



Ho Lin

Bibliography Biblioteca

The bookstore looked nothing like a bookstore. Lacking identifying signage or awning, the interior obscured by tinted windows and half-drawn velvet curtains, one could mistake it for a hip speakeasy. One had to be trudging in slow-motion, as the Reader was, be tickled by enough curiosity to come to a complete stop, press face to window, allow time to adjust to the dimness within, and only then did the shadows gain definition, paperbacks and hardcovers gaining substance and sustenance under the Reader's gaze.

Once upon a time the Reader possessed hundreds of books. Stacks upon stacks, listing towers of dozens, each tower a category. Respectable fiction, science fiction, mysteries, biographies, music, travel, random preserved books from the sun-kissed days of youth and the dilated years of teenage-dom. The vast majority of the books unread, what with work through daylight and dark, social obligations, family crises, whatnot. Books could not be entered lightly; they deserved attention, investment, even the deceptively thin volumes packed with wall-like paragraphs. But someday they would be read, of that the Reader was convinced. Each book would be pried from its tower in turn, as delicate an operation as Jenga, the book becoming something more and

different than it was as it revealed itself, ideas and characters and places and times taking hold, blossoming beyond a specific font and color and width of spine, more than a mere tangible fact.

Life moved too fast back then, and that was before the Significant Other. Then things moved even faster and very next thing, they'd moved in together. Rushed, rash, impulsive, impetuous, all of the above. The Reader understood all that yet didn't mind. The Reader was go-with-the-flow, the Reader wasn't naïve, didn't demand perfection—perfection was reserved for books, and then only on rare occasions. Their new shared home had more square footage but the floorplan was clunky, with no way to comfortably accommodate the Reader's collection. The Significant Other (or Sig-O, as the Reader referred to the Significant Other in the Reader's personal journal, back when journaling seemed useful) wasn't into reading. Sig-O, like most people who could keep up the The Culture, was the TV and social media type: fast thoughts, stringent conclusions, short words, the day packed with them. The Reader, on the other hand, was given to saying, *A book has to be read quietly to be understood*. The Reader had forgotten where that maxim was from, who had written or said it, but it seemed a solid enough foundation for a world view. Sig-O said the Reader was an old soul; a compliment, the Reader thought at first, and later a veiled complaint.

Sig-O suggested: *Why don't you just replace your books with e-books?* The Reader bought a second-hand Nook instead of a Kindle as a vague protest against the idea. Rarely used it. Many of the Reader's books hadn't survived the evolution to electronic format. Still more had disappeared after a printing or two, eluding the reach of Amazon and rare book sites alike. The Nook had its own issues—closing quotation marks replaced by random words, for instance. *“And what would you say, especially said Allen, “about that? especially* The touchscreen grew insensible in the corners. Side buttons sticky and stuck, books fast-forwarding from title page to appendix in seconds. Soon the Nook's minuscule memory was full. More memory cards needed. The tiny cards misplaced, as is the fate of all tiny objects. Regardless, e-book were the opposite of pleasure. Large and small volumes flattened out, the same monotonous fonts and layouts. Audiobooks were no better. A stranger's voice hijacking tone, texture, tempo. Who needed it when the original unsullied print versions still existed, the Reader's towers relocated to the entryway just past the vestibule, lined up and down the lengthy impractical Victorian hallways. Every so often a tower would be blown over by the wind of the Reader or Sig-O's passing, books toppling in multi-syllabic thumps. The Reader didn't mind. It was a pleasure to reconstitute each tower in precise order, clearing out dust bunnies, smelling the new-book smells that persisted beyond all reason, the now-familiar cover designs as pregnant with emotion as any childhood memory, even more than that, because the book's innards had not yet been exposed, and thus the pairings of cover images and titles suggested multitudes of as-yet-unconfirmed possibilities. *Hard Rain Falling*, a black-and-white blurred shot of a '70s coupe motoring down a local road flush with trees: Childhood? Crime? Romance? Escape? All of the above, but in which order?

The Black Book, a shadowy figure wearing what might be a fedora, prowling across midnight cobblestones: A mystery with existential undertones, the past going all wrath on the present? A treatise on modern life, lone and lonely? All would be known, someday, someday.

