ginosko
literary journal
ginosko

A Greek word meaning
to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;
knowledge that has an inception, a progress, an attainment.
The recognition of truth from experience.

γινώσκω
The craft or art of writing is the clumsy attempt to find symbols for the wordlessness. In utter loneliness a writer tries to explain the inexplicable. And sometimes if he is very fortunate and if the time is right, a very little of what he is trying to do trickles through — not ever much. And if he is a writer wise enough to know it can’t be done, then he is not a writer at all. A good writer always works at the impossible. There is another kind who pulls in his horizons, drops his mind as one lowers rifle sights. And giving up the impossible he gives up writing. Whether fortunate or unfortunate, this has not happened to me. The same blind effort, the straining and puffing go on in me. And always I hope that a little trickles through. This urge dies hard.

— John Steinbeck
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A girl drowned one summer, when I was twelve.

I can still picture her after they’d dragged her out, after someone had tried mouth-to-mouth long enough for her ribs to crack – the sound was like twigs snapping – lying wet and sand-covered and still.

People said things like Don’t let the children see, but I got up as close as anyone, just gazed at her limp girlish limbs, her pale-white face, her flat bare chest.

And the eyes… Open, bright, orbital things. Two fixed blue moons.

Her mother cried in a whispery kind of way, ‘Wake up now Honey, wake up, it’s time to wake up…’

*

I was near her, beside her in the water, just before.

We were splashing, teasing, pawing, wrestling.

And it was me who handed her mother the top part of her drowned daughter's swim-suit, after the resuscitation attempts had stopped.

She said nothing, just stared at what I handed her, then knelt and lay it upon the girl’s chest.

*

Later, back in the rented caravan, my father was sleeping, and my mother was drinking. Her eyes were so different than the girl’s – yellow and red-streaked, gin-riddled suspicious saucers, drilling into me, like she could read my soul.

‘I don’t want you near that water again, do you hear?’ she said eventually.

There was no concern there, only cold warning.

*
I will never forget the sight of her body just after it happened – just barely submerged, like driftwood, her long hair splayed across the surface of the water like seaweed – in those endless-seeming moments before someone else noticed her.

I liked that girl in a way I hadn’t experienced before; felt inchoate urges I didn’t understand, just beginning to spark.

I have felt them sparking since.

I suppose you could call her my first.
The things I begged my mother to let me do. The things she let me do. The things I did. One winter Willie Carlos had a party going outside by the lake several yards from his house. Not his lake, not anybody’s lake. Geography didn’t matter, or ownership, belongings, or boundaries. We were fifteen and wasn’t the world ours? Willie’s skating party wasn’t his. His name only labeled the word-of-mouth invitation that bored through Friday school exhaust.

Willie and his family came from the Philippines, via California. He and his younger brother Guillermo were new arrivals in the neighborhood we called home. Everybody’s tongue buzzed over two boys high school age with jet black hair, constantly jerking their necks to try and uncover their eyes, trying to see in 1973.

I was a skater. I could skate. Tim Schlueter had taught me how one Saturday afternoon at the roller rink in Price Hill. Not much trick to switch from roller to blade. I had my own ice skates, but I didn’t bring them to the party. At fifteen, you didn’t proceed A to B in the logical manner of adults, you didn’t do or have or say anything to stand out. I was a crowd dweller, I was on track to disappear, marginal, negligible, a last thought, if a thought at all among the crowd. For God’s sake, don’t show up with skates.

Guys working to maybe impress ran and then shushed across the ice in their sloppy wet tennis shoes, but that was it – a skating party with no skaters. Just a bunch of kids balancing on slippery stuff and completely, wrongly attired, dropped off by trusting mothers, and winking over contraband in the shadows. The beers fished up out of the cooler with jocularity, the one-ups-man-ship of boys aware of being watched, the tittering girls with garish-looking makeup, aware of their observers. Burn barrel flame cast the girls’ hats and gloves into gruesome shadows, and lit their scary faces. They scared me in any type of light. Some wore skating tights, others were bare-legged. Me in my jeans, a sensible pea coat, saddle shoes, hands clenched in my bottomless pockets, all of us begging for the moon to be kind.

No one came by with welcome, no one spoke to me. This wasn’t purposeful shunning, I did not matter.

I walked home, a good half hour or more through the slush of the roadside, my feet numb and yet impenetrable. Nothing would stop me. Every winter of our youth had slush. Every winter of my youth held darkness. I crossed the barrier to our house, inside the storm door and strong inner door, up the flight of steps, down the short hall to the bedroom I shared with two others who were elsewhere. I didn’t care where my
younger sisters might be. They were spit, they were burrs, they were dandruff to be brushed off.

That winter I was saved by Don McLean and Carole King records, a lit candle in the window at the foot of my bed, and my face on the pillow as I gazed into the flame, watching as it melted a hole in the ice crystals of the storm window. Mom would periodically burst in and say, "You’re gonna burn this place down with that candle." "No, I’m not." The sing-song-ey backtalk she suffered.

I’ve had my own children, my own mis-aligned teenagers. I know my mom was checking on me, muddling at ways to reach this downhearted creature she’d once held confidently and happily on her lap, and I regret to say I kept my face to the window, conjuring the warmth and hilarity I supposed erupted at Willie Carlos’s lake, taking solace in my self-pity, in my choice to exit before someone could turn from me the way I was learning to hold myself from Mommy.
The husband pursues several hobbies and a law career. He tries to act the intellectual but has difficulty reflecting on books. He focuses a lot on himself. His wife dotes on decorating and good clothes. She believes in connecting with her women friends. She likes to think they appreciate the subtleties of social life better than men.

The husband and the wife lead lives apart. The two walk by each other in the kitchen and the bathroom without speaking as they prepare for work. The wife returns home much earlier than the man; she makes and finishes dinner and settles on the couch to watch TV. The husband returns, eats, and resumes his casework, his "homework", in his study. He tries like this to get ahead. He is addicted to it. He will work and not leave the study. The woman will go on watching TV and forget him. When she tires of watching, she calls her friend on her smart phone. She talks as the TV runs, distracting her. Later, the man will emerge and join her on the couch where he will pick up a magazine to read. The two will talk some before she goes upstairs alone. She reads a magazine in bed for quarter of an hour before lying down to sleep. Downstairs, the husband will watch TV engrossed for hours. He will go to bed long after his wife. The wife no longer enjoys living like this. She feels she will cry before the TV that she thought she liked. Her husband will not join her at the couch until very late though she asks he come earlier. She decides to find a lover. She gets an app for her phone to connect with men interested in adultery. She visits their profiles while her husband is in the other room at his homework. She writes men hoping to interest them. She connects with one and sees him on her day off. The husband slogs on with his casework at nights. He tires of it and believes his wife no good an alternative. He improves his mood by popping pills that he gets over the counter. The wife cuts from work often to see her lover. She makes excuses to her boss that she must visit the doctor. She races out the door, happy to go. She makes two supposed doctor's visits each week. Her boss becomes suspicious and asks if her health is okay. She says she has a medical issue she rather would not discuss. She likes telling this lie to his face. When she sees her lover, she abandons her restraint. She laughs, jostling against his naked body.

