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May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

The nights are clear, but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation.

But by early June the southwest monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.

I was, as it happened, the first of us to read "The Pale King," and well before I'd finished it I found myself calling Maureen and Susan and saying, "The first paragraph of the Wallace book is more powerful than any entire book we've read so far." ③

Consider its opening line:

Past the flannel plains and the blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the a.m. heat: shattercane, lamb's-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscatine, spinecabbage, goldenrod, creeping charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your cheek.

Maureen and Susan both started the book, and both agreed. It was a little like having heard a series of chamber pieces, and been pleased by them, until the orchestra started in on Beethoven.

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After a while you forget it's summer. You don't remember what the morning is. I'd worked two doubles with eight hours off in between, which I'd spent sleeping on a gurney in the nurse's station. Georgie's pills were making me feel like a giant helium-filled balloon, but I was wide awake. Georgie and I went out to the lot, to his orange pickup.

We lay down on a stretch of dusty plywood in the back of the truck with the daylight knocking against our eyelids and the fragrance of alfalfa thickening on our tongues.

"...to church," Georgie said.

②
THE MADNESS of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cooling star. Gust after gust of disorder. Trees restless, temperatures falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end. No children in the yards here. Shadows lengthened on yellowing zoysia. Red oaks and pin oaks and swamp white oaks rained acorns on houses with no mortgage. Storm windows shuddered in the empty bedrooms. And the drone and hiccup of a clothes dryer, the nasal contention of a leaf blower, the ripening of local apples in a paper bag, the smell of the gasoline with which Alfred Lambert had cleaned the paintbrush from his morning painting of the wicker love seat.

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my trousers. I lean down and find the neckline of his sweater and draw it back and away from the nape of his neck which I gently probe with my tongue. In loving him, I saw a cigarette between the fingers of a hand, smoke blowing backwards into the room, and sputtering planes diving low through the clouds. In loving him, I saw men encouraging each other to lay down their arms. In loving him, I saw small-town laborers creating excavations that other men spend their lives trying to fill. In loving him, I saw moving films of stone buildings; I saw a hand in prison dragging snow in from the sill. In loving him, I saw great houses being erected that would soon slide into the waiting and stirring seas. I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life.

AMITAVA KUMAR WORKSHOP

⑥
[Story]

THE ORPHAN LAMB

By Amy Hempel, presented in June at a reading for the Graduate Writing Seminars at Bennington College, in Vermont. Hempel, who teaches at Bennington, is the author of four story collections. The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel was published in 2006.

He carved the coat off the dead winter lamb, wiped her blood on his pants to keep a grip, circling first the hooves and cutting straight up each leg, then punching the skin loose from muscle and bone.

He tied the skin with twine over the body of the orphaned lamb so the grieving ewe would know the scent and let the orphaned lamb nurse.

Or so he said.

This was seduction. This was the story he told, of all the farm-boy-stories he might have told; he chose the one where brutality saves a life. He wanted me to feel, when he fitted his body over mine, that this was how I would go on—this was how I would be known.

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HE LIVES IN a one-room flat near Mowbray railway station, for which he pays eleven guineas a month. On the last working day of each month he catches the train in to the city, to Loop Street, where A. & B. Levy, property agents, have their brass plate and tiny office. To Mr B. Levy, younger of the Levy brothers, he hands the envelope with the rent. Mr Levy pours the money out onto his cluttered desk and counts it. Grunting and sweating, he writes a receipt. 'Voilà, young man!' he says, and passes it over with a flourish.

He is at pains not to be late with the rent because he is in the flat under false pretences. When he signed the lease and paid A. & B. Levy the deposit, he gave his occupation not as 'Student' but as 'Library Assistant,' with the university library as his work address.

It is not a lie, not entirely. From Monday to Friday it is his

HAPPIEST MOMENT

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If you ask her what is a favorite story she has written, she will hesitate for a long time and then say it may be this story that she read in a book once: an English language teacher in China asked his Chinese student to say what was the happiest moment in his life. The student hesitated for a long time. At last he smiled with embarrassment and said that his wife had once gone to Beijing and eaten duck there, and she often told him about it, and he would have to say the happiest moment of his life was her trip, and the eating of the duck.

AMITAVA KUMAR WORKSHOP

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SAMUEL JOHNSON IS INDIGNANT:

that Scotland has so few trees.

(8)

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

Building and the lights that alternately spelled out TIME and LIFE above Rockefeller Plaza; that pleased me obscurely, and I did walking uptown in the mauve eight o'clocks of early summer evenings and looking at things, Lowestoft tureens in Fifty-seventh Street windows, people in evening clothes trying to get taxis, the trees just coming into full leaf, the lambent air, all the sweet promises of money and summer.

Some years passed, but I still did not lose that sense of wonder about New York. I began to cherish the loneliness of it, the sense that at any given time no one need know where I was or what I was doing. I liked walking, from the East River over to the Hudson and back on brisk days, down around the Village on warm days. A friend would leave me the key to her apartment in the West Village when she was out of town, and sometimes I would just move down there, because by that time the telephone was beginning to bother me (the canker, you see, was already in the rose) and not many people had that number. I remember one day when someone who did have the West Village number came to pick me up for lunch there, and we both had hangovers, and I cut my finger opening him a beer and burst into tears, and we walked to a Spanish restaurant and drank Bloody Marys and gazpacho until we felt better. I was not then guilt-ridden about spending afternoons that way, because I still had all the afternoons in the world.

And even that late in the game I still liked going to parties, all parties, bad parties, Saturday-afternoon parties given by recently married couples who lived in Stuyvesant Town, West Side parties given by unpublished or failed

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The Wedding Shroud 99

ing, drinks a glass of water and starts working like a machine. She prepares parathas for Rahat and keeps the milk on boil for a long time so that a heavy layer of cream forms on it; if she could, she would take some of the fat from her own body and knead it into the dough she used to make parathas for Rahat. And why shouldn't she do all this? After all, one day he will be hers, and whatever he earns he will entrust to her care. Don't we all water and nourish a fruit-bearing plant? And then, when the flowers bloom and the bough bends with their weight people who now gossip will be silenced forever. It was this very thought that made my Kubra Apa's face glow with bride-like luminescence. The sound of wedding trumpets echoed in her ears and she rushed to sweep up the dirt in Rahat's room with her lashes; lovingly, as if they talked to her, she folded his dirty clothes, washed his soiled, foul-smelling socks, laundered his stinking undershirts and handkerchiefs filled with mucus, and on his pillow-case she carefully embroidered the words, "Sweet dreams." But things were not falling into place. Rahat ate a hearty breakfast consisting of eggs and parathas every morning, returned at night to eat meatballs, and then went to bed. Amabi's adopted sister whispered complaints.

"Yes, but the poor fellow is very shy," Amabi offered excuses.