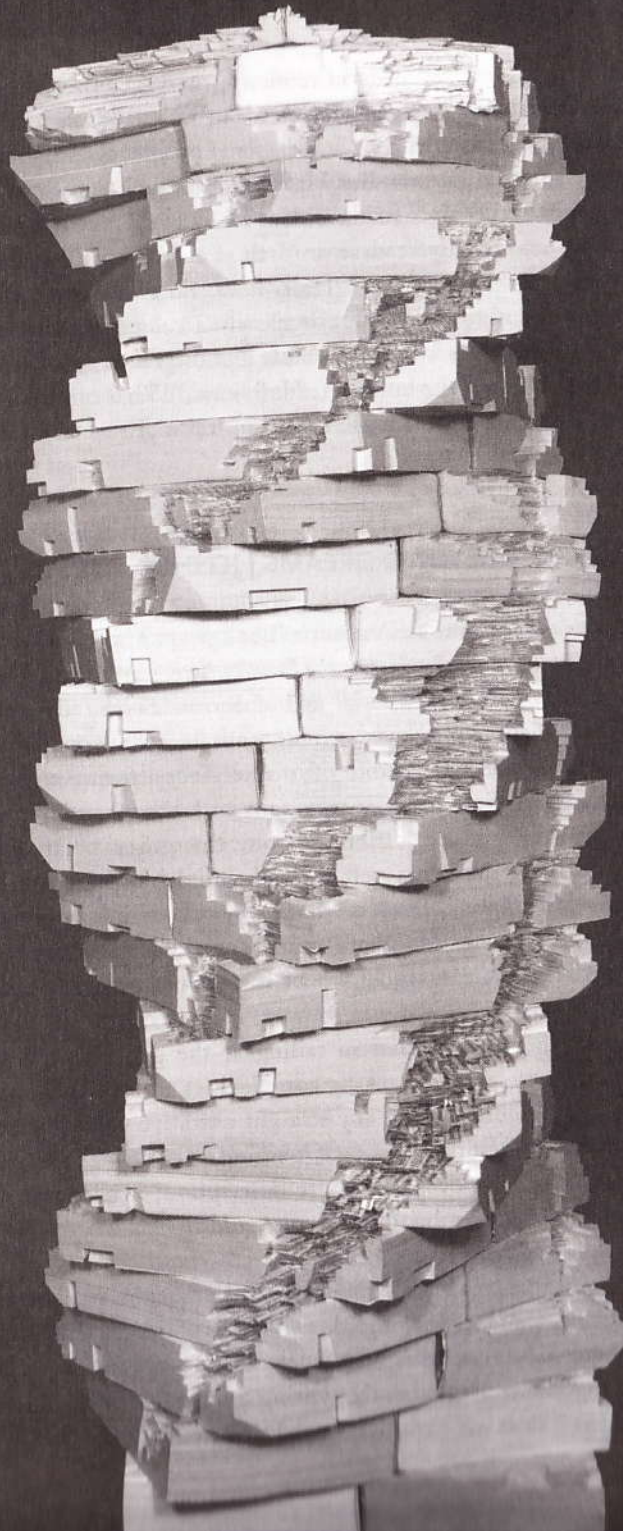
RANDOM HOUSE BOOK OF TWENTIETH CENTURY
FRENCH POETRY | BOB HICOK

Since you've been kind enough to ask which book translated into English I would leave where for whom, I would take Paul Auster's *Random House Book of Twentieth Century French Poetry* with me to my autopsy to be read by the scalpel of some hewolf or shewolf doc who doesn't know Pierre Reverdy, when being dead, still the lyric flower—the Gauls don't give a shit for narrative, do they—would bloom into this corpse-strewn garden as how I felt about Paris, which is a metaphor for how I felt the nut house even was beautiful, in that I slept beside a guy who was all the time trying to translate his head into lovely, almost cursive making thrashing birds trapped in his hands in the air whenever the restraints came off, like how do you say anything, all praise to the stumbling breaths, otherwise we are grunt systems, who knows

PICASSO'S MASK | JED PERL

André Malraux's *La Tête d'obsidienne*—published in English as *Picasso's Mask*—is grand, wild, idiosyncratic. Composed late in Malraux's life, after the death of Picasso, the book is histrionic, mythomaniacal—a recapitulation, on a chamber-music scale, of the themes Malraux explored in the multivolume studies of world art he'd been working on since the 1940s.