The husband takes pills nightly in his study with the door closed. He feels happy, energized on them. He thinks at these times he does not need his wife or anyone else. Acting the intellectual again, he puts aside his books and dreams up theories of law based on his reading. He glows, believing these rants true. Then his mood crashes and he cannot believe he thought what he had. He realizes he had been excited. However, he loves the confidence and energy of his highs. He thinks he should try to re-discover the truths he had thought earlier when he takes the pills again. The wife enjoys her friendships with other women more. She invites over her friends!
Patti and Jen for lunch some weekends. In good weather, the three eat on the deck. The wife always has something to say about their office and her husband. She smiles at Patti and commends her hair even as she thinks of her lover. She remembers he is passionate and sensuous. He strikes a different chord for her than the loose, clean remarks at the table, and this excites her.
Patti asks, "What has given you this energy?"
The wife smiles and says, "Who knows?"
When her friends go, the wife reflects on her lies to them. She considers she may have to go on covering up the truth about her trips from the office to avoid trouble. Patti and Jen would be shocked to hear she was having an affair. The wife suddenly feels isolated. She tries to forget this when she visits her lover that night.
The husband struggles to rein in his drug use. He takes his pills to get started in the morning. He goes to his law office high. He researches and takes notes without weighing the relevance to his clients' cases.
When they meet, the husband and the wife are bored though they have come right from their acts of indulgence. They have different conversations since they have picked up their new interests. The husband holds back when he tells his wife about his day. He fears letting slip about his habit. He comes across as halting and unsure.
Sometimes the wife makes a remark that suggests she may know he is taking the pills. "Did you enjoy working in the study tonight?" she says one night.
The husband hesitates, he fears too long, before saying, "I had a productive couple of hours."
The wife avoids telling about her secret more confidently. She claims she was running errands in town during lunch one day, calling her friends another. Actually she goes to meet her lover at a rendezvous point between their workplaces. She changes gears smoothly from her lie to the mundane affairs of the household.
The husband and the wife tense listening to each other's polite, formal words they neither like to say nor hear. They feel glad when they stop. They smile, sensing they can relax and forget the other once alone.
As they conduct their new private lives, the pair continues to have a normal social life. They hold parties in their home where they invite over their usual friends. The wife talks with them while her husband hangs out by the hors d'eurves. She leans toward a man who resembles her lover and her eyes dance, laughing. Talking to him excites her, especially as the husband is nearby. Her spouse stays by the punch. He enjoys the alcohol. He likes to forget himself and his wife as he drinks. A slightly sad feeling comes over him and he stays from everyone else, relishing it. A few come to talk with him, believing he must be lonely. They smile and speak in good cheer. The husband smiles, making signs he also is content. The people talk excitedly with him. The husband plans to take more pills the next day.
The husband and the wife are more on edge with one another. The husband reads a magazine while they eat at the breakfast table. Lowering his eyes, he hides his
exhausted downs after taking too many pills the previous evening. He reaches for the milk carton, struggling to keep his hand steady. He gives his wife a few tired, short answers--"Yes, I know", "I'm sure"--when she speaks but will not engage her. He trusts his answers suit her. The wife hedges when she talks with him, too. She worries about how far she has gone with her lover. They meet almost daily. She gives herself to him like an animal. She hopes for ever-new physical heights with him. However, she does not get them. Their acts are growing routine; sometimes, she hurries to finish and be done with them. Her lover has not talked as much with her lately, too. It seems that he expects their events and does not care for her otherwise as a person. He will not be coy; he is brief and does not indulge her when she lingers at his place. She wonders if he is bored with her.

The husband parts from the wife at the table. He feels their hesitation not right and that it must change. Otherwise they will break into some fight, some bitter argument, he trusts. They cannot just avoid each other and get by. Still, he mopes about the house rather than be with her. He fears her. He goes out to walk even if he has not popped his drug. The wife leaves the table and goes to the living room to read. She feels she will crack, hiding all she has. She is supposed to talk at ease with the husband and cannot.

The husband tries to quit taking the pills. He puts his supply into a back drawer of his study desk where it would be hard to retrieve. He reviews his books and writes his casework. He feels under strain as he does. He thinks soon that he cannot perform unless he has taken his drug. He makes an unusual effort to focus. He resists going for the drawer. How will I recover if I take them?, he wonders. He quits his study for the living room where his wife is reading a book.

"So how is your novel?" he asks.

In the book she reads, a frightened woman walks along a dark city street. "Decent," the wife answers. She does not lift her eyes from the page. She fears her spouse. That night upstairs, she considers telling him about her lover. How can I avoid saying the truth?, she ponders as she turns onto her side in bed.

The husband goes to a forest reserve alone one weekend. He plans to climb a mountain and take his pills at the view. Once in the reserve, he straps on his knapsack with his lunch and other goods inside. He hikes. He considers the wife at home as he marches past a row of pines. I am not going to like the view on the pills, he thinks. And I know I wanted to use them. He reaches the mountain height and takes the bottle from his pocket. He studies this, puts it back in his pocket and looks from the vista. Mountains roll before him like waves. He tenses surveying their great expanse; the green goes into the distance.

The wife tells her lover of her unhappiness in seeing him. He paces across the room and turns a few small figurines on the table. He says, "I'm sorry you feel so. I'm content being with you if you had doubted." The wife does not believe him, not after his many signs of boredom. However, she does not argue whether he was honest. She is
tired of trying to prove things. "I wish I could talk of you with my husband. I struggle over how I would. We do not talk and yet I think nothing else might set me free with him. I've kept quiet when he's there to feel safe. But I can't anymore." The wife sulks and sets her hand into her cheek. Her lover comes and stands before her, ready to offer help. He does not know what to say, however, and she knows it. She inspects the pattern in the carpet and does not lift her head.
The husband and the wife meet in their living room where they sit and watch TV. The husband considers the pills in his study. He has been in the mood for them awhile. He knows that he will continue so while missing them. He fidgets sometimes where he sits beside his spouse. He asks her, "What do you think of this program?", to show interest.
The wife studies the screen blankly. "This actress says too much," she answers. She holds quiet and the husband listens to the show with her. She believes she should tell the husband about her lover. She does not know if she will or what to say if her lover urges her to come to him. All she hopes for right now, and what might just be possible, is to sit beside her husband and act as if she were content.
She strained to hear the whistle of the train in the distance. She’d never even known it existed. She’d slept so soundly before, she’d never been awake in the dead of night to hear it. Now, she knew its schedule like she was one of the fleet conductors. She could smell the dirty diesel fuel burning in their engines as she lay on the dirty bed, waiting.

The sound of the whistle faded to nothing more than her imagination. The metallic crunch of the loose door handle turning took its place and rattled between her desperate ears. It’s just temporary, she remained to herself as the strange man entered the room cloaked in the deliberate darkness. Just a little more money, she whispered in the tears that slid from the corners of her eyes. Just a few more times, she cried. It’s only temporary.

The train had passed and the next one wasn’t due for another hour. She needed another distraction in the meantime. She counted the money in her head while the stranger convulsed on top of her. He was the third one that night, and the tenth one that week, give or take. It was hard to remember how many there were when she disappeared while they loved her body. She didn’t think of them as men; they were doses of the drugs she needed to keep going.

She focused her scattered mind on the cigar box on the floor of her closet at home, and not the drab business clothes that still hung on the racks above. She knew the skin-tight skirts and sweat smeared low-cut tops that lay scattered on the floor underneath them were only temporary. One day she’d need the drab office clothes again. One day she’d be working upright, sitting in an office chair instead of on her back behind closed doors.

She heard the click of the door’s lock come closed as the stranger left her laying on her back, money in hand. She slinked to the bathroom, avoiding the glance in the mirror she’d learned was more pain than it was worth. The woman in the mirror wasn’t her. She was a woman born out of necessity and loved with desperation. She missed the light in her eyes she used to see, but she’d given it to someone for safekeeping while she searched for God in the inexplicable things he forced her to do behind dirty motel doors.

The warm discolored water trickled out of the showerhead and onto her ruined body as she tried to scrub the feeling of strange men from her skin, but the cheap motel soap was not strong enough. The hard water stripped her skin of its sensuality, leaving it dry and dead. It felt numb, helping her to feel less when strangers touched it, for which, she was thankful. But even she knew the shower was merely a rouse to make her feel normal in the time in between.

Two more faceless strangers into the night and the warm water scratched at her skin again, washing the evils of the night down the drain to the treatment plant to be
cleansed of her sins. Her thoughts turned from the ghosts in the room to the woman that controlled her; her keeper, her Madame. She’d be waiting for her like she always was; hands outstretched for the money that was now the lifeblood flowing through her shriveled veins.