Sig-O tried being helpful. Suggested reordering the books by size, constructing true towers, fat bottoms, tapered tops. Or arranging each tower by color, forming rainbow columns, interior design statements. The Reader couldn't abide. It would destroy the order of things, the subtle relations each book had developed with one another. Impossible to imagine that National Geographic travel book alongside anything except the César Aira book, for example, the end of travel and the beginning of fiction, letter A, serving as a constant reminder that the Reader was supposed to buy a book by Kōbō Abe at some point, because in a strange nonsensical way, the National Geographic book conjured thoughts of travel, Far East, Japan, Abe, so it made sense that Abe would take his rightful place there someday.

For all of Sig-O's haranguing and threats, this state of affairs lingered. Relationships, compromise, patience, so forth. Meanwhile, life shot past, time measured by the changing of bedsheets, as one sleepwalks through certain seasons and awakens to years later. Sig-O suggested to the Reader: *If you're going to keep books, at least read them.* But when? Hours after dinner were designated TV time and Sig-O insisted on company during TV time: *Did you catch that? Why did they do it that way?* Bedtime reserved for heart-to-hearts, occasional mechanical sex. The daily commute? Music squawking from others' phones, smells from adjacent armpits overpowering, conversations intruding. *Is carpet or tile better, what could be worse than mass murder, she walked into that weed store thinking it was a tea shop.* The Reader took to reading during random silent moments at home; Sig-O would wear a *Really?* look, especially when reminding the Reader about an unfulfilled task or obligation, for the third or fourth or fifth time, none of it registering because for the Reader, reading had precedence over listening. In this drip-coffee fashion, the Reader completed a handful of books every year, the total number of finished volumes not quite enough to fill one file storage box.

Early on in their relationship, The Reader bought Sig-O a book that held particular significance for the Reader. Even inscribed it, something the Reader was loathe to do, as the Reader believed books should have multiple lives and whether through owner death or donation seek new homes, free from scrawls that denoted possession or ownership. But the Reader was feeling good about Sig-O, so a personalized message was added: *In memory of our first "urban hike" and what you said about people finding each other—hope you enjoy this book as much as I do.* The Reader had almost written *Hope this book means as much to you as it does to me* but such unabashed extremism would be foolhardy. The cover of this new edition was none too enthralling—why did modern book covers insist on fattened-up fonts, blobby backgrounds, primary colors?—and just before purchase, the Reader debated whether it would be better to gift Sig-O the older copy

already in the Reader's possession, but that specific copy had too much weight and history to risk for what was after all only a nascent relationship. It dated back to that rough patch in college, flailing, meaning of existence lost, that poetry workshop which suggested the Reader wasn't meant to be a poet, or as the professor had said, *I don't think you're meant to be a poet*, the Reader seeking solace in the student bookstore shelves while boot-soggy rain raged outside, enticed by a book cover, canoe beached on a lake shore, the prow pointing towards water and a foggy indefinite horizon, the image mirroring the Reader's state, the book written by a C.K. Harbor who hadn't been heard from before or since the book's publication, and although the book was reserved for a lit class the Reader wasn't enrolled in, the Reader appropriated it without even a twinge of guilt afterwards, because the book would tell the Reader everything about early-twenty-something life, the book becoming the Reader and vice-versa, like favorite clothes, and even though the Reader was now decades older and only superficially resembled that college student in thought or word or deed, this specific printing with this specific canoe on the cover an irreducible part of him, so no, it would not be parted with, and besides, the person who would become Sig-O wouldn't begin to comprehend or appreciate the little details, such as the college bookstore price sticker on the cover—just \$7.98, those were the days!—or the wrinkles cracking the spine like striations of archaeological sediment, or the patina of age blooming at the edges of each page, or the splash of sauce on page 45 from the local pizza joint, long since closed, where the Reader had spent nights reading the book, the taste of pepperoni and the smell of traffic and cigarettes just outside the door fused with the text in the Reader's memory, or the name C.K. Harbor tripping off the Reader's mental tongue like the rain outside the bookstore that day, or the back cover blurb by a fellow author that was better and truer than anything else that author had ever written (the Reader was compelled to purchase every one of that author's books after reading the blurb, only to confirm this fact). So a newer copy it was. The one who would be Sig-O thanked the Reader. *Your handwriting is lovely* said Sig-O.

