

# The Tragedy in the Breakfast Nook

*This Angel on My Chest: Stories*

By Leslie Pietrzyk

Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015,

216 pp., \$24.95, hardcover

*The Grass Labyrinth: Stories*

By Charlotte Holmes

Kansas City: University of Missouri/BkMk Press, 2016,

158 pp., \$15.95, paperback

Reviewed by Kelly Cherry

Beautifully presented in a hardcover, print edition, as so seldom happens these days, *This Angel on My Chest*, by Leslie Pietrzyk, which won the Drue Heinz Literature Prize (judged by Jill McCorkle), is Pietrzyk's third book, following two novels. The collection comprises sixteen remarkable stories propelled by her husband's death nearly twenty years ago. He died at the breakfast table.

Discovering this, we are already in shock. It comes too close for comfort. What might be happening in our own breakfast nooks right now? What jolts await us in our own lives, our own kitchens? Are our husbands safe? Our wives? Our children? The beloved dog, the honored cat?

The first story, "Ten," reveals ten things about the husband that only the wife (is she the author or a character?) now knows: that there is always "one more time for everything"; that he compared her to an avocado; that he was right when he predicted Cal Ripken of the Baltimore Orioles would hit a grand slam; that he was afraid of bugs and made her get rid of them; that he kept his books separate from hers; that he once saw a ghost, specifically, the ghost of a Civil War soldier; that he loved malted milk balls; that he despised his job and once wrote a movie script in an attempt to make money, and then his work place changed, and he was finally happy; that he poisoned the mice in the shed; and that he loved her without reservation, even after she kissed his best friend and the friend told him and he broke the friend's nose.

These "minichapters" within the story are drenched with sadness. Their particulars, recited calmly and clearly, make them even more poignant. "Ten" introduces the book as a whole; it is intimate and detailed. Not everyone could come up with such a revealing and precise list, and perhaps because of that, the reader feels both singled out—preferred—and anxious, as if it is now her duty to see that this information is not bandied about loosely. In other words, the writer has already become someone we know, or think we know, and from now on we will be on her side, feeling protective, hoping some happiness will come to her in the future.

In the next story, though, the details change. In "Acquiescence," the husband is thirty, and his dead body is transported by airplane to Detroit. Here, the cemetery's "stones [are] flat in the ground to make mowing easy." "A minister with a square head spoke. God this, heaven that. She'd heard it all before." The story is barely more than two pages, but the enmity between the wife and mother-in-law will last for an eternity.



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Places, ages, characters, moods, and modes switch with each story, but the basic arc remains the same. Pietrzyk's ability to make each story new while retaining the same essentials is a feat—and it succeeds. Each story rings a credible change, the result being a portrait that deepens and opens up. The reader is happily surprised by each new development even as sorrow continues to pierce the heart. And even as the wife experiences a battery of emotions, from pain to anger, bitterness, fear, and loneliness, she protects herself with sarcasm. The story "Do You Believe in Ghosts?" makes her feelings clearest, but each is wonderfully written, engaging, and expert. *This Angel on My Chest* enlarges our sympathetic awareness of the struggles that consume lives—all our lives.

Can such grief—fierce, raw grief such as we encounter here—culminate in a happy ending? Read the book.

Charlotte Holmes's *The Grass Labyrinth* is about as different from *This Angel on My Chest* as a book could be. Writing about a family of artists, Holmes strives to capture the rhythms and meanings of visual and aural art in language. Sometimes her style is a bit too florid for my taste, but that will not be true for every reader, and her ability to describe children and the emotions surrounding the having of them—or not—is penetratingly acute and moving. In "Song without Words," she writes,

Trying to imagine how the ocean might look to a child seeing it for the first time, you turn and squint out at the water, hands jammed in your front pockets, resting on the hard, narrow crests of your hipbones.

Henry, who appears in the first story and is clearly central to the book, has been married

consecutively to Lisa, Agnes, and Kerry. He makes a living writing and illustrating picture books; he is a good cook; he loves his children. He tells Agnes that it is she and not he who will become the great artist—but despite his sensitivity, he is still a male, always directing the movie rather than acting in it. “A man generous and tender,” Agnes says, “but when the time came, he was colder than glass and his edges twice as sharp.”

Although Henry had expected to become an important painter, he is content with his accomplishments and reputation. We learn of his