She felt exposed in the bright white hallways. The artificial light burned against her skin and exposed the secrets she couldn’t even tell herself. She waited, uncomfortably, to talk to the Madame, biting her nails and fidgeting in her own skin. The weight of the money in her bag pulled at her shoulder. She hoped it was enough to get what she needed. Still, she knew it wasn’t enough. It was never enough.

She sat on the edge of the chair while her Madame counted the dirty money splayed out on the counter, each bill with a different man’s face smeared in the middle of it. When she was done counting she looked up at her with disapproving eyes; like a mother disappointed in a child who had not reached her full potential. You can do better than this, her eyes read. You can do more men than this. Don’t you know what’s at stake?

“Two doses,” my Madame whispered. “Enough for another week, maybe ten days. Room 205.”

She forced a smile and watched as my Madame pocketed the money. She left the desk without saying a word and found her way through the bright hallways, trying to find shadows to hide in along the way. They’d be waiting for her in the room with her two doses, her weeks’ worth of sins and sleaze. But her transgressions didn’t matter, least of all to her.

She took her seat and watched as the women in white coats hooked up the doses she’d earned with the talent between her legs; the talent all women are born with. She watched as the liquid in the clear tubes traveled down to the needle that had pierced girlish skin. It felt warm, she always said and brought with it instant relief from pain and fear.

The young girl in the bed stirred as the warm liquid reached her veins, and mother again found the light she’d given up for safekeeping. The darkness of the night melted away and her skin felt like her own again as she looked into the only eyes that mattered. She stroked her little girl’s hair, trying not to think about what the nurse had said; a week, maybe ten days. The cigar box in the closet was empty. The train whistled in the distance, calling her back to work. She looked at her little girl and with a smile ran into the night to find men to love her. It’s only temporary, she whispered. The medicine couldn’t help her now. She was only ever buying temporary time.
Poor men’s currency

Jessica Simpkiss

I sat at the kitchen table with my mother while we watched through the large bay window waiting for my father’s return. The fire sizzled and popped loudly from the other room. I listened as my mother’s fingers tapped nervously on the wooden tabletop, the callouses from the years of working the loom almost completely healed. Even the skin on my own hands had softened with the lack of work we’d been cursed with. My nails were clear and not muddied with dirt for once, but I missed the feeling of work on my hands.

After an hour had passed and my father had still not returned from his meeting with the Tweed man, I excused myself from my mother’s company. I found my way to the nearly empty pastures we still tended. In the distance I could see a handful of sheep grazing, their hot pink stripes clashing angrily against the drab brown background of the hillside. The mothers were heavy with babies and promises in their bellies. Lambing was still at least ten days away. It wouldn’t be much work when they came, but amidst the nothingness, we found ourselves in the middle of, it was something.

The wind had picked up and the handful of sheep moved into the shadow of the hillside, hunkering down in the small crevasses after hours of grazing. The sun scrambled through the fast-moving clouds and glittered on the surface of the lake like fairy dust, begging to be swum in. As a child in the summer, I had braved the cool water, letting it sting my skin. Now that I was grown, I thought I wouldn’t have time for such frivolity. I kicked the dry dirt as I walked the pastures, leaving clumps of hay and filling the feed buckets as I did. What should have taken all day now took less than an hour. All I had was time and worry.

I tried to put memories of the past and fears for our future aside, but the two pulled me in opposite directions, leaving my insides in relentless turmoil. I’d walked all the way to the edge of the pasture, where the green-brown color of the ground disappeared into the blue of the sea stretching out to the horizon. I found a flat rock to lean against and duck out of the reach of the biting wind. I would have sat but the ground was still burnt in places. The smell of burning heather mixed with lamb’s wool spun in the air between the rocks and flooded my mind with painful memories of trying to save the animals that gave us life. Their deaths had been ours as well. Now, our lives had been placed in the hands of the Tweed man my father knew and his compassion for a family of sheep farmers living on the edge of extinction.

The wind died enough for me to hear the cry of the season’s first lamb. It wasn’t unheard of for mothers to lamb this early, but it made keeping the babies alive more difficult. Early lambs were weak and could freeze easily in the harshness of the winter that always lingered well into spring. His cries were shrill and desperate, but so were ours.
My father’s footsteps took the place of the lambs cries when he got close enough. The crunch of his boots over the dried and blackened grass grew louder the closer he came. When he perched on the rock next to me, he could hear the penetrating cry of the lamb as I had. His face was sullen and sad, gray like the storm clouds that hung over the horizon. We stood next to each other in silence, listening to the change we both knew the wind was bringing in. 

"Will he still let me work the sheep?" I finally asked.

"He says he will, if that is your wish."

"It is," I answered, knowing my place was in the field with the beasts and not behind the loom like other women.

"How many?" I asked, our eyes still unable to meet.

"Five hundred, and a hundred more each year for the first five years."

I smiled. I would not cry like the lamb. I knew my place in this world and now I knew what my life was worth.

"Not bad," I laughed, touching my father’s face to bring us eye to eye. "A thousand sheep will keep you the way an unmarried daughter never could."
Summer was waning. The nights had started to cool enough that you needed something around your shoulders if you were going to be outside past sunset. Generous groups of crickets sang in the long grass covering the dunes, their songs overtaking any late afternoon conversations on the boardwalk before it gave way to the scratchy sand. The last of the summer fireflies puttered about in the evening breeze, but soon, even they would be gone.

The sun had been up long enough to warm the sand under her skin as she sat and watched the waves rolled in and out over the salt-riddled bodies that refused to believe summer was over. She began to sweat under the oversized long-sleeved shirt she’d thrown on over her two-piece bathing suit when her daughter gave her the disapproving look that daughters of a certain age always seem to give to mothers. She was torn between not dying of heat stroke and not wanting to embarrass her daughter while she played in the waves with newly discovered friends one last time before summer officially ended and they all went back to school like summer never happened. Ultimately, she decided she could sweat it out for one more day.

The sand scratched against her feet as she moved them back and forth, burring them in the little caves their movement made. She listened to the laughter and screams of the children playing in the surf like a record on repeat, their bodies jumping in the whitewater as if imitating the mullet that jumped further out. Some of the older boys and girls of the group had ventured out past the shore break and were treading water against the current. Quinn, her daughter, stood knee deep at the break, the waves trying their best to toss her backward and then suck her in. She looked back at her mother and yelled something that was carried away on the wind before she disappeared under her last summer wave. The seafoam gleam of the water caught her eyes as she lost sight of her child and shaped a memory of a time and a girl who had thought she was a mermaid.

"So, we’re all mermaids before we’re born," a younger Quinn stated in a surprisingly matter of fact tone, motioning to the swollen belly of the pregnant woman on the lounge chair next to them. She had never thought of an unborn child’s ability to breathe liquid prior to birth as classifying them as mermaids, but in that moment, she had to agree with her daughter’s interpretation of the natural world around her that she, and every seven-year-old, was yet to fully understand.

"I want to be a mermaid again," she proclaimed that day, before throwing herself into the community pool, scarcely to be seen walking on two legs for the rest that summer. Every morning she stood outside the chain link fence to the pool with her daughter, waiting impatiently for the locks and chains to be removed, opening a world under the surface of the water her daughter had created in her mind. Diving sticks transformed into ocean coral and the rings formed the walkways leading the way to underwater
castles and forts. All her creatures had names and places in her world below the water's surface and she, of course, was always their Queen.