Years later, the Reader was compelled to read that book again, couldn't find the original copy. Misplaced in the wrong tower, like a telltale brick eons older than other bricks in the wall? Lost during the move to the new home? No store or website had that particular edition in stock; in fact, all editions were out of print, as the world had forgotten about C.K. Harbor. In better times that would have been an ego boost: *I'm among the proud few who recognizes this writer's genius!* Now it was just further aggravation. Sig-O's copy would have to do, for now. Only Sig-O didn't know where it was. Further questioning only increased the vagueness of Sig-O's responses. *I don't know, maybe the garage? The crawlspace? So many unlabeled boxes of old stuff there.* Hours later, smudgy with dust and cobwebs, the Reader had turned up nothing. Sig-O said with not so much as a shrug: *Guess you'll have to buy a new copy.* The Reader didn't tell Sig-O no more copies existed. Didn't say that the Reader was disappointed in Sig-O because Sig-O clearly didn't care about Sig-O's copy of the book in the least. Didn't declare that the copy given to Sig-O back when that person wasn't Sig-O was intended to be a statement about what

they were then and what two people in a relationship could be at the best of times, gifted as a treasured keepsake, a Rosetta Stone to the reader's fucking heart, even if Sig-O was now given to reply to every question the Reader asked with *I have no fucking idea*, spoken in flatline, as if the Reader should have known better than to ask that question, that it was a trial to be asked that question, and Sig-O couldn't even be bothered to flash a scowl or huff in exasperation, the invisible line between concern and apathy crossed.

After the betrayal over the lost book it should have been over for the Reader and Sig-O but years continued to pass; there comes a point when everything in life tips, see-sawing from forwards to backwards, the two of them retreating to what they were before they met. More books joined the ranks of the towers in the hallways, front lines in an unspoken battle campaign. Except Sig-O wasn't on any kind of offensive, not any more. Sig-O had other concerns, thwarted ambitions to reignite: promotion at work, trip to Paris, new nieces and nephews, the surprise appearance of Northern Lights in the spring nighttime skies. The Reader noted these happenings like one notes a glass of water, a fart, a passing car that spits gravel. The Reader had prioritized finding the original edition of that much mourned C.K. Harbor book. Lists were created of bookstores, each bookstore checked off, working radially, ten miles away, twenty, across state lines, five hundred, one thousand, international destinations, Paris too, where Sig-O indulged in baguettes and eclairs while the Reader walked alone on cracking knees down side streets and turnarounds and alleys to inspect bookstores with nary an English book, gift and souvenir shops masquerading as bookstores, cafés that had a miserly shelf or two of books. The years-long crusade expanded to books from youth and teenage-dom and young adulthood also long gone, as the memory of one forgotten book led to memories of others, an unending domino chain. Would that children's picture book *Goodnight Moon* retain magic and profundity all these years later? Would that Asimov book reek of the age it was written, or would its setting and speculations resonate and stand in vivid contrast to today's sci-fi and fantasy books in which characters would feel bad most of the time, then good for a moment, then bad again?

The Significant Other's mother became ill: procedure, complications, stroke, more procedures. No question Mother should live with them a while. Of course the Reader's books would have to go. Mother and her walker required room to maneuver. Garage full, crawlspace overflowing, maybe the Reader could rent out a storage room for the books, but money was tight now that the Reader was out of work, and that might have been the greatest irony at all, that the Reader had become a writer, only not the kind the Reader wished to be, but a *technical* writer, because the world runs on refrigerators and refrigerator manuals must be clearly written, and not just refrigerators, but also televisions and apps and medical instruments and SUVs, all requiring concise, cool, robotic instructions for use, and after years of admittedly bog-average work, the Reader's services were no longer required, because AI could do the Reader's job, not even quite as well, but well enough to justify the cost savings.