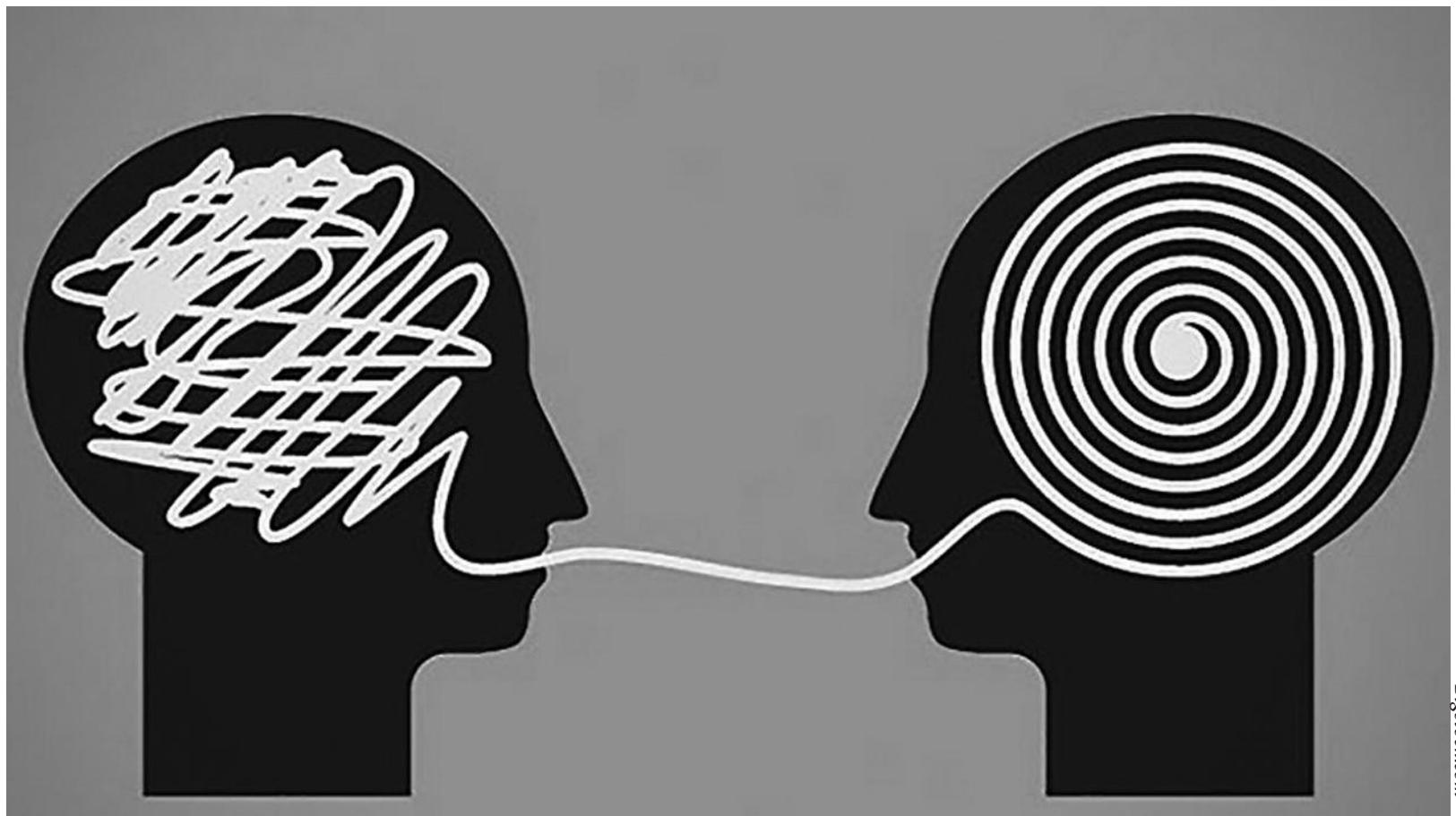
death in the story “What Is,” narrated by his much younger widow, Kerry. It is Kerry who will eventually undertake to fashion the grass labyrinth of the title. She is independent and confident, and after Henry’s death, she and her daughter continue to live in his stone house in Pennsylvania. In time she marries Ben, Henry’s son. If this is Oedipal, it doesn’t bother Kerry, Ben, or Emma, Kerry’s daughter with Henry, or Jane, her daughter with Ben.

In fact, the reader hardly notices the family tree, because Holmes closely acquaints us with so many

other artists, including a poet and a photographer. We can, I believe, think of the book itself as a labyrinth, and I imagine that Holmes was aware of this while she was writing. Kerry describes a labyrinth as “a spiral winding inward.” That’s what this intriguing book does; that’s what artists do to create art. 🌀

Kelly Cherry’s most recent book is *Twelve Women in a Country Called America: Stories* (2015). Her next book of poetry comes out in February 2017.

## Translation and Retranslation



### *Good on Paper*

By Rachel Cantor

New York: Melville House, 2016, 320 pp., \$25.95, hardcover

### *Ways to Disappear*

By Idra Novey

New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016, 272 pp., \$25.00, hardcover

**T***raduttore, traditore*: Students of translation learn this phrase immediately. It is an Italian proverb with imprecise origins that is both a joke and a topic of serious discussion. *Translator, traitor*. The silent word that sits between this neat juxtaposition is *faithful*. Is a translation faithful? Can it be? Should it be? A translation involves two parts that remain necessarily interconnected, and in complex ways. The original can, theoretically, exist on its own. The translation cannot. Although the translation does, in the end, occupy its own temporal, linguistic, and geographic location, and in that sense, it must exist on its own.

And yet, the translation is the textual conclusion of an intricate negotiation of the idea of “faithful.” What is the direction of this negotiation? Does the

#### Reviewed by Michelle Bailat-Jones

translation move the reader toward the original—pulling her closer to its time, into its language and atmosphere—or does the translation shift the original into a completely new place, accepting the inevitable transformation this might entail?

This question has split translation theory for centuries, creating lively debates about how best to bring a foreign text into a new language, place, and time. Which side of the translation equation has to undergo the greatest transformation? This remains a useful way of approaching a work-in-translation, but it is also a question raised by two recent English-language novels with translators at their center, Rachel Cantor’s *Good on Paper* and Idra Novey’s

*Ways to Disappear*. On the surface, the books share a number of similarities: each features a translator-as-heroine embroiled in a personal crisis that involves or is resolved by a translation project. For both, the act of translating and its hard-won product—the text rendered anew/transformed/repurposed—are not simple professional tasks but profoundly transformative personal acts.

Cantor’s *Good on Paper* follows Shira, a 44-year-old single mother who is raising her child with her gay best friend, Ahmad. Shira was abandoned by her mother when she was a child, and she shuns long-term, intimate relationships. She has also decided that her youthful aspirations of writing, scholarship, and translation were as ephemeral as they were misguided. As the novel opens, she is working as an office temp and operates behind a