A few weeks into the summer and they knew the lifeguards by name; Danny, Tripp, Samantha and a boy who would only answer to the name Maverick even though everyone knew his real name was Jacob. Occasionally there would be a new face filling in for someone who’d called in to lie about being sick so they could play hooky and to go to the beach with friends instead. They didn’t know that Quinn was a mermaid and wasn’t expected to leave the pool when the whistle blew for fifteen minutes of adults only swim. The regular guards would always have to explain it to them and none of them ever cared. They were only kids themselves, working summer jobs to have enough spending money to take dates to the movies or buy makeup they’d convinced themselves they needed.

Halfway through the season, the chlorine in the pool had bleached hair green and eyes red. The penetrating rays of the sun had stolen the bright colors from every swimsuit, the warm water had permanently pruned soft skin and her mermaid had fallen in love with the boy who only answered to Maverick.

She watched from the lounge chair, peaking over the tops of the books she pretended to read each day, as he threw the diving sticks or rings to her when he wasn’t in the guard chair. When the pool was quiet or when the adults weren’t paying attention, he’d let her blow the whistle at the kids who were not following the rules. Her eyes sparkled like the glint of the sun’s reflection trapped in the water when he smiled at her and he was the prince in every little girl’s dreams.

When the day had passed and only when the sun had completely set and cast pinkish orange streaks across the sky would the lifeguards blow their whistles for the day’s last call. She’d watch as the few remaining families packed their wet towels and half used bottles of sunscreen and made their way to the gates where one of the guards was always waiting to quickly sling the chains through the fence. Not even the shrill scream of the silver whistle was enough to get Quinn out of the water, but Maverick could with the promise of more mermaid games the following day.

When that summer ended, Quinn returned to school as a second grader and Maverick as a high school senior. She couldn’t tell if her daughter’s melancholy manner was due to the shedding of her mermaid tail for the coming winter or her lost love, neither of which she could do much about. She pouted for the winter and only smiled again when the days began to warm and the closed for the season sign was removed from the pool gate as if the winter had not happened. But the boy who only answered to Maverick was missing from her mermaid’s dream and she watched as the smile slid from her daughter’s face into the pool that had been her world the summer before. The water did not shine as brightly as it had before. There was a dullness to it that made it feel murky and sad. She tried to be a mermaid again but spent all her time with her eyes just above the surface hoping to see him standing on the coping stone, ready to throw a ring for her. The new guards did not understand that she was allowed
to remain in the water when the whistle blew. Each time she was forced to sit on the side of the pool and wait for adult swim to conclude, more and more of her tail faded in the powerful sun until she was left with just two legs.

He’s guarding at the beach - chair 14, one of the guards confessed when Quinn asked quietly after the majority of the summer had slipped by. His absence from the pool and her life had been a cloud following her on an otherwise sunny day, but now the sun shone through and she begged her mother to be taken to the beach so she could be a real mermaid, one that swims in the ocean instead of just a pretend one in the community pool. And who was she to deny a little girl’s dream, when all mothers tell little girls is that they can be anything they want to be.

She watched as a dark-skinned boy in red swim trunks pulled her would-be mermaid from the surf, a lifeless sundrenched of summer returned to her skin. The world began to move again once she heard her little girl speak. "What happened?" she asked the boy who’d pulled her from the sea.doll in his crooked arms. The cold water ate at her feet and then at her knees as she knelt next to her daughter lying in the sand. The sound of the waves and the calls of the gulls overhead froze and all she could hear was his counting; one, two, three, four all the way to thirty as his hands pressed roughly in the space just between where her breasts would eventually be, she hoped.

When the counting stopped, there was nothing but the rushing sound of air around them, like they’d been swallowed up by an invisible waterspout coming off the ocean, but really it was the sound of his breath breathing life back into her little girl. She couldn’t help but think how jealous the other girls would be of her little girls first kiss. When the gurgling and coughing noises started, he rolled her onto her side and she kissed the sand with both lips. The boy in the red swim trunks smacked her roughly on the back with a delicate hand. The ocean slipped out of her mouth and the color "You tried to breathe water," the boy who only answered to Maverick replied with a smile. "You became a mermaid today."
Skinny
Victoria Endres

I struggle to remember how I got here. Somehow, I’ve ended up on the floor of my bathroom, the grout filled canyons between pine green tiles already paining my knees. My head rests on the cool rim of the toilet seat, as the remains of countless candy bars and chips swirl down the drain, leaving behind only a harsh, bitter smell. It will linger for hours.

I try and remember how it began, when I first started to hoard food under my bed to eat well past when I should have gone to sleep. It started with a spoonful of peanut butter right before bed. Then it turned to two spoonfuls, then three, then four, then I added other foods, junk food mainly. The drawer under my bed cluttered with chocolate bars, chips, cereal, energy bars.

I had to hide it all: the wrappers, the stress and sugar induced acne, my fears. No one would understand that this wasn’t some desperate attempt to be sexy. I just wanted to be healthy. I didn’t come up with this idea on my own.

* * *

I’ve always been small. I grew up being called skinny, bean-pole, thin as a rail. Until recently it never bothered me. But then something changed. It started off as a seemingly innocent conversation. She stopped me in the hallway and asked how my lunch went, if I had eaten anything good, if I finished my food. A bit strange, but then again, most librarians are a bit odd.

But the questions didn’t stop. Soon she was asking every day, the same questions, always trying to find out how much I was eating. I couldn’t understand why. After weeks of cryptic questioning, she found me at my locker, wedged in the corner at the end of the 7th grade hallway. She handed me a book, simply saying "I think you need to read this," before walking briskly away, frizzy red hair bouncing as she went. The cover was black, adorned only with a lime green popsicle missing a bite, the words "SKINNY" written in white bold letters across the top. Confused, I read the back cover. This was the story of a girl with anorexia. She was so sick, but she didn’t know it until she almost died. Somehow, I thought that this librarian was seeing me more clearly than I saw myself. She could see every bone or vein that pressed against my skin. I, in my sickness, must be blind to the truth.

I was devastated. Mom was always trying to get me to eat seconds after dinner, but I always ate until I was full. Could I have this disease and not know it? I stayed up all night reading the book. In the end, I decided she must be right. I was anorexic.

* * *
It was not until much later that I asked myself why. Why didn’t she really try and help me?
Why didn’t she talk to me about this, instead of handing me a book?
Why couldn’t she really see me? See that I was doing okay, that I was just a skinny girl, that being small doesn’t mean you’re sick.
She didn’t see me. She saw what she expected to see from a pale little girl with prominent collar bones.
Maybe she couldn’t understand. Like most of the women in my town, Mrs. McCurdy wasn’t thin. At some point maybe she had been, but she had carried her surplus weight for years. Perhaps she, like so many other women, had forgotten that it was possible to be naturally thin.
Maybe in a world that struggles to show that plus size body types are natural and beautiful, we’ve forgotten that there can be more than one desirable and healthy shape. When the radios unceasingly stream songs saying curvier is better, they don’t realize they’re saying that those of us who don’t have curves, those of us who can’t seem to get them, aren’t beautiful.
Maybe she was jealous. Unable to keep herself from tearing me down, just because she couldn’t have the thin body she desired.
Maybe I was a charity project. A task for her to complete, a cause requiring minimal effort to make her feel good.
I don’t know why. And I never will, because instead of helping me understand, she handed me a book and walked away.
For some reason, women seem to think they have a universal right to critique each other’s bodies. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, friends, and strangers all seem to have an opinion about how I should look. Their voices drown out my own. No one asks how I feel, they only tell me how I should appear, how I should change.

* * *

Since people with anorexia don’t eat enough, I resolved to eat, and keep eating until I wasn’t skinny anymore. I was playing three sports then, and quit two so that I could put on more weight.
Nothing worked.
I stopped exercising. No change. I could see my ribs when I took a deep breath, I must still be sick, I thought. I stopped eating vegetables. Still my kneecaps seemed to stick out too much. I added more food to my bedtime snacks, all junk food. Still my vertebrae were too prominent when I bent over.
Eating became an obsession. But somehow my body was betraying me. I couldn’t seem to gain any weight.
So I forced myself to eat even when I was full. Pushing past the cramps in my side and the pounding headaches to eat one last sandwich, one last chip. Then, finally, my body had had too much. I ran to the bathroom, hand over my mouth.
Heaving over the toilet, hoping my parents wouldn’t hear. All of my hard work was gone, in just minutes my body had purged itself of what I had forced into it. I sat sobbing, wondering how I would ever get past my anorexia. That had been two days ago. And I was already back. Reliving the nightmare all over again.