Still the Reader refused to surrender the books, stuffing what could fit in closets, all rules of organization in abeyance, the towers eroding as if ages were passing. Sig-O was paring down too, removing photos of the two of them from the hallway, selling off their TV room couch, their accumulated lives evaporating with each subtraction. The morning before Mother arrived, the books were gone altogether. *It was time* said Sig-O. Who gave Sig-O the right to make such a sweeping decision for both of them? *Face it, you were never going to read them anyway* said Sig-O. Where did they go? Sold at some local bookshops, donated to the library. *The bookstore people were such lawyers about the whole thing, it was annoying. Once we accept these books you can't get them back, no haggling over the payout, if you choose in-store credit you must use by this date, yaddaya yaddaya.* The Reader didn't even care how much the books earned in cash back, even though the figure Sig-O quoted was ridiculous: around fifty dollars. The Reader demanded to know which bookstores, which library. Sig-O refused to say. *It's over*, Sig-O kept saying. *It's over*. The Reader said *You're goddamn right it is* and spent the rest of the day driving to all bookstores within a twenty-mile radius, gaze magnetized to every bookshelf, seeking a familiar spine or font even as the thought *Too late* beat hard against the edges of the Reader's brain. Fruitless, defeated, the Reader returned home, still processing the absence, the halls echoing hollow with his footsteps. The Reader had been preoccupied with mortality and had concluded that his memorial would be a shelf inside a mausoleum lined with rows of his favorite books—*Who was this person? Read and you'll know*. What did it mean now the Reader was book-less? Did purgatory await? *Where's your books? No? Well we can't do much with you then.* All this time and the Reader had never maintained a definitive list of every book in the collection. Quick, pen to paper, write down every title, if that faintest of faint chances ever came to resurrect the collection, but even the covers were fading from memory, crowded out by the ephemera of the day's events, useless information like the new crack in a favorite beer glass, the newest real estate alert in the inbox, the dabs of pigeon shit on Sig-O's car window, and then even these bits of information would be usurped by equally useless crap the next day, so on, so forth, forever.

So it was now like this: Mother in the house, Reader sulking at the north end of the house, away from the sunlight, Sig-O toiling at the office miles away, none of them happy where they were. Mother talked all the time. Stories and stories and nary a point in sight, the worst kind of story. The thought of her there in the house all day, telling meaningless stories with stroke-slurred speech...the Reader struggled to maintain composure in the face of it. The Reader would be in a room, Mother in another, and Mother would always find him, clomping down the hall, her walker squeaking and sliding, taking ages to get to him, the most ineffectual horror movie villain of all time, and when she arrived she would sit with a huge *Uhhhh*, as if every tendon in her body had snapped, and then she would begin, the sound of it like a 78-rpm record played at 33-rpm speed: *The weather today reminds me of... Is it true what they say about the crime rate... When*

*my husband was alive...Did you hear about the hiker who fell off the cliff... Somehow she would end all the stories with *It's interesting, isn't it?* The Reader smiled, nodded, clueless as to what aspect of anything was interesting. Weeks this went on for, until the Reader finally thought *Fuck it*, although not in those words because an erudite person would have a better way of saying that, but it had been so long since the Reader had been exposed to literary flourishes, so fuck it, *Fuck it* it was, and as Mother sat and went *Uhhhh*, the Reader spoke before Mother could: *You know what's wonderful about books? They invite you to leave the real world and construct a new one, encourage you to interpret the author's intentions, the act of reading bringing you somewhere neither you or the author could fully expect. I read this novel back in college...**

And the reader went on to describe that book, that accursed unattainable book by C.K. Harbor, the one whose finer points were already escaping memory, its resonance dampened years later, like the last ripples from the center of a lake reaching shore, but the feeling was still there, dammit, and although it was impossible to describe in a way that communicated all that, still the Reader went on about the plot, the characters, a moment or two that crystallized the book's worth—that moment when the woman and the man make their own individual decisions, the combined outcome resulting in heartbreak, epiphanies reached in someone else's company, those concluding paragraphs, so incomplete yet so final, the language slowing to the spaces between heartbeats, the world condensed in a closing line that was so quotidian yet told the entire story: *Down the street, a car retreated, the rumble of it like the dying aftershock of an explosion.* The entire dissertation went on for near half an hour and by the end of it the Reader was heavy with sweat. All had been said; if Mother wanted to do her usual thing now, the Reader could accept it. Instead, Mother nodded. *I had a book like that*, she said. *Stuck with me, made me think about things differently.* She named a novel that the Reader had once read and enjoyed, not to the extent that Mother did, but it was a perfectly respectable book. In fact, it was a more adventurous book than the Reader would credit Mother for being aware about, let alone read. *Good one*, said the Reader. *I remember that part when...* And Mother knew exactly which part the Reader was about to talk about. *That road trip*, she said. *What happened in New Orleans.* That was all that needed to be said. They both basked in their shared knowledge, the emotional telepathy of it. *Been years since I read it*, Mother sighed.