I've loved this careening, speculative tour-de-force of a book—part memoir, part treatise—since I first found it on a remainder table in a Greenwich Village bookstore late one night in the 1970s. Back then you could still buy a book in New York City as the witching hour approached. And *Picasso's Mask* is the work of a magus, a magician, a mesmerist. I know many people nowadays dismiss Malraux as a reactionary, a poseur. They have their reasons. But this Gaullist was also a modernist visionary, and this dissembler is at the very least a great illusionist when he is spinning his world-historical visions. In *Picasso's Mask*, his recollections of talks with Picasso in the 1930s provoke meditations on the nature and origins of the act of creation. Malraux time-travels. He writes of the art of the Greeks, Egyptians,



knows some German can compare the two versions. After some fidgeting back and forth between languages, I settled into the English with full confidence in the translation.

Grünbein's genius lies in his fluidity as a poet, his quick moves, enormous leaps that can span centuries—and in his talent for fast-freezing vivid and unforgettable images. Whatever he has stared at stares back at the reader, often sending shivers down the spine. The French have a phrase, “coup d’oeil,” which means “a glance”—literally, a quick movement of the eye. But “coup” can also mean a punch, a blow. Grünbein's images are like a blow to the eyes and the mind; they stir the reader to think about the horrors of history and the banality of contemporary life.

Looking is very important to Grünbein, as it should be to us. In the second poem of a brilliant and savage sequence, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Border Dog (not Collie),” he writes:

“Get out of the light,” you say, talking to the demon
 In the glass gone blind with looking,
 Giving you the glad eye these many years.
 Its harsh glance pierces your face
 Like a spy from the clan of the X-ray spirits.
 When you turn your back, your fear of
 Going rigid turns with you.

How close are poet and Medusa. But Grünbein's poem makes obvious that Medusa's dangerous power has nothing to do with hissing serpents. The power is in her eyes, which have seen the horrific. It is experience that looks out of her eyes and freezes anyone who returns her gaze. Perhaps because Grünbein grew up in the German Democratic Republic, a country where, as he puts it, “the best refuge was a closed mouth,” he has learned to speak brilliantly through image and indirection. In an essay, “Darwin's Eyes” (translated by Andrew Shields), he answers, indirectly, those who might ask, *Why keep looking at the dark and terrible in life?* Quoting a passage from Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, he says, “In some of the crabs the foot-stalk for the eye remains, though the eye is gone; the stand for the telescope is there, though the telescope with its glasses has been lost. As it is difficult to imagine that eyes, though useless, could be in any way injurious to animals living in darkness, I attribute their loss wholly to disuse.”

There is a tendency, a very human one, to escape horror and banality by turning inward. But Grünbein never escapes into hermeticism. He has chosen the more difficult work of looking and thinking deeply about what he has seen, and passing this on to his readers.



IN THE DARK OF THE HEART | MEENA ALEXANDER

How can you lose a book you love so much, one you are about to bring to a virtual book swap—just as soon as you touch it once more and open up the pages a crack and peek at the lines of the exquisite songs that the medieval poet Meerabai sang to her beloved Krishna? She was a wanderer and left house and home and in the end only her singing was able to save her. Her clothes frayed and her long hair blew about her tired body and her feet were chapped. I have long been inspired by the songs of Meera and cannot imagine my life without her. I keep searching for the book, so I can touch the indigo covers—but in a few hours I leave for the airport for a long journey to Venice, to Marco Polo Airport. I will have to keep Meera’s music in my head. The poems are translated from Braj Bhasha by Shama Futehally: “Here she comes squeezing berries for Him / those which ooze are chewed, then spewed at him.” Perhaps when I look down through the windows of the plane I will see the shadow of that great singer, that wandering woman, crossing the borders between land and sea. Though we know of no sea voyages for her, she would have understood, I think, what Pound meant by “periplum.”