Sitting there, my head against the grey bathroom wall, mouth filled with the acidic taste of bile, I didn’t feel like someone in recovery. I felt worse than I ever had. My stomach was in knots, I didn’t have the strength to pick myself up off the floor. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My face was paler than I’d ever seen it. Like I was some kind of ghostly version of who I’d been. I looked for protruding bones, trying to find the signs that I was too skinny, and realized they weren’t there. Maybe they never had been.

I missed softball, volleyball. I missed eating broccoli. I missed sleeping without pain in my stomach.

Standing up shakily, I went quietly to my room, grabbed the book from my desk and tucked it under my arm. It was a warm night for March, so when I snuck quietly out the back door there was no chill to deter me from going out into the dark. I only had to walk a block before I reached the lake at the center of my neighborhood. Walking the familiar path between my neighbors’ fences I heard a dog start barking somewhere down the street. But it was late and the only other signs of life were the moths circling the street lamps.

When I threw the book into the lake, it sank quickly, anticlimactically. The green popsicle on the front seemed to glow for a moment, the only part visible as it sank into the water.

Then it was gone.

* * *

A month later a letter arrived. It announced to the whole family that I had a late fee. Some book called Skinny. When I went to pay for the lost book, the librarian wasn’t there. Her absence a blessing, I didn’t need to face her. Instead of leaving the envelope on her desk I left her a note. Simply saying, "I didn’t ask for this, pay the fee yourself." The letters stopped coming, and I told my mom it had just been a misunderstanding. The librarian was wrong.
Birthday Gifts from A Lover

A full body suit, swatches of midnight and gloomy blue, fresh souvenirs, of your touch.

Patches of fading yellow, tattered paper, on every limb, spotted memoirs of failed revolution.

Here and there a grey or purple, suggestions to improve, to bury my flaws.

Once without crimson stains, no rips, nor tears, and never threadbare, now worn too cruelly to be so pure.

A full body suit of injury, your gift to me.
Refuge

The blasts of wind signal
an angry, grey pursuer,
red leaves tremble, and their branches
knock, incessant on speckled glass,
seeking shelter at my border,
in need of refuge from
death’s destructive force,
from the storm on their heels.

Water pours and the outside world
droops, held down by the weight
of my betrayal; a crash of thunder
punctuates their plight,
wind like a child’s frightened
scream, just outside my haven.
I struggle, attempting, failing
to remain aloof, to feign ignorance
of suffering, the helpless,
would-be-refugees, pounding
on my door.

My eyes find the world in my lap
where spring flowers and gentle
breezes wait, as I attempt to
ignore the howls of the winds
and the trees’ drowning pleas;
pretending I feel no empathy.
Tattoo

The first bite
is sharp, distinct.
I crave another sting
just so I know
if this pain
will sing
of failed love
of bruises
of tears
like drain pipes
after a storm.

I hear the gun,
hear it sing
some sweet,
pure melody
writing new
lyrics on
my once
bruised skin.
Beginning
a new story.

I see it coming,
the next prick,
like the first;
go on I say
to the blue-gloved hand
resting on my leg.

Black ink
erasing,
ghostly pale scars
from the tumble
I took
down the stairs
at your push.
The gun pushes against my skin, leaving its mark.
This time lacking blues, this time by my choice, not your abuse.

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Leaving

Two weeks ago, the second pair of hummingbirds left their nest. After the bold one flew off, Mama worked with the more timid fledgling for a few hours until he, too, summoned his wings and departed. The nest looks worn, as if it will eventually blow away. Wind has ruffled the weeds and webbing. There is no longer anything to keep it together.

Floating

Years ago, my gynecologist had instructions to tie my tubes. Tying means to make a knot. Instead, she cut them free from my ovaries. After that my ovaries floated inside me, as if in the gelatinous saltwater of the sea, unmoored to any anchor. Without guidance, my ovaries grew cysts the size of coconuts and plagued me by growing and shrinking and hiding from the ultrasound technician.

That's how I feel now. Like those unrealized ovaries—floating free and full of past possibility—I am a pod of seeds, although many are dead or dying.
Leaving

My oldest cat, a bossy, hypnotizing Mama's boy, died Sunday morning. Knowing that his illnesses and the vet’s treatments would cancel each other out and make his future a chronology of suffering that would seem eternal to him, I sang him a Yiddish love song, "Tumbalalaika," and held him bundled in a beach towel while the vet slipped poison into a tube embedded in his front leg.

I used to kiss the pads of his paws. They smelled like the feet of a human child. In the weeks that my father was sick, my cat sat on the antique elm chest and watched the first pair of baby hummingbirds outside our window.

Changing

The surgeon cut open my foot and scraped the tumor from the shell of my navicular bone. Then he filled it with a paste made from my iliac crest and from a cadaver bone. Do people register at the DMV to offer up their skeletons in case they die in accidents?

III

Leaving

When the tech came to take my swaddled cat from my arms, I gave him up because he had become just a body. I recognized the moment he was no longer with me. The tech said, "He's gone up here" and motioned to his eyes, "but not yet here"
and patted his heart. I held him for minutes more and then he was gone. He had weight and substance, even as he was dying, and then suddenly, he was light as a dry husk.

**Floating**

When my father was diagnosed with his final illness three months ago, my husband and I visited him. We helped him in his decision not to accept treatment and to enter hospice. Then we had to return home to our own lives and to our cats, especially the old sick one. I wasn't there in those last days when my father hallucinated and slapped a nurse. When I called him the day before he passed, his voice was disembodied, as if it emanated from a large empty room. "Am I dying?" I didn't know what to say, but apparently he had been asking it of everyone, as if he didn't really understand what it meant.

**Returning**

After my father died, the hummingbird returned to her nest and laid two new eggs. I hovered over them from behind glass, as if I were helping their mother. But all I did was worry and take photos, like a 1950s father.
Leaving

Who knows what it means to die? It's been five days since my cat died, and now my second cat, fifteen years of good health behind her, won't eat and has developed a bad heart. A week ago she was indistinguishable from a 2-year-old cat. Now she turns her head, leaving the food in the bowl, sleeps in odd places she’s never lain before.

My house is overrun with books and photographs and objects with stories. I pay them no mind because for a year I took care of a sick cat, for months I talked with my father every day, and now I have another cat to worry about. And two more behind her.

Returning

I don't want any new things. I would like to spend time with what I have. I don't want to leave them untasted, unsmelled. There isn't enough time left. My tumor could come back. My other cats could get sick. My husband could have a heart attack. I could be walking in the park when a bomb explodes.

Ordering

Cheesy disaster movies are like lyric essays. They order the chaos. The important people, the ones close to the viewer, always survive. Then the movie ends with the world on the brink of renewing itself.

Leaving to Return
The empty nest bakes in the sun today, drying it out. Eventually it will break apart and return to the earth. I will watch for the hummingbird to appear next spring with plant fibers in her beak. Maybe my newest cat will lie on the elm chest to observe.
Josua walked around the outside of his house and small garden twice as he always did, every night. The first time around he spoke softly to the demons of mischief and disease, asking them to spare his family. He touched the maize and the beans climbing up the corn stalks, and asked for abundance. The second time he spoke to his companion, the earth, thanking him for life. He returned some drops of water from the jug to its source, the creek that ran to the river, and touched each banana tree while looking at the moon. *You must know how to give to our Mother Earth, and she will give back.* He lit the copal resin, its smoke respecting the earth, water and maize.

