Silk Road 5.1
a literary crossroads

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Editors’ Note

We love what the English language can do—its insatiable desire to describe, its inclusion, its flexibility and ability to absorb, its playful and comic qualities. English is a big language, and it is travels well, like a bottomless duffle bag. The world population takes it on, adapts to it, and at the same time forces the language to stretch and accommodate. There’s always room for more, as the expanding cyber world and blogosphere remind us daily.

In this issue of Silk Road we show writers telling elaborate fictions and nonfictions and poems that honor the flash points on a journey. Josie Sigler considers how far the arrival of new person, no matter how small, will push the adults around him. Bonnie Jo Campbell stages a big what if: Say a tiger gets loose at a circus. Say the tiger meets its match. Michelle Cacho-Negrete mourns the end of fire escapes in New York City but at the same time considers what escape really means.

Our editors are all writers, and our appreciation for well-crafted work directed us to the pieces we chose for this issue. Try as we might, we could not seem to accept a piece, no matter how tragic, that was not buoyed by the beauty of its language and showed an inherent hopefulness that seems in keeping with English itself.

But lest we forget:

At least half of the world’s languages will likely become extinct within the next one hundred years. Millions
of people face the demise of their cultures—the way they speak and the way they live will disappear. Indigenous peoples may represent only 4 percent of the world’s population, but they speak at least 60 percent of the world’s languages. The regions they inhabit, until recently outside the traffic of cars and cell phones, show the highest levels of biodiversity. As their words die, so does the web of the natural world that sustains them—and all of us. As we grow linguistically homogenous, we voraciously consume and efface the subtle differences that a diverse organism needs to survive.

The poet Aku Wuwu is a member of the Yi peoples who live in southwest China. He reaches us in English through his translator Wen Peihong. What is he asking? To keep a world full of voices and sounds, to honor what he calls the mother tongue. Some of these languages may take effort to preserve and comprehend; others we may never grasp. But each is necessary and, to those who know their language like they know their mothers’ faces, utterly beautiful.

Kathlene Postma and Alissa Nielsen
Josie Sigler

Breakneck Road

Walking home from Country Lake Liquor I see a red something there between the snowbank and the line of grey slush left by the plow: Coca-Cola box, the long tail on the “C” poking through the loop on the “L”. I almost kick it the way you do a thing on the roadside, make it fly and hit the ice on the edges of the swamp. But something stops me. Maybe hope gets to me. Even in this weather, a little something sweet to put with the 151. So I go and lift the flap. Even looking at it I don’t buy what’s inside that box: human baby, tiny, almost blue, curled up and no bigger than a skinned muskrat. Dead baby. But no, it’s breathing. The nostrils flare and its hand opens just a little bit and slow like one of those stop-action flowers on PBS.

What can a person do with a baby in a box when he’s no friend to the law? Especially once the thing opens its black-hole eyes and looks right at him like its accusing him?

I don’t even think about Cherry and what she’ll say. I drop my bag and take up the box. The cardboard is wet and collapses where I touch it. I don’t know what women do with babies, but it’s colder than fuck out and the thing doesn’t have a little sweater or anything. I tear one side of the box off quick. And like those climber guys who stripped naked in their tent to save their frozen friend in the arctic and didn’t even care that the whole world saw it on the television, I lift
my flannel and press the whole soggy deal to my skin.

Right away the thing starts to wriggle. Then, it expands and yowls fit to beat a bag of mad cats because I don’t have tits and that’s what it wants most likely.

Shhhh, I say, like it knows how to behave.

I look around to make sure nobody’s watching. I’ve never seen a soul but the plow out on Breakneck this time of year and I can tell that prick Randy’s already been by. But sometimes even when you aren’t doing anything wrong, you don’t want to be seen. The thing’s having a hissy fit loud enough now to reach the horizon, all those houses cozied up on real streets, houses for folks who work at Great Lakes Coal, same ones I got busted for three winters back.

My bag’s melted, so I grab my rum and the hotdogs Cherry’s mom wanted and pick up my pace. I walk that baby right to the trailer, get us in the lean-to, and start stripping off wet layers. And that’s what I’m doing when Cherry finds me, standing there in my fruit-of-the-looms peeling red cardboard off this screaming cheesy baby. It’s a boy, his nutsack bright pink and enormous, his penis uncut. Where his belly-button should be is a purple snake tied with a yellow yarn. Other than that, he’s all set, ten fingers and toes, no frostbite, sticky black hair, and a voice like a damned opera singer. Between the kid and the TV blaring in the back room where Cherry’s mom’s watching, Cherry can’t hear me trying to tell her what happened. Of course she’s talking over everything I say, anyway, so it all comes out in a jumble.

Are you insane, Joe? You can’t just pick up a baby like a stray dog.
I come into the kitchen, elbowing my way past her. The kid’s slippery and I’m trying to figure out how to hold him without breaking him or flopping him around too much. His skin’s a hell of a lot colder than a living baby’s skin ought to be.

I mean, somebody’s got to do it, Joe, but it can’t be you, Cherry says. It sure can’t be you.

