Fate
CONTENTS

Introduction
Sigrid Rausing

Domain
Louise Erdrich

Origin Myth
Mary Ruefle

Key Stroke
Will Self

How to Get Over Someone You Love
Adam Fitzgerald

Self-Made Man
Mark Gevisser

Apparition
Mark Doty

Some Heat
Miranda July

Miracles
with an introduction
by Francisco Goldman

The Ferryman Is Dead
Saša Stanišić

A Hebrew Sibyl
Cynthia Ozick

A Place on Earth
Anjan Sundaram

Blasphemy
Fatima Bhutto

The Atlantic Wall
Ianthe Ruthven
Where the World War Began
Joseph Roth

The Alphabet of Birds
S.J. Naudé

Salad Days
Barbara Ras

In the Shadow of the Hospital
Tim Winton

Books and Roses
Helen Oyeyemi

Hare in Love
Sam Coll

Tourist
Andrea Stuart

Living Goddess
Isabella Tree

The Making of a Writer
Kent Haruf

Notes on contributors
Introduction

The last time I wrote about fate was in an article for the Guardian on addiction, two years ago: ‘There is some evidence for a genetic disposition,’ I wrote, ‘but it’s not straightforward. Genes do not map out one’s fate; they map out possibilities of fates.’ But perhaps, as in the classic fate narratives, I am deluding myself, blithely unaware of how narrow our choices are, how genetically and socially predetermined our lives.

The pieces in this issue are concerned with fate in its most serious manifestations: love, sexuality, identity, death, illness, religion and war. We have new writers, S.J. Naudé and Sam Coll, alongside established ones, Will Self, Cynthia Ozick, Louise Erdrich, Tim Winton and Kent Haruf. We are publishing four poems, by Mark Doty, Adam Fitzgerald, Barbara Ras and Mary Ruefle, chosen by our new poetry editor, Rachael Allen.

We also have a piece by a writer long since dead: an essay on Sarajevo by Joseph Roth, written in 1923, translated here by Michael Hofmann. Given the centenary, I wanted something in the issue about 1914 and the war that was supposed to end all wars. We read Roth’s description of Sarajevo, aware that he is thinking backwards, to the war, while we think forwards, to the second war, to the Bosnian war, to the atrocities and the occupation. That hidden kernel of the future, our knowledge of what is to come, speaks to fate.

The issue is not all serious – the extract from Miranda July’s forthcoming novel is genuinely funny and so, in its own way, is the piece by new Irish writer Sam Coll – but it’s probably true that the tenor of this issue is melancholy rather than light-hearted. Thus Cynthia Ozick’s captivating new story describes the tragic fate of the illegitimate daughter of a Jewish trader in ancient Greece. ‘Domain’, our lead story by Louise Erdrich, is about life after death in a hyper-digital age, written with the deft and warped veracity of all great science fiction. Will Self channels J.G. Ballard’s last days in a surreal and poignant meditation typed on Ballard’s own typewriter. Tim Winton writes movingly about his fear of hospitals. S.J. Naudé, the other new writer in the issue, describes a former nurse going for Aids training in the South African outback. Naudé writes in Afrikaans, but like many Afrikaans speakers he is bilingual, and translates himself into English. There is something reminiscent of J.M. Coetzee in his language, and in the vision of the fate of South Africa, hanging in the balance.

When I thought about this theme I felt that the contemporary discourse on sexual and gender identity must be part of it. Here,
writer and academic Andrea Stuart describes, for the first time, her own transition to lesbianism. Her story is a measured defence of preference over destiny, of fluidity and of experimentation.

The transgender discourse has taken much of its narrative frame from the gay rights movement. Mark Gevisser is a South African writer, who is working on a project researching the Global Sexuality Frontier for the Open Society Foundations. We met and talked about the rise of transgender identity. It seems to me – Mark I think only partially agrees with this – that the idea of the simple structural opposite (the boy inside the girl’s body, the girl inside the boy’s body) might be temporal and fleeting, and that we don’t yet quite know how the model of gender identity will settle. But we do know that in at least some circles in America the gender you are born with is no longer assumed to be the gender you are destined to live.

The issue ends with Kent Haruf describing how, against significant odds, he became a writer. It is in some ways a narrative of anti-fatalism, or at least a story of self-determination – a good ending, I thought, and an oblique answer, if we need one, to the question of fate.

