ing inward, and, as Young put it, screaming from a “bottomless pit” of alienation and frustra-
tion. Folk City began life as a companion essay to a recent exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York. It comes close to being a complete social history of a vital, but ultimately tragic moment.

\[BRIAN MORTON\]

Catalan Fiction

Tony Sala

THE BOYS

256pp. Two Lines. Paperback, $14.95. 978 1 938388 49 8

The Boys begins with a beguiling descrip-
tion of a stretch of road between two brothels. The road leads to Vèrredes, a village in the Girona province that Tony Sala has tried to make a breeding ground for iniquity and petty rivalry of the sort familiar from True Detective or the novels of Jim Thompson. Written in long stretches of indirect mono-
logue, The Boys follows four lives brought together by a car crash that kills two young men. Ernest, a banker, mulls over the tree that the boys’ car stuck, has a fraught encounter with a prostitute, then more or less disappears; Miqui, a brute, shotguns his way, tries to help by bringing away his hours arranging hook-ups in inner-city chatrooms; Iona, the girlfriend of one of the deceased, broods about mortality; and Núi, a failed art student, schemes with his father to buy the dead boys’ patrimony and shoots videos of himself torturing animals. The novel struggles between registers, bucking the strictures of its genre yet too pro-
saic to be thought literary. In the rare moments when the ubiquitous digressions about death transcend the commonplace, they frequently veer into incoherence: “Every death had told her: you are dead and that’s why you must live. You have to live because you’re dead. If you weren’t dead, it wouldn’t make sense for you to live.” Sala is at his best when he’s writing in the prose: there is charm and insight in his discus-
sions of the bursting of the credit bubble and Spain’s lingering economic crisis, the vagaries of Catalan nationalism, and the country’s out-
side. Latin America, is the country’s outsourcing to Russia. But this is a work that is not at the top of its game, that is, it is not a novel to be savored, but rather a summary of a life that has been lived, a life that has been lived in the bowels of the earth and the narrator’s own interiority, but it does so with an absurdist attention to detail. It begins without a subject in stream-of-consciousness fashion: “Been walking and walking through this band of pine trees”. The narrator is a young Trotskyite flying a booted romantic who ends up working in the coal mines of northern Japan. The miner’s life would be hard to imagine. The mine would have reminded contemporary readers of the massive Ashio copper mine, the site of one of Japan’s most devastating envi-
romental disasters and a place infamous for its hellish working conditions. The novel’s narrator, too, had a counterpart in real life: a young man who knocked on Sōseki’s door and asked him to make his story into a novel. But in Sōseki’s hands, the young man becomes a spouter of theories about the non-existence of character as “something fixed and final”, and the hero of a novel that “never did become a novel”. The mine flickers into allegory and The Miner becomes a hybrid of realism and existential parable, somewhere between Zola and Kafka.

For a new edition the translator Jay Rubin (who also translates Murakami) has given his original version from 1988 a thorough scrubbing and a new immediacy – sticking closer to Sōseki’s striking use of present-tense narration. Rubin’s superb afterword remains unchanged and ends on almost the identical phrase to the one with which Murakami’s introduction begins, describing Sōseki as “Japan’s great modern novelist.

\[JONATHAN BARNES\]

Memoirs

Marion Coutts

THE ICEBERG

A memoir

304pp. Atlantic. Paperback, £8.99. 978 1 78339 352 8

The news is given verbally. We learn something. We are mortal. You might say you know this but you don’t.” Marion Coutts is slowly plunged into a vertiginous chute after her husband, the art critic Tom Lubbock, is diagnosed with a brain tumour. Coutts charts every arc of this journey, the treatments, the hope, the new drugs (“How we dive deep, putting the psyches of an ordinary married couple under the unsparing analytic scalpel of an invisible and omniscient narrator. To read these two novels in succession is to leap in a single bound from Laurence Sterne to late Henry James. It is also to understand how Haruki Murakami’s 1Q84 is not an incoherent introduction to Sōseki’s The Miner by calling him “Japan’s greatest modern novelist.” The Miner, which Sōseki began serializing in 1908, manages to incorporate both extremes of surface and depth. It narrates a descent into the bowels of the earth and the narrator’s own interiority, but it does so with an absurdist attention to detail. It begins without a subject in stream-of-consciousness fashion: “Been walking and walking through this band of pine trees.” The narrator is a young Trotskyite fleeing a booted romantic who ends up working in the coal mines of northern Japan. The mine would have reminded contemporary readers of the massive Ashio copper mine, the site of one of Japan’s most devastating envi-
romental disasters and a place infamous for its hellish working conditions. The novel’s narrator, too, had a counterpart in real life: a young man who knocked on Sōseki’s door and asked him to make his story into a novel. But in Sōseki’s hands, the young man becomes a spouter of theories about the non-existence of character as “something fixed and final”, and the hero of a novel that “never did become a novel”. The mine flickers into allegory and The Miner becomes a hybrid of realism and existential parable, somewhere between Zola and Kafka.

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