Cherry blows the smoke from her cigarette through her nostrils like a dragon and starts to pace on the other side of the counter. She’s done near worn a hole in the carpet over the last few years between me and her mom.

It ain’t legal. It ain’t clean, she says.

I know it ain’t clean, Cherry, I tell her. I’m about to give it a bath if you’ll just give me a hand.

I hold the kid out toward her. His arms and legs fly out like he’s skydiving and his cries are fast and raspy. Desperate.

Oh, no, Cherry says. She shakes her head and holds up both her hands palms out, her cigarette ash falling on the floor. I’m not having anything to do with it.

I stop and look at her for a long minute the way I do when I want her to know just how unreasonable she’s being, but she’s making a point not to look at me or the baby. I shrug. I wad the boy up and tuck him in the crook of my arm like a bundle of firewood. He arches his back and lets out a fresh series of howls. I struggle to plug the sink with my free hand. I turn on the tap. Water’s ice cold. Out in the swamp we don’t get much hot.

It’s kidnapping, that’s what, Cherry says. She lights a
new cigarette off the one she’s smoked down.

Jesus, Cherry, I say. I didn’t sneak into its crib and steal it, for Chrissakes.

Joe!

Cherry raises her cigarette hand like she’ll smack me. Apparently, there’s no situation that warrants taking the Lord’s name in vain.

I rummage around in the cabinet for a pot, take a deep breath, and try again: Somebody left it, I say over the ruckus. He was just sitting there alongside—

You go out looking for trouble you’re bound to find it.

Yeah, Cherry, I say, practically yelling now, jamming the pot under the faucet. Uh-huh. That’s right. I woke up this morning and says to myself, what could make my shit life even better?

I juggle the pot against my hip the way I’ve seen Cherry do. I slam it on the stove, sloshing water all over. I crank up the burner, careful not to roast the kid’s toes. Then I turn to Cherry like I’m in a soap opera and slap myself on the forehead.

Oh! Of course! A baby. Why didn’t I think of it sooner? And so I head out hoping to find one. And lo and behold, there just happens to be a baby freezing its ass off right in my path. Lucky, lucky me!

But the truth is, I do feel a little bit lucky. It’s not like this shit happens to just anybody. I look down at the little guy. Cherry’s pretty faithful to the pill and we’re always broke, so we might not have any of our own. I’ve never seen a lot of babies up close. Outside of the gunk that’s stuck all
over him and the noise he’s making, he’s kind of cool. Hard to believe you could start off like this and end up nearly forty, hairy, drooping, nothing to show for it but a parole officer and a trailer owned by your girlfriend’s mother.

I wipe off my pinky finger on the kitchen towel and offer it up to the kid that way I once saw this guy do with his baby way back in high school. When the boy takes my finger, his sound is shut off like a stereo when the circuit’s blown. The kid settles in that way, crosses his arms and legs over his body. The roof of his mouth is ridged and he sucks mightily, his eyes wide and hopeful.

I feel you, buddy, I say. I wish I had three arms so I could get to that 151 and have a pull myself.

You could get busted, Cherry says, turning off the tap. You could go back to jail. Or even prison if somebody thinks you done something wrong to it. She glances at my finger suspiciously, preparing her testimony, no doubt. Then she looks away. I can tell she didn’t really see the boy, didn’t notice how…human he is.

Now that the kid’s quiet I can hear the announcer on The Price is Right from the other room shouting: Let’s see what’s behind door number three, Johnny!

A brand new baby, I say, joking as soft as I know how, stepping into Cherry’s path. I just want her to look at the kid, really look at him, at me. Come on, Cherry, I say. Have a heart.

You picked it up, Joe, Cherry says. You’re the one that touched it.

What was I supposed to do? He would’ve died,
Cherry.

Either due to fear of death or because he’s caught on that my finger doesn’t make milk, the boy cranks up his wailing again. This time it’s a jagged series of cries precipitated by enormous inhales.

What’s that racket? Cherry’s mom rasps from the back room. The station must be on a commercial break because she’s muted it and I hear the creak as she hauls herself up onto her walker.

For the first time, Cherry looks at me. I can see that she’s working it out with me, trying to get our story straight. We struggle together like that. The edges of her eyes are like the woods that surround the swamp. You could get lost there if you don’t know where you’re going. But I can see I’m on a path.

That first summer out of jail Cherry had me trap a mess of raccoons that were raising hell under the trailer nights. She hated them even as she ate the damned stew. Then, when only the one baby raccoon was left, she up and took him in. Just for the night, she said. Thing lived with us for a month or two—until it tried to wash a couple of joints in the toilet bowl. It escaped when I gave chase. The look on that animal’s face when it saw there was a whole world outside of the pre-fab one! It gave a little fuck-you-very-much sneer and waddled off into the swamp, no doubt stoned as Steve Miller from the few soggy bites of pot it ate before I caught it. Cherry was heartbroken.

I hold the flailing baby out like an offering, my hands cupped under his butt and shoulders. He claws wildly at his
own face and it hits me just how helpless he is, how close the call was. He really would have died out there. Maybe the coyotes would have come after dark. I feel a sick panicky tingle in my bladder. There would have been no trace. A whole life could happen, and never happen, at the same time.