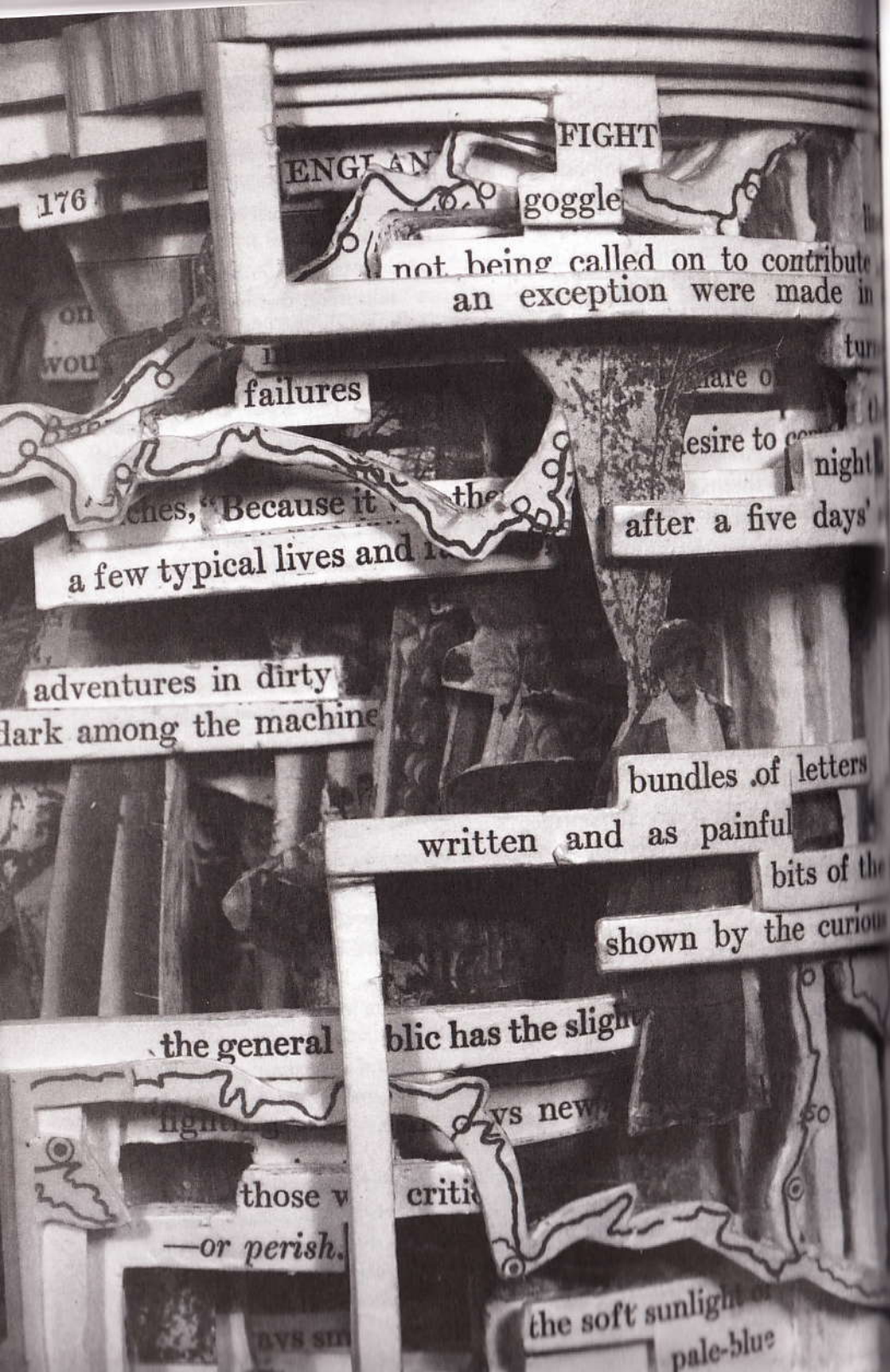
SORROW | NORA EISENBERG

If they hadn’t left it where it had no business being, I wouldn’t have taken it. I am not, by nature or habit, a thief. Anyway, it wasn’t so much robbing as swapping—for something far more appropriate.

How it happened: I am very tired from a morning of teaching and a long train ride and need nothing but a good night’s sleep for a busy next day of meetings. I’ve ordered and finished a room-service turkey club and a martini (other habits for another time), brushed my teeth, showered, and want only a few minutes of my nightly habit, a prerequisite for sleep. Just a few minutes is satisfactory and then I’m off. I can never sleep without reading something.

