

cal handbook. "History is never the simple repetition of archival content," Farge writes, "but a pulling away from it, in which we never stop asking how and why these words came to wash ashore on the manuscript page." How then to pull away from what we find? The archive grants us the illusion that we're just around the corner from a recoverable past. But Farge is too good a historian and too supple a writer not to know that history does in fact deceive with whispering ambitions. So she replaces her romantic hat with a didactic one and divvies up several chapters with subheadings that read like guidelines for the would-be historian: "Combing through the Archives," "The Process of Connection and Contrast," "Gathering," "Traps and Temptations," "From the Event to History," "Meaning and Truthfulness."

It is in "Meaning and Truthfulness" that Farge admits what anyone living in the twenty-first century already assumes—that our stories about the past are composed, provisional, subject to error, misconception, and/or the ambition of those writing them. Again, to Farge, this is no reason to suppose the historian is a kind of novelist in disguise. The novelist creates a world out of her imagination, which is fine; but the historian is an ethicist, not a fabulist. The stakes are high. The lives she narrates were the real lives of real people, and "if we are to do right by these many forgotten lives, lives ground by the political and judicial systems, we can only do so through the writing of history." Otherwise, Farge feels, we betray them by making them heroes who would be "immediately lumped in with so many other heroes, whose defining trait is that they were put in motion and controlled by an author's hand."

Of course, this ethical historian is also a prowler looking for loot. But that is not a moral indictment; far from it. The historian learns what to take and what to leave behind, and in writing of these lives, acknowledging there is no such thing as a simple or settled story, she creates "sequences of what was plausible, rather than what was necessarily true." And the tale she tells has always to remain unfinished. Some other day in some other place, a different historian will build from the remains of these lives a different story.

"It is finished" can never be said of us," Emily Dickinson said. Ideally the historian's chronicle is neither one-dimensional nor complete—and, according to Farge, it never assassinates memory. Just the reverse: at the archives, we honor memory, we preserve it. "We cannot bring back to life those whom we find cast ashore in the archives," Farge admits. "But this is not a reason to make them suffer a second death." So we untie the ribbons on those packets to tell better tales, responsible tales, tales about "humanity and forgetting, origins and death. About the words each of us uses to enter into the debates that surround us." That is the allure of the archives. □

## The Melancholy Assistant

I had an assistant, but he was melancholy,  
so melancholy it interfered with his duties.  
He was to open my letters, which were few,  
and answer those that required answers,  
leaving a space at the bottom for my signature.  
And under my signature, his own initials,  
in which formality, at the outset, he took great pride.  
When the phone rang, he was to say  
his employer was at the moment occupied,  
and offer to convey a message.

After several months, he came to me.  
Master, he said (which was his name for me),  
I have become useless to you; you must turn me out.  
And I saw that he had packed his bags  
and was prepared to go, though it was night  
and the snow was falling. My heart went out to him.  
Well, I said, if you cannot perform these few duties,  
what can you do? And he pointed to his eyes,  
which were full of tears. I can weep, he said.  
Then you must weep for me, I told him,  
as Christ wept for mankind.

Still he was hesitant.  
Your life is enviable, he said;  
what must I think of when I cry?  
And I told him of the emptiness of my days,  
and of time, which was running out,  
and of the meaninglessness of my achievement,

and as I spoke I had the odd sensation  
of once more feeling something  
for another human being—

He stood completely still.  
I had lit a small fire in the fireplace;  
I remember hearing the contented murmurs of the dying logs—

Master, he said, you have given  
meaning to my suffering.

It was a strange moment.  
The whole exchange seemed both deeply fraudulent  
and profoundly true, as though such words as emptiness and  
meaninglessness  
had stimulated some remembered emotion  
which now attached itself to this occasion and person.

His face was radiant. His tears glistened  
red and gold in the firelight.

Then he was gone.

Outside the snow was falling,  
the landscape changing into a series  
of bland generalizations  
marked here and there with enigmatic  
shapes where the snow had drifted.  
The street was white, the various trees were white—  
Changes of the surface, but is that not really  
all we ever see?

—Louise Glück

PERSPECTIVE

## The Late

I HAD A complex straining the Vietnam War I didn't include moving Virginia. At least not at first at the National Institutes doing bench science had dispersed military obligation, but it was public service. I wanted to would be practically beneficial to began five years of the residency ing I knew would be unpleasant. I popular among new medical school graduates to seek innovative ways help "the people" in that decade, which most of what is called the Sixties actually took place. So it was an accident that I wound up in the West Virginia hills a week after getting married.

I'd discovered that the just-created National Health Service Corps had plunked down a Jewish guy from Miami in one of thirteen communities they'd originally identified as medically under-served. He and his wife had a six-month-old son. Because he was the only medical doctor in the county and was therefore always on call, people embraced the novelty of calling. Even so, some local residents resented that the federal government thought to provide them with doctors, still coming down on the Jeffersonian side of a states' rights argument leftover from the Commonwealth of Virginia included these transmontane coun- At least one fellow had urged the arrivals from Miami to get out of n before the new EKG machine unpacked. Young, idealistic, dis- ed, and wandering in a culture couldn't understand, they were a wreck. By the time I stumbled em almost a year later, they were ing for relief. Although I was as ess as they were, none of us knew then, and it turned out that the c Health Service was happy to er me from Bethesda to Gilmer y, West Virginia.

In the summer of 1972, my writer and I moved to Glenville, a com- of about two thousand long- residents, not counting the several d students at the local state col- any of them were locals too, for a few imported black ath- he mayor at the time was Jake e, as cagey and intelligent a e was unprepossessing. A few fore we arrived, Jake had from a trip to New York City business. After greeting us in al capacity, he wondered if I'd uch time in New York and could advise him. He'd hiked e Chase Manhattan Bank to a check for financing a com- new Glenville water-works and system, a task he considered rforward until he ran up against al New York customs. Jake, lked with the deliberate cadence