I'll be back soon, the Reader said. One could order Mother's book from Amazon, but this situation was post-haste. Today would end with either a brand-new or used copy in her hands, let the fates fall where they may on whatever version the Reader could find, the old bookstore list resurrected for this new purpose. The Reader would spend days reading the book to her, and then other books she liked—at least, the ones the Reader was happy to read—and in this way they would weather these hours together, reader to listener, freed from thought or decision, out on the porch if the sun was out, maybe even down at the local park if they were feeling ambitious. The Reader could set Mother up in a camping chair purchased long ago, when the Reader believed

the Significant Other could be convinced that camping was a worthwhile activity, Mother in floppy sun hat, Reader lying on his back on a blanket, the position adding reverberation to the Reader's voice, the book held up in the exact right position to block the afternoon sun from the Reader's eyes, only the Reader and Mother and whichever flies and cicadas wished to be there, and as the Reader got a handle on the author's tone and rhythm and characters, the spoken performance would improve, the Reader a master storyteller by the end of the book, shifting between characters' voices easy-as-you-please, smooth as an F1 racer gear shift, pausing just enough at meaningful moments to let the import of what had been spoken linger. This could be a new vocation for the Reader. Audio books, podcasts, so many possibilities. It was all coming together after having been apart for too long.

The Reader had just exited the third bookstore on the local list when the Significant Other texted: *Where are you? Mom had another stroke*

The Reader imagined Mother doubled up on the floor, alone, *Uhhhh* coming out of her at regular intervals, calling out to the Reader to help, unaware the Reader wasn't there. As if divining the Reader's thoughts, Sig-O texted again: *Why weren't you at home? We're at the hospital*

Then: *I can't believe you just left her alone*

And then: *She's going into surgery, where the fuck are you*

The Reader didn't respond, couldn't respond. The Reader knew Sig-O knew the Reader was already irate at Sig-O about giving away the books, among other things. The Reader knew Sig-O believed the Reader capable of any variety of domestic atrocities. The Reader suspected Sig-O suspected that the Reader had abandoned Mother out of spite, pettiness, vengeance. The Reader could hand out nothing but *That's not true* and *I swear I was just* til the heat death of the universe and Sig-O would not be satisfied, Sig-O was as far from being satisfied as Sig-O would ever be, not that the Reader could blame Sig-O, because Sig-O had put up with a lot, it must be said, or at least thought, because it had never been said, which was the entire problem right there. What it all meant was that Mother's book had to be found. All would be in vain otherwise. The Reader checked the best used bookstore in town; no joy. *We can order it for you and have it here in a couple of days*. The Reader always appreciated their consistent level of service, even if it was insufficient on this day. Over to the downsized branch of the national book chain, situated in a lonely desolated corner of the mall, a far cry from the three-level emporium it used to be, and past the facades of bestsellers and remaindered books was nothing, as expected. Onward to the crappy little book nook the locals often confused for *charming*, a shelf of misbegotten discount books dusting up the sidewalk just beyond the door, the owner's cats roaming and shedding unchecked inside, books piled up without any sort of guiding principle, dust thick as fog, those

lucky enough to corral the owner for a query awarded grunts and shakes of the head for their effort. An hour spent inspecting every nook and shelf, even those labeled Philosophy and Local Interest and Cooking. Zilch.