Sigrid Rausing
DOMAIN

Louise Erdrich
Asphodel

Seven corporations control the afterlife now, and many people spend their lives amassing the money to upload into the best. Others, like me, assume they will need a scholarship and pile up experiences. I piled up one too many. Shortly after my fall, I applied to Asphodel. I knew of course that this particular domain, or afterlife provider, was run by the oldest entity in the business. Asphodel was known to have the most secure and complete terrain. It was the first choice of artists, poets, academics, even famous politicians and movie stars. Teachers always chose Asphodel if they could afford it, and I was a teacher before my accident. I knew some parents who’d had to upload a child under grievous circumstances, and who chose Asphodel for the schools and the reliable surrogacy. For one other specific reason, too, Asphodel was most attractive to me. As a consequence, that first morning I was so nervous about the interview process that I refused pain medication. I wanted to be mentally sharp. As I was wheeled along the corridor, past the swooping black characters glazed into the hospital tiles, I thought I might have made a mistake. The pain was that distracting. But as soon as the questions began, I regained my concentration.

The interviewer was a square red cube sitting in the middle of the room on a stainless-steel table.

Your name?
Bernadette.

Named for the saint?
Yes.

Any other associations?
My mother was a Catholic and a theologian. She was chosen by the Church and completely subsidized, her understanding was that valuable. Since she was uploaded, gratis, we have communicated every day. But I chose Asphodel because I do not share her system of symbols. I was not raised in the formality of her religion, and find comfort in literature.

I smoothly volunteered that my father had chosen a premature upload before they were outlawed, and that his decision had been secured since then. I gave his name and effortlessly moved on. The cube did not react. My practice had paid off.

Where did you grow up?
North Dakota.

Do you mind if we scan?
No.

I closed my eyes, dizzy, and requested additional oxygen. As deliberately as I could, using the training my mother had insisted on since I was young, I called up a series of images. These began when
I was about five years old. They were detailed, visual, aural, descriptive, emotional, as concrete as I could possibly manage. I remembered the wooden front steps of our house, the paint worn off the risers to show grey wood. The temperature of the wood in every season. The green of Virginia creeper, the leaves fluttering off the porch in summer wind, stiff with morning dew, half wilted in full sun. The tiny knuckles of the vines clutching the wire of the screens. The lobes of lilacs. The scent. The sour green balls of new grapes and the heavy, peeling, brown loops of grapevines. And from the front steps the horizon and the sky. My mother had coached me to memorize the sky every morning and evening. I used the sky as my masking image – you could not get through it to the bad thing that had happened. The sky was my protection. I could pass through years of sky, a slide show of sky, endless mental snapshots. A thousand skies and a thousand more. I went through them at a leisurely pace, skipping no small detail. The sky had always been my favourite mental exercise, and one that, I now hoped, would increase my value for Asphodel.

Impressive.

The interviewer changed to a thoughtful maroon red and quit the scan.

You were coached?
By my mother.
Memory games as a child?
Yes.
The pain was becoming difficult to ignore. It was taking some attention.

An unusually pure visual memory. The best I have encountered.
Your mother did her job well.
She knew that the chances were slim that we would ever have the means to afford Asphodel.
The interviewer agreed, a quiet yellow tinge.
And then, this.
Yes.
Can you describe the accident?
Well, I was climbing. I climb buildings.
Free climbing. It is ... not exactly illegal.
No. But I was trespassing.
A small matter. We will not take that into consideration.
I was climbing the Guthrie Theater here in Minneapolis, where my father’s play was performed this year.
Yes, we know about your father.
The pain was, suddenly, nearly overwhelming. I began to breathe deeply, explosively, but could not help crying out.
What is it?
My legs, you know, everything.
Yes, said the interviewer, you’re broken. But you have a good chance for some limited capacity, enough to survive. You could have a life. A life here. Are you sure you want to ...?
Yes, yes, as soon as possible. Now.
So they came with the fentanyl and scheduled the upload for the next day.
Neural cascade