I try to think of poems about signs of spring. Shakespeare’s Sonnet 98, Blake’s “To Spring,” Claude McKay’s “Spring in New Hampshire,” Dickinson’s “A Light Exists in Spring.” It’s poetry I’ve come to prefer before sleep. When I’m too tired to follow literal meaning, rhythms and sounds take over, lulling me. I reach in my bag for the book of poetry I’ve begun to read. But it’s not there.

What will I do? On the bottom shelf of the night table, I see a book and grab it with gratitude. It’s the King James Bible. I try to remember lines from that Bible that had made it through the walls of my secular upbringing. *The*



Nicaragua's first minister of culture. His many collections include *Salmos*, published in English as *Psalms of Struggle and Liberation*, which received the Christopher Book Award in 1972. He was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1980.

Alan Cheuse is the author of four novels, three collections of short fiction, and the memoir *Fall Out of Heaven*. His short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *The Antioch Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Letters*, *The Idaho Review*, and *The Southern Review*. His most recent book is *Song of Slaves in the Desert*.

Martha Cooley is the author of *The Archivist*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. She has been published in *A Public Space*, *Writer's Chronicle*, and elsewhere. She lives in Brooklyn and teaches at the Bennington Writing Seminars.

Stanley Crawford is the author of five novels: *Log of the S.S. The Mrs. Ungentine*, *Travel Notes*, *Gascoyne*, *Petroleum Man*, and *Some Instructions to My Wife*. He has written for *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Country Living*. He and his wife live on a garlic farm in Dixon, New Mexico.

Alice Elliott Dark has written two collections of short stories, *Naked to the Waist* and *In the Gloaming*, and a novel, *Think of England*. Her work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *DoubleTake*. She received the O. Henry Award in 2000 for her short story "Watch the Animals." She teaches at Rutgers University.

Ludovic Debeurme was born in 1971. A French cartoonist and illustrator, he received the Prix René Goscinny in 2006 for *Lucille*, which has just been published in English. He lives in Paris.

Alain de Botton was born in Switzerland and educated in England, where he now lives. His books include *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, *The Architecture of Happiness*, and *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. He appears frequently on British television and in 2008 he founded an educational establishment called The School of Life.

Brian Dettmer is a visual artist. He has had solo shows in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Barcelona, and elsewhere. His work has appeared in such publications as *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *Wired*, *The Village Voice*, and *Modern Painters*.

Matt Donovan is a poet and a recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award. His first collection, *Vellum*, was selected for the Bakeless Prize in Poetry. His poems

have been published in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. He teaches at the College of Santa Fe.

Bruce Ducker is a lawyer and writer whose work has appeared in *The Yale Review*, *Poetry*, *Commonwealth*, *The Literary Review*, and other magazines. He received the Colorado Book Award for *Lead Us Not Into Penn Station* and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for *Marital Assets*. His most recent book is the novel *Dizzying Heights*.

Nora Eisenberg is a fiction writer whose work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, and many other publications. Her most recent novel is *When You Come Home*, which was a finalist for the Grub Street National Book Prize in Fiction. Her other novels include *Just the Way You Want Me* and *The War at Home*.

Najat El Hachmi was born in Morocco in 1979. She moved to Spain as a child and studied Arab literature at the University of Barcelona. She published a memoir, *Jo també sóc catalana*, in 2004. Her first novel, *L'últim patriarca (The Last Patriarch)*, appeared in 2008, and will be published in the United States later this year.

Anne Fadiman is a writer and editor. Her book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* won the National Book Critics Circle Award. She has written two books of essays, *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* and *At Large and at Small: Familiar Essays*. She teaches at Yale University.

Marcelo Figueras is an Argentinean writer and screenwriter. He received the Best Screenplay award at the Cartagena Film Festival in 2003 for *Kamchatka*, adapted from his own novel, which is also his first to be translated into English. He has published four other novels and written the screenplays for three other feature films.

Elizabeth Frank was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1986 for her biography *Louise Bogan: A Portrait*. Her essays and criticism have been featured in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Art in America*, and *ARTnews*. She teaches at Bard College.

Joshua Furst published a book of stories, *Short People*, in 2003, and a novel, *The Sabotage Café*, in 2007. His work has appeared in *Conjunctions*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Tyrant*, *Five Chapters*, and many other publications. He teaches at the Pratt Institute.