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FEATURES

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A collaborative survey of the BEST, MOST VISIONARY AND MOST UNORTHODOX ways to make Minneapolis and St. Paul an even better place to live.

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Frank Bures Asks if Greatness Can Again Take Root Here

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Against Readings

By Benjamin Obler

I was on my way to Denis Johnson's reading at the University of Minnesota, when I thought to myself: "Why am I doing this?" I admire Johnson's work—his *Tree of Smoke* won the National Book Award and *Jesus' Son* ranks with classics like Raymond Carver's *Where I'm Calling From* and Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*.

The problem is I don't even like readings that much. There's something insufferable about them. Reading a book—reading to ourselves—happens through our perfectly self-made narrator. We control the pace, the inflection, the emphasis, even the imagined volume. Our inner speaker is a patient guide, kindly pausing for snack breaks, obligingly skimming awful bits, and happily repeating lines missed due to inattention. He certainly never goes on past our point of fatigue. We read in an inner voice that is all our own.

At a reading, that voice is smothered and gagged, and we are subjected to a voice often of a different gender, pitch, and attitude. In front of a crowd, the pallid writer is put, like a plate of restaurant food, under hot lights, in a quest to wet an audience's appetite. But the taste is never quite what we imagined.

Despite all this I decided to go, and it wasn't long before I was sorry: A few sentences into his Pulitzer-nominated novella *Train Dreams*, Johnson stopped, and speaking of its protagonist Robert Granier, said, "You know, I've never really decided on the pronunciation for his last name. We'll go with Gray-nyer." There could be no balder admission that the spoken voice is not a book's innate medium! The author himself wasn't even sure how to say the main character's name! The book read aloud is a housebound cat taken to the lawn. It puzzles about, cowering and flinching uneasily, out of its element. Take it back in the house, I say.

The Q&A was equally painful: One pretty young blond woman approached the microphone, wearing a black leather jacket and laughingly blurted, "First of all, I think you're a genius." Johnson didn't seem to know what to say. Of *Jesus's Son* another student said that, "This feels like it's all one narrator." That's because it famously is one narrator. (This was like say-

Keepers

We will hive the bees,
praise their mandibles and compound eyes,
the pollen baskets on their fine-haired legs,
honey stomachs, wings.

The field will fill with clover, aster, goldenrod.

They will hover at the pond and dip
to drink; they will enter each blossom
efficient as nurses, gathering
pollen or nectar.

The queen will move her long body
from cell to cell, laying her thousand daily eggs.

But in January, the whole world is white.
We get out hammer and nails, pull
the hive frame pieces from their boxes,
and build toward spring.

—Cullen Bailey Burns

ing to Scorsese, "Ever think of making a mob movie?") Finally, when asked about his aims with his novel *The Name of the World*, Johnson unflinchingly replied that with everything he writes he expects to win the Pulitzer and all the other prizes. An informal poll later concluded he was not kidding.

By the time I left, the voice I knew—the voice that emerged from the pages of Johnson's work—was gone. I knew I might never get it back. Between author and reader, there's equanimity. It's you and the writer's words, alone. The author reading tries to recreate a version of that. But Johnson's reading reminded me yet again that the attempt is futile. Reading is its own form. A book in our hands is a date between text and reader, and third wheels—like the author—are not welcome. As I left, I knew I was ready to good home and curl up in bed with...well, you know.

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