You say goodbye to your body very carefully. The toenails you’ve clipped and polished, the vulnerable instep, the ankles and shins you’ve barked, the sometimes unreliable knees, the calves you’ve shared, thighs your lover has grazed his hand along and inside, goodbye to the dark of you, the brilliant unshattering or ravelling that seemed at one time the way your spirit also travelled, outward, everywhere, beginning from the heated core. Goodbye to gut that pinched with hunger or split with gas, goodbye to asshole and nervous sphincter that permitted a loud fart when you laughed in a movie on your first date. Goodbye to vagina, wait, goodbye again to black, brown, purple, gold, mauve, red, bleeding leaves of skin, vulva, and stubborn fickle clitoris that maddened with indifference or was whiplash-sensitive – goodbye. Goodbye old uterus, old love, old capacious fist, and goodbye outraged liver. Goodbye sweet lungs with your faint bubbling black carcinogenic lace and your amazed resilience, and heart, dearest heart. So long pumps. Goodbye throat licked and suave collarbone in a low-cut black sheath, and arms that held and clung to other arms and other edifices, arms and legs that climbed and back I never really saw. Breasts always in the way. Nipples. Hands, oh my hands, piano-player hands. Hands that grasped and pulled and slapped and touched so tenderly beyond my appetite. Hands of my appetite, goodbye. Ears, neck, earlobes and mouth of a million golden tastes and mouth that knew food of every type and tastes of all description but above all things mouth, goodbye, and goodbye tongue, that loved the kisses and also the body of my husband. I do not have to say goodbye to my eyes. I’ll still see. And in fact I will feel the feelings of all parts of my body. I will feel the eidetic past. But the broken body I am leaving behind will be recycled for parts and then sold for remaining mineral content. Even the physical brain, soon transferred, neural file by file, molecule by molecule, into the liqui-chip. A dumb lump of fat will remain.

The holes will be drilled tomorrow. The liquid memory slowly introduced to the still-living brain. The software drug binds and copies as it eats the living memory. The drug contains a disciplined virus that takes instructions and is formulated to mimic and store consciousness – here is the beauty, the complexity – store the individual consciousness in a form that can be siphoned from the brain when loading is complete and then absorbed by Charon. She, the program, is the reader of my life text who will transfer me into the field.
Last night, before I went to sleep, I had the nurse access my mother and push the screen up close to my face so that we could talk. She had chosen to be old and reassuring, lined and pallid, with a sweetness in her face I can only remember rarely in earthly life. We talked and talked.

Mama, what will it feel like? Will it hurt?
You’ll be all right.
All right like in childbirth? All right after I’m ripped apart?
Her face slackened. She didn’t want to say. But she loves me, and she did.

The virus cannot accomplish its task without your full alertness. You’ll feel it all. Old emotions. Every pain and pleasure. Every fuck-up and every fear. Only fast and furious. You will believe you are going mad. (They do not read you because they do not find readings during the process reliable, so don’t worry, they won’t see anything.) Still, it is a drowning. Some don’t surface, it is true. But you will come back, I promise. Remember, I made you strong. What helps is to find an image. Something to hold on to.

We stared at each other for a long time. Her face kept flickering through the many ages and personae she’d assumed. Her face would not be the image I’d hold on to. I needed something more solid.

Pick him, she said, suddenly, softly.
I thought at first she meant my husband, or my son, though his image is inaccessible. But she didn’t. And now I saw it in her face.
I know why you’re choosing his domain.
Her voice trembled, a whisper.
And she was right. The one uncontaminated truth. My father, my changeless hatred. I’d hold on to him.

Fasten your seat belt, it’s going to be a bumpy ride.
Are you kidding?
I’m not good with reassurance, said the uploader. But you’re lucky. You’re going to a good place.
The technicians put me in a flexangle, a hard gel that closes around you up to the chin. When I was immobilized, the woman picked up the drill.
You’re going to feel this. Everybody feels it. Try thinking past it.
While you can still think, said the other.

They try to introduce the liquid as slowly and gently as possible, but at a certain point it saturates. By then the virus is moving quickly, humming along, sparking and devouring, capturing, destroying. From the first instant, I know that I cannot endure it for another instant, even to gain eternal life. And then I do endure it. I go on. I have his face in focus for a moment, here and there, but then he
changes and I just hold on to the hate.

I whip around it like a pole. I fly off it like a flag. That hatred, planted in calcareous shit, gets me through the first part. But then it wilts and at the base of it is love.
Field of asphodel

They let my body stay where it was for the hours it took the system to read me, and then for me to focus my new eyes. The results are better when you get to see the technicians put away your old carcass, apparently, because I saw them do me. Oh, they were respectful enough, took the tubes out without yanking. But I could see well enough so that I could tell my body had stiffened a bit already and I’d shat myself all the way up my back straight out of my diaper.

Well, never again.

I have a new body now and it’s made of thought.

When I arrived in Asphodel, I was placed in the transition program, a cross between purgatory and a hospital, a quiet, calm place where my task was to understand the entity that I would now be, forever. Here, the siphoners come to pick and choose what they want to add to their domain. Using human memory they are building a complex and ordered world that replicates and outdoes the first one, into which we are all born. Asphodel is the deepest and most thoroughly finished, but there are still gaps in its reality, places, even in the transition program, where the tiles quit or go rubbery when they are actually ceramic or where the windows contain the wrong light for the hour of the day. But the personnel are fully integrated and know not to change too drastically while you are looking at them, which is something I cannot do when I first arrive.

