

# LAPHAM'S

Q U A R T E R L Y

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## FOREIGNERS

dropped on my face by my lady will bring my spirit  
 a brief reprieve. I'll have no last words, there'll be  
 no loving hand to close my fluttering eyelids,  
 no final lamentation. I shall lie  
 sans funeral rites, sans tomb, unmourned, unhonoured,  
 in a barbarian land. When you hear this  
 surely your heart will be stirred to its depths, and surely  
 you'll strike your loyal breast with timid hand?  
 Surely you'll throw out your arms in furious frustration  
 toward this place, clamor your wretched man's  
 name in the void? Yet don't rip your cheeks, don't tear your hair out;  
 this isn't the first time, my love, that I've  
 been torn from you: when I lost my country, *then*, believe me,  
 was when I died, an earlier, grimmer death.  
 Now, if you can—but, my peerless wife, you cannot—  
 rejoice that death writes *finis* to all my ills.  
 One thing you *can* do, though: make lighter by enduring  
 with a brave heart the troubles you've long known.  
 Would that our souls and bodies perished together, so that  
 no part of me escaped the greedy pyre!  
 For if the spirit's deathless, flits high through air, if maybe  
 the sayings of old Pythagoras are true,  
 then my Roman ghost will wander among wild Danubian  
 spirits forever, a stranger. But see that my bones  
 are brought home in a little urn: then I'll not remain exiled  
 even in death. This nobody forbids—  
 Theban Antigone buried her slaughtered brother  
 against a king's commands.  
 So mingle my ashes with sweet dried herbs and spikenard,  
 bury them close to the city, and inscribe  
 these lines in gold letters on my marble headstone  
 for travelers to glance at as they hurry by:  
*I who lie here, sweet Ovid, poet of tender passions,  
 fell victim to my own sharp wit.*  
*Passerby, if you've ever been in love, don't grudge me  
 the traditional prayer: "May Ovid's bones lie soft!"*

*From the Tristia. Ovid attributed his exile from Rome by Augustus in the year 8 to "a poem and a mistake"—the former his illicit Art of Love, the latter perhaps his having known about the indiscretions of the emperor's granddaughter. His books were ordered to be removed from the city's libraries. In his Tristia and Black Sea Letters, Ovid cataloged his various miseries. "I've seen fish frozen into ice," he wrote, "yet notwithstanding/some still survived, and thawed out." After mentioning a list of famous exiles, he concluded, "you'll find no one, right down the ages, dumped in a more remote or nastier spot." Ovid died in 17.*



*Islands*, by Brad Kunkle, 2012. Oil and gold leaf on linen.

## 1979: Paris

### NOT SO DIFFERENT STROKES

Two writers, living in two chalets on opposite slopes of the valley, observe each other alternately. One of them is accustomed to write in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Mornings and afternoons, the writer who is not writing trains his spyglass on the one who is writing.

One of the two is a productive writer, the other a tormented writer. The tormented writer watches the productive writer filling pages with uniform lines, the manuscript growing in a pile of neat pages. In a little while the book will be finished: certainly a best seller—the tormented writer thinks with a certain contempt but also with envy. He considers the productive writer no more than a clever craftsman, capable of turning out machine-made novels catering to the taste of the public; but he cannot repress a strong feeling of envy for that man who expresses himself with such methodical self-confidence. It is not only envy, it is also admiration, yes,

sincere admiration: in the way that man puts all of his energy into writing there is certainly a generosity, a faith in communication, in giving others what others expect of him, without creating introverted problems for himself. The tormented writer would give anything if he could resemble the productive writer; he would like to take him as a model; his greatest ambition now is to become like him.

The productive writer watches the tormented writer as the latter sits down at his desk, chews his fingernails, scratches himself, tears a page to bits, gets up and goes into the kitchen to fix himself some coffee, then some tea, then chamomile, then reads a poem by Hölderlin (while it is clear that Hölderlin has absolutely nothing to do with what he is writing), copies a page already written and then crosses it all out line by line, telephones the cleaners (though it was settled that the blue slacks couldn't be ready before Thursday), then writes some notes that will not be useful now but maybe later, then goes to the encyclopedia and looks up Tasmania (though it is obvious