On and on it went, the next bookstore, then the next, until what was the warm afternoon breeze became the prickly winds of evening, and the Reader exhausted every bookstore in town, so it was on to the next town over, even though most of the bookstores were already closed, and Sig-O had gone silent, which only meant that Sig-O no longer cared, or maybe the worst had happened and Mother was gone, and if that was the case the Reader didn't want to know, because this quest took precedence, as the night went all black and only the streetlamps guided the Reader as home got farther and farther away, and the Reader's phone died, and by the middle of the following morning the car was out of gas, or had crashed, the Reader was too zoned out to remember which, just that the car was half-on, half-off the curb and it wasn't moving, so the Reader got out and walked, through an unfamiliar, unlikable city, and then the next town over, and then another city, each bookstore the same brand of disappointment as the last, the sun unrelenting no matter where the Reader went, until the sun was gone and night was back, and the Reader walked on into the next day, and a few more, or at least it felt like a few more, but for all the Reader knew it was still the same day, only the day wasn't ending so the Reader was inventing the passing of days, mind usurping reality, until the Reader saw the bookstore that didn't look like a bookstore, tinted windows, velvet curtains, no signage, and the Reader thought *Fuck it.*

Behind the curtains, the interior was just as anonymous, one unlabeled dark-wood shelf running into the next, near ceiling-high, all the shelves bristling with books, light from the dangling pendant lamps funneled down between the shelves in mini-spotlights so that walking between them was like venturing through a museum exhibition, the smell of the books rich with pine. At the front desk and register was the kind of woman one expects in a quality indie bookstore: sensible hair and glasses and makeup and voice, a demeanor that said *Feel free to ask anything*, and the man talking to her was indeed asking, and telling a lot besides, going on about a book he was looking for. The man had the slouchy look of someone who didn't care about much, but very much cared about the things he cared about, and he treated the woman as a confidante, not quite a lover but maybe getting there, because she was impressed by what he was saying, his passion, his insight, the book's critique of modern society which of course was also his own, *It's a shame what this neighborhood has come to...I was in another bookstore and they had no clue about any of the books I was asking about...you can tell how good a bookstore is by their beat poetry collection...You know in New York, there's a bookstore that's just so wild...* Transfixed, the Reader observed the man go on and on while the woman at the register nodded and smiled—Job had nothing on her patience—and the man talked books and the overall shittiness of the world, how cell phones were instruments of our destruction, the one time he had read a book on the subject

and another book he had read about AI and the Singularity, and even though the Reader agreed on the man's general conclusions (précis: we're screwed)—hell, the Reader hated AI as much as anyone—yet the way the man was talking about it was so over-emphatic that it made the Reader embarrassed to be sharing the same opinion, and the man concluded with a smile that was more like a snarl, Don't you agree this is fascinating, and the Reader suspected that this wasn't a one-time event but something that happened on a regular basis, this man here in the bookstore, leaning against the front desk in an oh-so-familiar way, whiling away the afternoons telling the woman what the shape of things were, the woman receptive throughout, and the man was finally ready to leave, but wait, something else had occurred to him, something about how there were no longer any great writers, just like classical music gives way to jazz and then rock and then pop and then pap and finally poop, and still the woman listened, her eyes never leaving him for a second, and the Reader got the unshakable impression that she really wasn't that invested in what the man was saying but she looked for all the world that she was, an award-winning performance, maybe some sort of Zen technique, or penance for some unspoken wrongdoing in the past, that she had to be here and present for it all.

And finally the man was well and truly gone, still talking, only this time to himself, *That reminds me of when...* As he wafted out the door, the Reader couldn't help but usher it shut a little faster.

How do you stand it? the Reader asked.

The woman smiled a sensible smile. *Oh I don't mind. He comes in unhappy, he leaves happy. Even though we never have what he's looking for. And someday he'll find the right bookstore.*

And then you won't have to deal with him anymore.

Yes, she says, neither glad or sad. It just is, to paraphrase about half of the books the Reader has read, and no matter how many times it comes up, that aphorism refuses to stick.

We're pretty niche, says the woman. *He knows that by now. But I think he likes talking more than reading.*

I know that feeling.

But you don't like it.

Is it that obvious?

