

a lost voice only recovered in childbirth, hints that history returns unbidden, yet complete:

You had not sung a lullaby,  
yet the words of your mother will return to your lips  
full and complete.  
You will sing the lullaby to your child,  
as your grandmother had sung to your mother.

Like a lullaby, *The Secret of Hoa Sen* acknowledges our collective pain by looking at it head on. Nguyen does not sooth over old wounds, but she does break down the painfulness of the past by suggesting the journey back can offer a chance at redemption.

—Anna Saikin

**Jacob M. Appel. *Phoning Home: Essays*. The University of South Carolina Press, 2014.**

Jacob M. Appel is the most interesting author you've never heard of, but not for long. Word will spread about this man's talents as more and more readers become familiar with his subtle wit and wisdom, to say nothing of his clever prose and narrative charm.

Appel's collection of essays, *Phoning Home*, is one of five books he published in 2014 and 2015. It's at times sensitive and insensitive, humble and braggadocios, highbrow and lowbrow, and it features chapters about his medical experience, love life, and childhood, which spanned—and endured—the Carter and Reagan presidencies.

Appel muses on a delightful array of subjects: aging; health; memory loss; death; his prank calling his own parents when he was child (hence the title of the book); the influence of two enigmatic grandfathers; his grandfather's watch; requited and unrequited love; a 94-year-old man who was a former chauffeur to President Truman but was detained in Appel's hospital after requesting a "suicide pill"; and

our increasingly vulgar, vitriolic public discourse and the concomitant narrowing of the range of acceptable opinion. Revealing his intense receptivity, Appel laments the loss of two small rubber toy cats, affectionately dubbed Fat Cat and Thin Cat, that his grandmother's sister—his great aunt—had gifted to him. This occurred in the early 1980s, when Appel was in the fifth grade, and the memory of the loss, and the tales he's imagined to explain it, continue to shape the way he thinks and acts.

Buried in this essay—ostensibly on toy cats—is this realization he attains after his great aunt passes away: "I'd been introduced to the ghastly secret that separated the adults from the children: members of the species *Homo sapiens* were like rubber cats. You could return to your motel room one night to find them gone forever." Appel doesn't dwell on this insight but lets it pass without exhibition. He's equally deft in his accounts of medical treatment, allowing events themselves to give instruction without imposing on them narrative preachiness.

Case in point: He recounts his treatment of two old men in the hospital, one of whom was confined to his bed—literally strapped down to it—and unable to eat by himself. The other old man is troubled by this state of affairs and expresses concern to Appel, who is likewise upset. Appel marches through the hospital unsuccessfully seeking nurses or candy-strippers to assist in the feeding, and just as he resolves to do it himself he sees that the one old man has taken to feeding his confined companion, a small gesture that, however necessary under the circumstances, renders Appel "mesmerized by the simplicity of [the] kindness."

Appel cultivates a playful, pensive voice and a trustworthy persona, even as he's raising disturbing questions: whether it's moral to prolong deteriorating life or let it end naturally, for example, or whether doctors ought to inform patients of their true condition when their death is imminent. "This is how most stories end in the hospital," he explains

in one touching, sobering scene. “Not with crash carts and sirens and electric shocks to the chest, but with an empty room, a crisp white bed, silence. And already the rising murmur of distant life encroaches on me.”

Appel can deploy literary allusions with the best of them. When he says his Jewish grandfather “swallowed a pound of fleshy pride,” for instance, he’s summoning Shakespeare’s Shylock. His essays are full of learned references that are not just fitting and surprising but surprising in their fittingness: to Lord Jim and Miss Havisham, Woody Allen and Imelda Marcos, Joseph Heller and Proust, Fitzgerald and Hippocrates, Freud and Marx. Mentions of Dickens abound, or seem to, and Appel may overuse the adjective “Dickensian”—once is enough!—but that’s hardly an unforgivable transgression. Appel has at least read Dickens, and, mercifully, by my count, he uses the equally hackneyed term “Kafkaesque” only once.

One outlier chapter—standing apart because Appel’s self-reflection yields to policy prescription—advocates open dialogue and uncensored discourse. “The most dangerous ideas are not those that challenge the status quo,” Appel says. “The most dangerous ideas are those so embedded in the status quo, so wrapped in a cloud of inevitability, that we forget they are ideas at all.” This polemic is neither liberal nor conservative as those words are used in current parlance, and such partisan neutrality lends his argument added credibility.

The book is a quick read. My longsuffering wife can attest that I tore through it one Saturday autumn afternoon. Just because it’s short and fetching doesn’t mean *Phoning Home* is devoid of nuance and complexity. In fact, it’s alive with those things and presents vexing moral challenges—from grand issues of bioethics to more personal matters of memory and the psyche. The specter of the Holocaust is always looming in the backdrop of Appel’s stories about his family and Jewish heritage. The horrify-

ing enormity of that atrocity may undercut Appel’s claim that tragedy is merely “the human condition, so unexceptional as not to be noteworthy.” Then again, Appel may embrace Hannah Arendt’s theories about the banality of evil.

As of this writing, Appel has seven master’s degrees, a law degree, and a medical degree, and he is, among other things, a practicing physician, playwright, professor, and bioethicist. His writing has appeared in popular venues—*The New York Times*, *Washington Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*—as well as in literary journals and peer-reviewed journals of ethics and medicine. The term “Renaissance Man” is overused, and sometimes assigned to those who’re positively medieval, but it’s fitting in Appel’s case.

Yet despite this breadth of knowledge, what we learn most from Appel’s book—besides the fact that his patients are all old and he falls in love too easily—is that he understands the profundity of the commonplace. He’s a compassionate healer, a brooding, loving son and grandson, and a chronic searcher ready to admit he doesn’t have all the answers. His essays are in a league with David Sedaris and Phillip Lopate. He has an acute, almost haunting gift for revealing what, in his view, renders us human: “the ability to bond, to love, [and] to feel loss, long after all our other faculties have evaporated.”

—Allen Mendenhall

**Adrienne Kalfopoulou. *Ruin: Essays in Exilic Living*. Red Hen Press, 2014.**

Adrienne Kalfopoulou’s *Ruin: Essays in Exilic Living* extends its inquiry across landscapes, time zones, and social circumstances, delivering on the promise its subtitle has made. In New York City, Athens, Edinburgh, and Freiburg, Kalfopoulou compares the ruin of antiquity to ruin in a modern sense—social, financial, global. She works to let her prose fill the