I mean, what would Jesus do, Cherry? For real?

She barks a quick laugh. Then she glances at the crucifix on the wall and clutches at her necklace. The boy’s chest rises and falls over his squalling. It’s enough to wear on a saint. Even one like Cherry, who sighs and rolls her eyes, which is always how she starts her giving in. Right from our first time in the back seat of my old Buick it was like this. She shakes her head. Then she bites her cigarette and takes the baby under the arms like he’s a cactus or made of toxic waste.

Out the corner of her mouth she says, Fine, then. But you know, you ain’t Jesus, Joe. You’re gonna have to turn it in to the cops eventually, and that means talking to the cops and that means—

Look, Cherry, I say. Least you could do is find him a towel or a blanket or something. And you want to put out that cigarette?

Who died, she says, and made you the American Cancer Foundation? But she tosses her smoke into the ashtray.

She and the kid disappear together into the hallway, but I can pinpoint exactly where they are by listening. The bathroom door closes and the cabinet opens, muffling the kid’s noise further. I hear Cherry trying to soothe him: What’s
the matter? What’s the matter, baby?

Stupid question. He’s cold and hungry. So am I, come to think of it.

I go out on the porch to take a leak and retrieve the bottle of 151 I left tucked in the snowbank. I unscrew the cap and drink deep and long. The slight sleet pelts my bare skin. I feel incredibly alive. The snow, the dark break in all the white where the swamp’s melted through, it all seems more important now, somehow.

I’m hiding the bottle in a hollow in the siding next to the fuse box when Pauline comes clanking in, dragging her oxygen tank with her. She cocks her head toward the muffled sounds of Cherry trying to sing the theme song from *Gilligan*. Pauline’s hair, which is done up in front with lots of hairspray, is flat and matted in the back, the cord from her oxygen pressed around it. Her lipstick is bright red and uneven under the clear plastic mask. I think she’s going to ask me what in hell’s going on, but she just holds her hand out. I pass her the bottle. She pulls the mask off her face and takes a swig.

Pauline settles the mask over her face, heaving. That a baby crying? she asks between drags of oxygen.

I don’t answer. It’s best if people handle their own mothers. I tuck the bottle away and secure the latch on the fuse box. I get a dry pair of long johns from the closet and haul them on. I go over and look at the water, but it’s not boiling yet. Come on, I pray at it.

Cherry comes into the kitchen. She’s got the boy wrapped in my robe. She’s looking down into the boy’s face.
There’s something in the flush of her cheeks I’ve seen but can’t place just now.

That’s what I thought, Pauline says. She shuffles over to the boy and draws back the folds of terry cloth. No more’n a few hours old, she says. Where’d he come from?

Somebody left him, Cherry says, looking up with tears in her eyes. Can you imagine?

It’s love. I’ll never know what happened to Cherry in that five minutes she was alone with the kid, but maybe it was like what I felt when I was hoofing it home. The universe chose me. Us.

Truth be told, Cherry’s always been a little funny in this way. Example? She knew me since we were kids—I grew up on the other side of Breakneck. Anyway, she must’ve refused me twenty times in all those years. Then, she shows up at my door one night wearing a triple-fat winter coat over her nightgown. Says her momma’s sick and will I drive them to Monroe Mercy because it’s snowing and she’s too scared. Of course I do. After I drop them off, I leave east and hit all the houses I can find empty down by the riverfront just in case it’s any kind of date we’re on and I could use the cash. I’m taking a nap in the Buick when she opens the door. She presses her nightgown against me. And two months later I go to jail and even though it goes far above and beyond the call of grateful, she sticks with me through the whole thing.

Sure, says Pauline. People are shits.

Mom!

It’s true, she says. She laughs the laugh of the lungless and holding out her finger to shake the little guy’s hand.
When the first folds of steam come off the water in the pot I pour some into the cold water in the sink until it’s just right, and Cherry hands the baby to me and gets a fresh washcloth.

Watch his belly-button, Pauline says as I slide him into the sink. And support his neck.

The boy’s suddenly more turtle than human, his arms and legs coming out one by one as Cherry moves the washcloth over them. He’s quiet now but for some small hoarse hiccupping noises. He seems to like the water. When Cherry’s gotten all the mess off him, I pull him out and swaddle him in a couple of dishtowels.

Cherry puts the steaming pot back on the stove, finds the hotdogs, opens the package, and drops them in.

He needs something, too, I say.

Milk? Cherry says.

We ain’t got none, I say, feeling bad for buying the 151 when I could’ve bought milk.

Momma always said sugar water’d keep a little one a few hours, Pauline says. Pauline’s from down in Mississippi and she always has ideas like this, pee on your hands for chapping, butter for burns, etc.

How do I get it in him? I ask.

Straw? Cherry says.

Cherry mixes the boy a drink and I sneak another myself. I can’t find a straw, but Pauline volunteers a piece of her tubing. I unplug her briefly, cut a bit with Cherry’s nail scissors, and go to work feeding the boy. I draw up a few drops of sugar water at a time. I put the tube in his mouth.