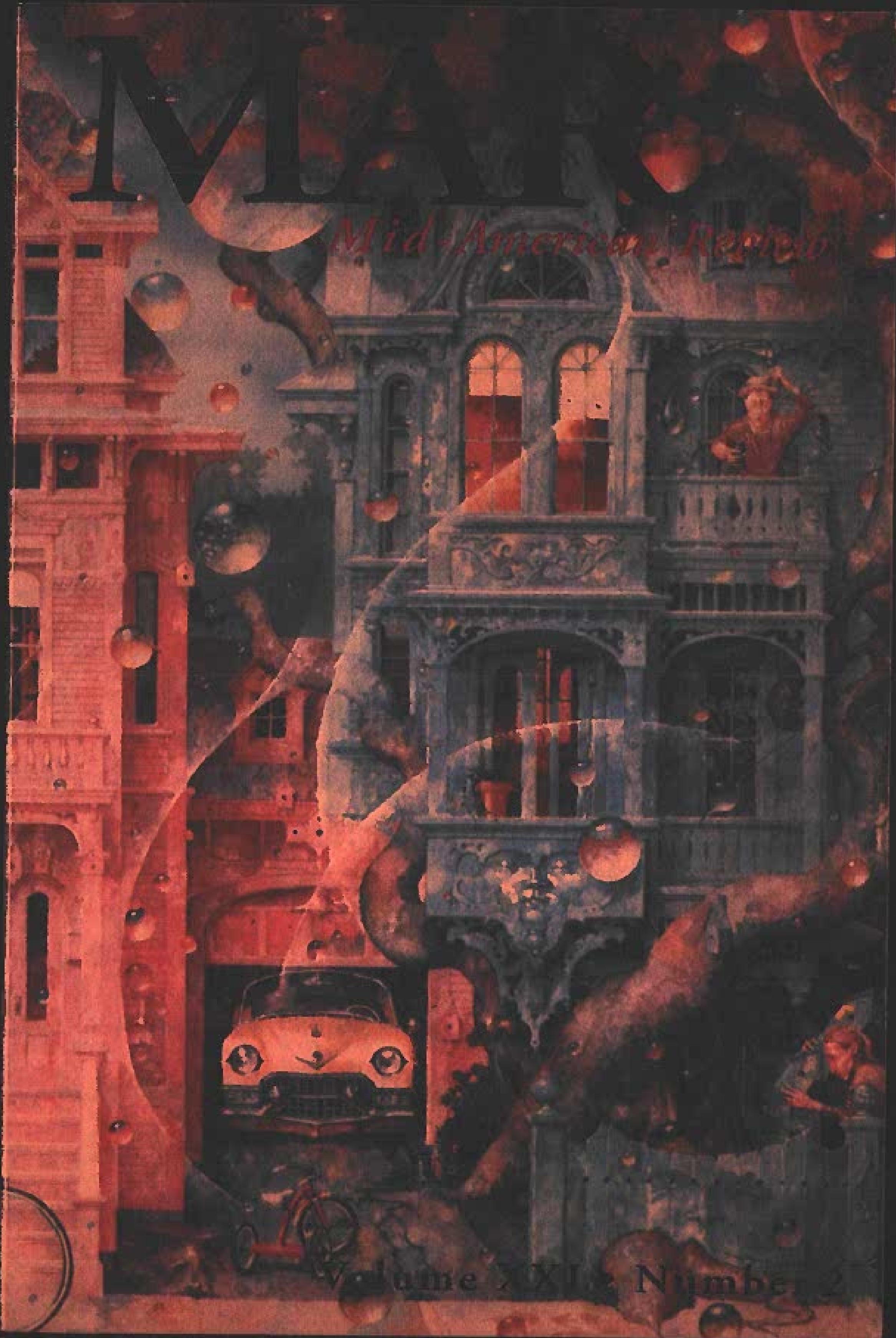
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Mid-American Review

Sam the Cat and Other Stories by Matthew Klam. New York: Random House, 2000. 224 pages. $22.95, cloth.

Matthew Klam, in his debut collection *Sam the Cat and Other Stories*, endeavors to unload a scabrous weight from the shoulders of men in love. Klam's male narrators, often desperate and desultory, somber and ashamed, discover that love, as pumped and unruly as it is, can be happily neutralized, tamed and tethered. For these men, the road to happiness proves bumbling and bony and bothersome, though the reward—the sense of finality, the end to searching—leaves them stout and satisfied, content with their many failings.

Take Samuel Beardson, for example, the focus of Klam's title story "Sam the Cat." A flighty ad consultant, he admits to being "the original hopeless lover," stuck and secretly fiendish, craving daily doses of that toxic yet irresistible "love drug." He pines in his cubicle at work, looking back nostalgically at all his old girlfriends, including his most recent, Louise. The story recounts, in Sam's jumpy, neurotic voice, the awkward falling out of he and Louise, an end brought on by his urgent attraction to a "basically handsome guy" named John Drake.