Later, lying in his hammock warm enough in t-shirt and cotton pants, his internal dialog continued, putting into quiet words his fears for his elderly mother. She had lived a very long time in uncertainty and as death’s companion. He asked for understanding of the troubled times and for news of brothers and an uncle disappeared during those years.

He remembered the evangelistos who had come to town by bus earlier in the day. Right there, as the sun beat down on the dusty road, they told of a just and merciful God. They told the story of the extermination of the Canaanites. Their all-loving God had ordered the killing as punishment for their sins. Did that god order the soldiers to rape the women and kill the men and boys in Josua’s ancestral village in the Altiplano? Josua had faith that his spiritual guides were protective, but he wondered where they had been while the government forces spent more than thirty years hunting down his people, the peones, believing them to be rebellious.

Lastly, just before sleeping, he spoke with his ancestors, dedicating his work of the day to their memory. He thought of his friend David, and asked Mother Earth to
David had stepped off the morning bus from Guatemala City, months earlier. He wasn’t a tourist; he carried only a backpack and small duffel bag. He wasn’t an evangelisto; he had copper wires braided into his red beard and a few ceramic beads in his hair, and he did not wear a white shirt. By sundown of his first day, everyone in town knew about David. Without actually looking at him, they knew the color of his eyes was identical to the color of Santa Maria’s dress in the Iglesia Isabel la Catolica nearby. They saw strong muscles and rough hands. He didn’t go straight to Holly’s, the one bar in town where the tourists went to feel at ease with their own kind; he went to the tienda. In effortless Spanish, he spoke of the rains last month and of the odd circumstances surrounding the misplacement of the funds to repair the bridge over the river. He drank a few Gallos quickly, since quickly was the only way to enjoy them while the beers were still relatively cold. He sat alone at the edge of the road and watched the chickens peck in the dust and village life pass by. He sat quietly, without checking his watch or fidgeting with his clothes. He bought Chiclets from one of the smaller boys. The locals observed him impassively. After a while, he stood up and looked around him. Josua, shaded by his straw hat raveled at the edge, was buying tortillas across the road, and David left his gear and went over and spoke to him: “Amigo, con permissio.” He asked Josua if there was a place to stay, not a hotel, but a place to rent, maybe a room or a small house. Josua led him away from the river, where the forest began, and where Maria Kok had a one-room house for rent.

He settled in with little fuss. He didn’t ask for anything, he didn’t pry. He ate rice and beans and tortillas and slept in a hammock. He charmed the children with his tricks with a Frisbee, and they brought him to their homes. That’s how everyone in town came to accept David.
When Joshua walked down the dusty path to town the next day, everyone greeted him.

“Que tal, amigo?”

“Bien, bien. Y tu?”

Everyone knew everyone in this small pueblo and was bound to everyone by the weight of memory. All the neighbors, every one, had come from the highlands, like Josua’s family, and each was trying to make a new life in this place where the growing season was different, familiar plants for food and medicine didn’t grow, and where the men and boys were still learning how to hollow the trunk of a ceiba tree to make a cayuco in order to fish in the river to provide protein for their families.

At dawn shopkeepers opened their stalls, and a profusion of bright plastic brooms, tarps, and kitchen utensils spilled into the street. Transistor radios were turned on, each to full volume, each to a different station. Fishermen set out their catch, and fish scales glistened on their rough tabletops. Pickup trucks from other villages offloaded crates of melons, bags of onions and habanero chiles, baskets of small apples, limes, and pineapples. Also in those pickups were young women with babies tied to their backs, grandmothers and grandfathers, short and bow-legged, and others come to shop in the tiendas or to sell scant produce grown in their small milpas. Some spread out blankets or pieces of cardboard and arranged peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers for sale. Mothers with babies swaddled in perrajes carried their laundry to the river. The day was like all others.

The morning bus roared to a stop, its fumes and music accompanying the sunrise. When strangers got off, they were either tourists come to see the river and the falls or evangelistos in white shirts come to sell Jesus. This morning only the bus driver got off to pee behind the tienda and to buy himself one cold Gallo.
Josua walked to the dock to check on his little boat and to listen to the last argumentative voices of the egrets on the small island opposite, before they settled down in the branches of the mangroves to sleep the hot day away. The heat would suck the smells out of the packed earth: rotting fruit, excrement, spilled spices, stale beer. Josua hoped a tourist would hire him to make the trip upriver to visit the falls and to bathe in the hot sulphur springs that bubbled through the cracks in the rocks close to shore. The day seemed cooler if you lay your body in the hot water in the shadow of the thick vines. Or maybe David would need a boatman and a translator for one of his trips into the remote villages.

Often he asked Josua to take him up and down the river in his small boat. He told Josua he had come to take testimonies from families about the bad times so that all the world’s people would be witnesses. The word spread with the river current, and one by one David, with Josua translating from Q’eqchi’ to Spanish, listened to the stories, wrote them in a notebook, felt the anguish, and sometimes visited the mass graves.

David would pay him ten quetzals for a day’s work, and Josua would go to the tienda in the evening to play dominoes with the other men, who spent their days sitting outdoors under a blue tarp, nursing beers, moving the flies through the still hot air, waiting. Then Josua would walk home to his dinner and, afterwards, would again walk twice around his house and elaborate on his conversations with his spirits, before sleeping, fitfully.

Earlier Joshua had asked David whether he thought the evangelistos were correct in their beliefs. Without condemning their opinions, David told him that he believed there was a lottery to life. Each individual’s place was defined by chance, not by being born in God’s image. Each individual’s legacy was determined by his choices: what to deny, what to applaud, when to be silent, and how to exercise responsibility. He saw his work as the obligation one brother has to another. Joshua
had a lot to think about.

David also had much to think about – not only the horrors to which he was bearing witness, but also the miasma of despair that hung like a dense storm cloud over Josua’s family. Each evening he would eat his dinner alone and write in his journal. One evening he wrote: “Josua’s mother has taken me into her heart, even though she is too shy to look at my face. She came out of her doorway in bare feet and gave me a pumpkin today, and I know she has only a few. I fear that she will die of heartbreak, not knowing the fate of her two oldest sons and her brother. I hear Josua’s love for her in the one word I can understand him say to her, Mami. I don’t know how to help her.”

The next day David and Josua traveled up river into Lago Izabal and to the small village of El Chapin where they heard and documented more testaments. As they often did, they stopped at the hot spring on their way home to soak and to soothe their burdened memories. They tied the small boat to a vine and slid into the warm water. Often a dugout would paddle by: a fisherman checking his crab traps or a workman moving supplies.

The stillness of the midday forest echoed a voice: one man in his cayuco calling out to them. He asked for permission to join them, as he was hot and tired and wanted confirmation of his directions. In his boat was another older man, slumped in the bottom, clutching a woven shoulder bag. He was bare but for shabby trousers. Josua grasped the older man’s hands, then gently raised his chin to see his face more clearly.

“Mi tio,” he whispered, and tears quickly welled and spilled over. My uncle.

Josua and David took him to the village, to Josua’s mother, the old man’s sister. For days the brother and sister sat together in the shade of her doorway quietly talking, sometimes keening, their backs bent. When all the words were spoken, the old man
reached for his bag. It was the one he had carried since boyhood, black and white, woven by their mother, made to carry tortillas wrapped in banana leaves. As though he was a spirit releasing the winds, he took out one item after another.

First, the collar of an old shirt, so threadbare that the white background was like dust on a cobweb. Still visible were the stronger polyester threads of gray and blue. Josua’s mother reached for it with trembling fingers, stroked the edge, and fondled the one button. Next, a belt, grimy with years of wear, sweat-stained, scratched and nicked, but unlike any belt in the world for the name scratched near the buckle: Checha.

There was more. He took the strap of another bag out of his bag; this one green and black, made long ago by her own hands for her second son, Herson.