Remember, your appearance reflects your every mood, thought, emotion, says a silky woman. Her hand is on my arm. She has given her hand just the right amount of warmth and my own memory of skin blooms in response.

Like right now, master it, master it, she croons. Yes, yes, you may take a deep breath. The infinite microbiocircuitry that is now you will remember what it was to take a deep breath and your brain, or the superfille of your brain, will remember it too. Take a deep breath. Your fear is purple. Your appearance.

I’m a cloud, I say, looking down at my legs. Insubstantial as a cloud. And I’m still in pain. The fuck! I’m still in pain!

Wait, she says, calm yourself and take a deep breath.

I do. The pain is gone.

And remember how your legs feel. Your workout two days before your fall.

Yes.

I look down. My legs are perfect. I am naked.

What were you wearing?

What the hell? Maybe I was wearing a low-necked black cocktail
dress.
Now you’re cooking! Her voice is delighted. I smell egg, onions, mushrooms frying in butter, and my mouth waters.
I think I’m hungry.
Yes, you’re hungry. And you’re going to eat. And if you concentrate fully on what you are eating, it will be the best thing you’ve ever tasted.

So how to find him. How to kill him. How to savagely or subtly murder my father in a world where there isn’t any death?

I look into the mirrored wall as I am wondering this and my face is faecal, feral, frantic, fraught, festering. No facade.
I work then for months (the sun comes up here, the sun goes down) on my control. Then one day I ask how we get places. I am now, because this is how everyone begins, right where I left off. I am in Minneapolis and have my apartment. But my skies in North Dakota and any other useful memories have been added, painstakingly, to the deeply convincing fabric of this world.

We have a marvellous transportation system. Very real. You can book flights almost anywhere now, take trains, whatever you want. Or you can scroll.
Can you teach me to do that?
Nobody can teach it.
How does it work? What happens?
Lucid dreaming. You teach yourself to dream yourself wherever you want to be. You have to learn how to stay conscious in your dream, but not to wake up. You don’t want to drop yourself.
And people? Can I look someone up from my past?
Of course, once you’ve got the hang of it. But it will be hard to tell whether you’re accessing the actual person or just your memory of the person.
I feel funny asking this, I say, but something occurred to me.
Ask anyway.
Is there any way out of here? Do people exit? Leave? Are they ever expelled?
She turns bright pink. An orange bubble bursts from her lips. She laughs in surprise.
No, she says, of course not, that never happens, except ...
Her eyes go black. Her face and arms fade into the wall. I can see through her. It is as though she’s made of tissue and her voice is faint.
It is rare. Yet people have been erased by other people here, she says. Then she readjusts. She’s solid and rosy.
But does it take enormous strength of will to do something like
that, I say, and time and control?

Of course, she says, her voice a whisper. Shock. There was an assassin sent many years ago, I heard, from a former life. He caught the victim completely unaware. Threw him into shock so he just – she laughs at the ridiculous act there is no other word for – deleted himself.
The library

My father has become the library. He will be dangerous to enter. In his time, he was a leading playwright and scholar. But his childhood memories of the library were most interesting to Asphodel, and he has been hard at work constructing this new library ever since he entered Asphodel. His childhood library still exists in the small town where he grew up, a sweet old county library made of red sandstone with brass handles on the doors and a great oak desk, stained dark, where the books are checked out and returned. He remembered every inch of it, and more, he remembered every library he had studied in as a young man, and older, as he became the kind of person who used libraries exclusively and bought real books of the old kind, made of paper and print and glue. He knew the smell of them and the weight of them and the texture of their covers. What books he didn’t know he could imagine in convincing detail. Every book in the world has long been auto-scanned into our universe and so it only takes the proper thought, an operational thought, to fill those tangible but empty ciphers of books with words. This, then, is my father’s work. The library is his mind. He is filling it with an infinite number of books he can play in, hide in, which he can be part of whenever he chooses. To murder him in that library may be impossible, but it must be done. I have to surprise him to death. Make him completely vulnerable and open. His mind must be utterly relaxed so that when I strike he cannot deflect the blow. And the blow, it must be true and final. He cannot be erased by increments, but just like that. One blow. One instant. He must reverse. Blow up. Disintegrate. Delete.