In his search for "real love," Sam is flung into a sexual panic: "Now what? Was I all of a sudden gay? I went to sleep one night and woke up a homo?" Lovesick and mortified, he tries, unsuccessfully, to woo John. He offers him flowers, calls him on the phone; he even extends a dinner invitation. Klam does an artful job of drawing Sam's humiliation and discomfiture, leading him to John's house in a "new pair of loafers," "shiny and uncreased," their sterile sharpness cutting holes into both his heels. When Sam visits the mall to improve his look with makeup, Klam is unsparingly brutal, seating his narrator across from a fifty-year-old woman, creating a scene at once gruesome and hilarious: "I leaned over the counter, and she gently drew a tiny black brush through my left eyebrow. I watched in the mirror. Then she did the other one. With each stroke I looked more and more like my sixth-grade football coach, Mr. Gaspari." Near the end of the story, Klam relents, and allows Sam a width of complacency. Still confused by his ardor for John, Sam quietly retreats to his apartment. There, he answers the question, "Who would I marry?" with, "I'll tell you who I should marry: myself." His response makes plain that, after spending so many hours poring and paining over love, he has finally chosen to embrace the hopelessness and the weirdness, the stark, unerring backwardness of loving as much, and as fiercely, as he does.

The decision Sam makes is not a daring or courageous one; he cowers in the basement of his own beleaguered heart, safely cut off from the world. In "Not This," the narrator, Vincent, makes a similar decision, one involving not so much his capacity to love, but more his avoidance of love in general.

Fleeing a stagnant relationship with his current girlfriend Kiffany, Vincent drives down to Cape May to spend Labor Day weekend with his brother and sister-in-law. Like Sam, Vincent has trouble resisting the pull of old girlfriends, the perfumed tug of memory. While driving, he pages through an index of his turbid dating history, touching first on Kiffany, then tracing back to Lisa, Jessica, and Kurt. "These girlfriends, they seemed to like me—sometimes it could be described as love—for anywhere from nine months to two years." He carries this index as one might a "lead weight," hunched and hobbled. By the time he reaches his brother's house, he can barely walk for the onus; the drag of remembering slows him to a dodder. But Klam is shrewd in his treatment of Vincent, and hampers him only briefly in the opening pages of the story. For it isn't so much Vincent's dilemma that moves and steers the plot; it is Vincent's brother Dave and his wife Denise who beckon the spotlight.

When Denise learns that she may not be able to bear children, Dave begins reeling, partly blaming himself for the couple's failure to conceive: "'Nobody ever got pregnant from me .... Maybe I'm shooting blanks.'" Vincent, standing in the middle of their plenary kitchen, can do nothing but eke out a minimal, "Oh," a short, simple sound, one Klam intends as a note of relief, a handing off of worry. At the moment of Dave's defeat, all of Vincent's lovelorn trifles are seemingly dismissed. Here, Klam excuses Vincent from any further memory-lugging, and graciously imbues his character with merit and necessity:

> Dave smoked a lot of herb in college. Maybe it zapped his supply. Here was my older brother, really scared, and I was his confidant—me, his crummy little brother. What if they did need me? I'd be the father. All of a sudden I was Dave's confidant and possibly a whole lot more.

In escaping Kiffany and his "long line of failures," Vincent gladly arrives at himself. The anxiety surrounding Dave and Denise is not lost on Vincent;

it merely becomes secondary to his private admiration of mordancy and crumminess—traits he is suddenly proud of, traits that hardly drag.

A majority of Klam's narrators share these traits. They are selfish, sardonic, petulant, and rude; some are more penile and bibulous than others. As readers work through stories like "The Royal Palms" and "There Should Be a Name for It," they slowly begin to realize the purpose of Klam's design, his plan for assembling such a wiry cast of men. It seems that only at their testiest, only when they're prone to fracture, do men approach the prickly task of describing or defining love, what it feels like to *be* in love. What Klam is doing is giving these men a passage, a means of approach. He smears them and cuts them and burns them along the way, but still, he encourages their voice, their pissy words. So only after heavy drinking and a catastrophic wedding rehearsal can the narrator of "Issues I Dealt With in Therapy" manage the simile: "Loving anybody is ... like trying to hug your favorite painting, or talk to or waltz with the perfect time of day, the memory of the most beautiful tree you ever saw." Only after a certain degree of suffering can these men function as successful, warm-bodied, intuitive lovers. Only then do they lose the weight.

—*David Amadio,* Mid-American Review

Nostos by V. Penelope Pelizzon. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999. 80 pages. $24.95, cloth; $12.95, paper.

Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility, sails across the cover of V. Penelope Pelizzon's premier collection of poems. The cover illustration, taken from the interior of a cup, is a representation of Exekia's "Dionysus crossing the sea" and invokes us on a voyage of sensual pleasures and rich stories that have a touch of antiquity and let us drink deeply from Pelizzon's cup.

Winner of the Hollis Summers Poetry Prize, *Nostos* is sure to be worth the journey, complete with an exploration of both the heart and mind. The book begins appropriately with "The Mind Descending from Above," a