These pitiful bits were the remains of her sons. They were all she had to remind her of their existence and of their deaths; all she had to know of their fate. But now she knew, and that was the gift her brother had brought home in his black and white bag.

David went with the family and the neighbors to the sacred burial ground. They returned the remnants that had been Checha’s and Herson’s to the earth, restoring dignity to the family and honoring their spirits and their ancestors. He wondered about the choices and the beliefs that led to these young men’s early deaths. He thought of responsibility and brotherhood and justice; and he speculated that their similarities outweighed their backgrounds – his of privilege, theirs of want. When he looked up from the newly dug hole in Mother Earth, Josua’s mother held his gaze.

Back at Josua’s house, the only sound was the chickens rummaging in the yard. The crying and the words were over. Anxiety and tension had given way to sadness and resignation. The day’s rituals would continue – coffee beans would be hulled, maize would be ground, eggs collected. Josua would talk with his companion, the earth, and, in the village, the evangelistos would sell their merciful god.
What is not so new

Rilke’s *random lechery of distraction*
obsesses on a pink (pure) shirt,
today subtle-soiled with imagined brown sweat,
enough to shift the field,
to foster the conviction that the life allotted
for this fabric may be over,
that the *lechery of distraction* wanders in a future,
not on history’s stained ground—
not on what this shirt has endured to become
human-worn, thrift-store soft.

Note how shoulders stretched the weave
while exploring rough country.

Note the nagging worry seeing what others
think, fearing this once essential
shirt cannot be replaced. O my, the drama of
uneven breathing, stomach turns,
restless legs, struggling to understand how
evidence threads to create
an existence, who we could be, how each of us
will die. The lechery of distraction
never fully dreams, or lies content with colors married—finished.

Instead, the never really random lechery itches with desire like a volcano heating deep within as it prepares to explode. Those who are never complete plot a life that can’t really exist—how to move, to hit with a hammer the next irritation, which is just a rock in a shoe, nothing but everything. But change nonetheless, which for the restless is forward, which is progress.
war ache

Sebald in his last meditative travels deliberately lingered in isolated country to fathom results when soldiers linger as a rule of force,

an encroaching crowd in a backwater grown accustomed to denied needs, to propaganda originating from far away.

Where in floating slow time soldiers waste and wait and stare at the populace they have learned to despise, each citizen shrunken into alien and absurd political molds. Outrage stifled, language erased. Who allows this routine—young men’s fear-driven bravado abusing those they were sent to protect, when no scribe stalls on detail that makes impersonal what is so personal,

so even rape eventually seems a natural act? The women stare with reproach, though no outcry leaks, not even a sad childish gesture.

Sebald the absorbing observer, detailed the chain of discolored perspective that collects long after the heat of battle.

What else to be expected, when those trained in war, are frozen in place, until the insistent need grows to desecrate a land they only want to leave? Without a Sebald, who else but victims remember the awkward saga,
the conquered shell, finally abandoned, alone, despoiled? What good describing lingering wounds when the world lumbers on, ashamed?
**Burning the places of power**  
Looking at J.M.W. Turner’s *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons,*

the shimmering red orange fire alive on the water,  
adding glow to faces watching,

the thick smoke that hangs in a solid grey layer  
makes bystanders kneel low,

even as one distinctive figure gestures as if to say *nobody knows why* in this age (like all ages)

that preferred to hide reasons for destruction,  
though we know now Parliament’s over stuffed

wood stoves warmed the powerful when fuel for  
the humble and voiceless was scarce,

until overheating led to this firestorm that first consumed houses of governance,

then soon enough poor neighborhoods nearby,  
all now before our eyes, though we live far enough

away to see textured beauty in flames, how smoke colors land and water and marries sky and cloud.

For fires such as this, we can stall and love awesome change, the fear feeding adrenaline, and savor

the impulse to run toward hungry heat to see what might be consumed. Too late the prophetic

calls to correct, to live in right fashion to prevent chaos—even to achieve balance with heat and color
and wind, to intuit how strength grows amidst frailties. Not too late to touch the surface and memorize faces, after the fact, in the stumbling need to start again.
Mountain Time Zone

Western lodge-pole pine pollen
dry like powdered snow.

Everywhere the yellow-crayon gold
enters niche and seam,
sifting deep into this quiet—insisting
that here in these high regions
where rock and crag compete
with sandy dirt,
spring gushes forth all at once
in one late-June week.

Those of us acclimated to flat land summer,
slow moving ceremony,
predictable holidays that mark
stop/start cold/warm months,
breathe deep soft daylight
and this rich hue a-drift in thin air.

A new season covers every surface
with evidence that life
here is as it should be—ready to
bloom as aged snow melts.

How a year circles, growing momentum
in patient time as we
skirt rugged land where pines loom
above boulders, the stream alive,
a cold history a-flow—undocumented,
greater than us.
“Laundry Weekend” by Myles Zavelo

Currently: Thursday, 1:20 AM:

Could be notes but I have never been one of those.

(A notetaker.)

I think this is for the best: if you do not notice me.

The reason: if you notice me you will know me. Because I think my mouth is an open wound. That requires stitching.

If I do not say it, I will surely suffocate. (I have experimented with suffocation before, and it just hurts.)

There is something wrong; I think it is the way they treat me.

So don’t leave. I don’t think you should leave this dorm room. Never, ever leave this dorm room. If you leave this dorm room they will attack you, and please: do not attack me.

Not here. On this campus.

Not here. In front of everyone.

No, and stop.
So I am maintaining the suspicion: they think I’m something like him—something like a babysitter’s boyfriend. Something like an attacker.

But I am not like him. I am not a babysitter’s boyfriend. I am not that.

I am not the image of predation forcing a body to clutch onto shower taps in the middle of the night.

I am not keeping the shower curtain closed. Like him, like he did.

Oh, wait: I am him/I am becoming just like THAT, and it’s way too late to change anything.

In my advanced creative writing course. They are writing about me. I am in the stories, their stories. I am totally seated in a sea of mostly brown eyes. So I withdraw.

In my theatre course, they are performing scenes from my life. So I withdraw.

And in my philosophy course, they just hate me. So I withdraw!

And the small campus becomes smaller. Much smaller.

Everything is closing in—I think I can see everything that exists.

But a bed, a bookshelf, a desk, a chair, and a dresser. All for me, all supplied by the college. This is what I want to see.
(This is my life.)

An American flag is on my wall as well. And all the stars are moving, slowly. Sometimes quickly. All before I can gain motive to blink.

Also, I am not eating. Subsequently losing some weight. For sure. Too skinny. Because the dining hall is just not a possibility anymore. Too many pairs of multi-colored eyes there. And my door is always, always, always locked. And I hurry to the restroom across the hall once a day. (This is a war.)

During this period in my dorm room, I make a very half-hearted attempt. I swallow every pill in sight and wake up in the middle of the night with the worst headache of my life. The worst headache I will ever suffer. I promise you this.

But I will go back there. (I will go back to Bennington. That’s in Vermont.)

Because I think it’s the drawings from my father. My dad draws for me, on our family week. And I think this is what does it for me.

He draws me/he draws my friends. We are just stick figures to him, my dad. We are supposed to be having (sober) fun: we are playing (like kids) on commons lawn. And I’m surprised he remembers my college.

He knows my college. Mom does too. And I love him. And I love her too.

So my parents are sleeping in a hotel. And sure. I am near them. But I am also
so far away, too. They are going to remember this. In arguments they will use this.

Because they are sitting next to people in pain. Because they are sitting across from people in pain. Sitting next to, and sitting across from all those people in pain. I am putting my parents through H-E-L-L.

Molly does not meet my parents; Molly does not hear/see my parents. She’s sick in bed.

Molly used to prefer longer hair—now wears it short. Molly also prefers grown women to boyfriends.