She coughed once, a gear change. *Something I can help you find?*

The Reader hadn't made it halfway through the title of Mother's book before the woman offered a knowing shake of the head. *Sorry, like I said, we're niche. But wait—* The Reader was already turned towards the door, assuming the same slouch the previous visitor had, and wasn't that the bitter finishing irony, that for all the self-consciousness and holier-than-thou-ness, the Reader was equally as lost, cut off, ridiculous.

I believe we have what you need, the woman finished. More than what you need, in fact. She let out a dry, relieved laugh. *I was thinking I'd never get to say that to a customer.*

How's that?

We have an edition of that other book you want. Sorry! So imprecise of me. The woman said *imprecise* as smooth and gentle as a brush clearing off lint. *The one with the canoe on the cover. The one about the twenty-somethings in college. C.K. Harbor.*

How—? What was—? The Reader didn't have time to voice the obvious questions because the woman was pointing to where it was, a few shelves over, singled out from the other books, its front cover facing out, canoe, lake, C.K. Harbor in that treasured stilt-like font, one of those handwritten recommendation index cards by a bookstore employee propped up against it, explaining why it should be read: *Is this the real life? If this book isn't, then I don't need it.* It wasn't the Reader's original copy but it was close enough, right down to the burnished edges of the pages, the familiar wrinkles in the spine that weren't the Reader's but were nonetheless right, even the blurb by that author who was good for nothing but that blurb. And next to the book was another familiar book from the Reader's collection, and another, alphabetically arranged, rows and rows of fiction, and more than that, books that had long ago been lost, dating all the way back to as long as the Reader could remember reading, even *Goodnight Moon*—the Reader's parents had thrown that one away when the Reader entered kindergarten, and it was the first time he had suffered acute loss. Next to these rows of fiction, right next to César Aira, was the National Geographic Travel book, and further rows of travel books, even the outdated ones the Reader had used that had been replaced by newer and somehow less satisfying editions, and next to the travel books were the theater books, and on and on, wrapping around the bookstore, every book in the right place, the walls of shelves far sturdier than any tower, utterly and miraculously comprehensive.

Take your time, the Reader hears the woman say from somewhere behind the shelves, behind the books that are back in the Reader's life, the swell of the moment crashing through his head and heart, so much that to stand requires maximum effort, the sight of each title, each familiar combination of color and width and length reigniting the neurons—There it is! Forgot about that

one! Shit, I haven't even thought about that one in years... By the time the Reader had circled back to the front of the store, the woman was gone. Someone was knocking at the door, another would-be customer. *Hello!* the customer called out, as if underwater. *Hello! Are you open?* The door jiggled, refused to budge. It was locked. Thank goodness. The Reader went to the back of the store, as far from the door as possible, drew out a book at random, ran fingers over the glossy cover, opened it up to see the familiar critic quotes on the front page ("an intimate epic written with tenderness and devilish flair"), recalled what the book was about and what it might be again, a notion too overpowering to even hold onto for too long, had to put the book back and return to the front of the store, which was now silent save the thrum of the ventilation that maintained the books in optimal condition. The Reader drew the velvet curtains all the way closed, the last bit of daylight chopped off, faced the books, not knowing where to start or end, refusing to acknowledge the hours as they passed into days, the books staying where they were, the totality of it ganging up on the Reader as the Reader stood and sat and walked and regarded it all, and still the hours went by and any previous memories drifted farther away, the bookshelves growing thicker in the Reader's mind, as if they were gates that needed to be wrenched open, and the Reader would get to it soon, someday, as soon as all the books were finished, both those unread and those that had been read before but required re-reading, but where to start or end, that was the question, a proposition that the Reader couldn't answer, as the Reader walked by row after row, the Reader's feet clacking on the stone-tiled floor with an insistent unending rhythm, the Reader's gaze going up and down each aisle, each row, overjoyed and cowed by the sights, the C.K. Harbor book now in the Reader's path, fallen from its perch, opened up to the last page. Down the street, a car retreated, the rumble of it like the dying aftershock of an explosion.

Ho Lin is the co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. He is a writer and musician who resides in San Francisco. His work has appeared in *Foreword Reviews*, *The New York Journal of Books*, *Your Impossible Voice* and *The Adirondack Review*. His books include [China Girl and Other Stories](#) and [Bond Movies: A Retrospective](#).