Molly was born in Eastern Colorado and raised in East Africa but attended an art college back where I’m from but you can’t know which one (because confidentiality).

After college, Molly relocated to Los Angeles. She was bullied by her coworkers there. So she came here. She wants tattoos to cover her left forearm. She wants tattoos to cover the scars.

I hope Molly is still alive. I really hope so.

Sydney is related to her mother and sister. They all look so alike! I meet that small family on her week. They are disappointed she is here, with us. And apparently her room at home is a mess, apparently. Sydney is the depressed person with the most rewarding laugh.
I hope Sydney is still reading, on the beach. I hope Sydney still hopes for something.

But Carly only shows up when she feels like it.

Carly is here because she swallowed like sixty pills. Or maybe more pills. I forget how many pills.

All the men say they wouldn’t even take Carly home on a bad night because she’s ugly as sin. (Alcohol/alcoholism, men; bad nights. You are aware, most likely.)

I hope Carly is still painting her nails, and taking Hallmark cards very seriously.

Rick is also in my process group.

Rick is a sweetheart from Memphis who has spent the last decade smoking very low quality marijuana (handyman supplied skunk), alone, in his car, his wife sometimes watching him from the windows in their apartment.

Do they ever think of me? Do they ever remind themselves? I kind of think of them often, kind of.

I think my greatest fear is this: being forceful. I do not want to be that.

I do not want to be that but I (desperately) want you to imagine this: two boys wearing their bright red swimming trunks in a sun drenched backyard. In Los Angeles.
I’d like to stand on that driveway one more time. I’d like to drink up that smaller refrigerator next to that much bigger refrigerator.

That big backyard, that very cold pool, to just be with my terribly confused roommate in his bright red swimming trunks too.

To share my cigarettes. To crack jokes about really dirty things. To lay down (he will not share a bed whenever we screen horror films from the nineteen-seventies because boundaries).

All with him, all with my roommate.

We both share cannabis use disorder. We do not share his pectus excavatum (there is something wrong with his chest).

And he still buzzes me.

And I still accept the calls.

He is in some trouble.

His new roommate is not me. His new roommate is breaking glass. His new roommate is bleeding in their apartment. His new roommate is shooting up speedballs in the bathroom. In other rooms, too. My roommate does not appreciate this. My roommate does not value speedballs.
He calls from Boulder. He calls from the University of Alabama. He does not attend the University of Alabama. In every new location he suffers. In every new location he calls. He calls about the suffering.

And what to tell him about suffering?

One evening I am taking a shower and he calls to tell me he should just do it.

But I am naked, dripping onto the bathroom floor, and my family hates a wet bathroom floor.

I contact the authorities in Boulder but I am forgetting his last name.

I am forgetting his last name.

And I don’t know his address, in Colorado, either.

So I’m home.

And my parents remove all the liquor from the kitchen and hide it in their bedroom like college students.

My father is not shaking gin and tonics. My mother is not unscrewing wine bottles. This does not happen in front of me.

In the month of April everyone is telling me I have a problem. Everyone is saying the drugs were a part of my breakdown.
I am saying the drugs were apart from it. I want to be a college student again. I want Bennington back.

I had seen alcohol before last summer. I had tasted alcohol before last summer. I just fell in love with alcohol last summer. I was alone/why I fell in love: I was primarily alone.

To be honest: I am not a bartender! By any means! To be honest: there is something wrong. Like twelve-step wrong with me. But I do not want to believe it.

Some drinks are simple to fix. (Gin and tonics—those are easy drinks to fix.) However, whenever I fix myself a gin and tonic I can usually imagine a gin and tonic of a much higher quality. My father can fix a wonderful one. You should try it. If you get the chance.

But my father will never ever fix me one. Cause it's harder than beer or wine.

But I am not a child anymore, dad.

DAD!

Sometimes I worry I cannot fix myself anything. I worry I cannot survive. Here (at college, at Bennington). Or even at home. Or anywhere else, too.

So I moved to the country.
Julia or something (also a sophomore) had sex on the beach in the early morning but doesn’t remember the sex. After a collapse in Vermont. After rehabilitation across this country. After I return to the city, I moved to the country.

This is when I fell in love. I fell in love with swigging it to the bottom of the bottle.

I fell in love with how cigarettes feel when swigging. I really fell in love with everything.

Life begins to feel private; no one is admitted. Plus: nothing, and no one, can attack you.

I like sleeping too. Sleeping is very similar. To alcohol. I think. At least.

My first beer. I was a freshman in high school. It was my birthday. I was always thinking about sex. But I was so ugly! Had a bad haircut, and Zack says I look like a peanut.

I shared a birthday with two older soft-spoken blonde girls that were already having some sex in beds, and showers too.

Lauren (a sophomore) had sex in eighth grade but couldn’t finish with Zack because she felt the baby kicking, already.

Summer sex. And Zack wouldn’t tell her. If it happened.
An unfortunate fact: Zack would later attack Julia in the school gymnasium.

On this birthday, my birthday, we are on our way to Lauren’s birthday. Lauren’s birthday party. She is turning fifteen. Or sixteen. Or some age. I suppose I forget what age she is turning.

I am concerned I will be denied entry. I do not know how impromptu high school parties function.

I have the worst acne/dandruff of my life.

What is going to happen? To me?

Do they attack you at parties?

But in the country.

I spend my days drinking. Alone. In an apartment that does not feel like mine. (Nothing like home.) With some sunlight that will hit my eyes occasionally.

And I become friends with the woman who lives downstairs. She tells me the man I live with lays on her bed and will not leave.

I need to leave. And I need to stop doing this. (I’m drinking too much cheap beer from the corner.)

Currently on my bed. A pile of (clean) laundry next to me.
Currently: struggling with a cocaine nosebleed. There is blood on my white pants.

And currently: attempting to discuss the state of my dorm room, on my mobile phone, to her.

But I am not supposed to refer to her as “her,” or “she.”

It is dehumanizing, she thinks.

My mother is telling me about the neighborhood tragedy. And I hate my room.

Because I want a bed that I did not sweat in the night before. And I want these hardwood floors to be swept and mopped, daily.

And I do not want this cough anymore.

My parents are driving to campus on Sunday. (Which is tomorrow.) They are going to help me make my room a lot better. They are going to bring me nice things. Like a lamp. Like a chair. Like anything they can fit into the car.

I am trying to communicate this to her: please do not tell me about what happened to the babies near the house. But she does not hear me.

Right now, I am looking at blood. On my pants. There is a lot. I am so grateful she cannot see me right now. I am so grateful she is not here.
So blood on my pants, blood on the sheets, and an almost paralyzing cough but the driver fell asleep (apparently a new medication the body did not agree with, apparently) and the little bodies were crushed by the tires.

No more blood from my nose but there is still very much laundry to fold and the babies are gone.

Currently: Thursday, 2:30 AM:

I think I tried. At least I think I did.

This, writing this, was trying.

To gently consider some bathroom tile while being attacked, is trying.

And for me to attempt to begin to love myself, is trying.

When you think of me I want you to think this: someone who tried.

These were just some notes, because I had to.
CLEANING MAN
Tom Larsen

Mindy watches him, skin and bones, really. And the way he moves, languid … is that the word? More like lazy, working the vacuum over the same few feet, flirting with Sharon of the idiot grin. Must speak to her about that. And his sullen way with her, Mindy, the crackling between them since their last go round. Janitor. What a thing for a man his age! A loser if she ever saw one. Just the sort of waste the city budget needs to trim. And the pay rate! Nearly fifteen dollars an hour when she could have a crew of Mexicans in here for half that, city charter be damned! And what does he do besides run the vacuum? The bathrooms are so shabby you can’t tell if they’ve been touched. And even with all that vacuuming she’s seen dust bunnies the size of tumbleweeds rolling down the hallway. Well he may not know it yet, but Cleaning Man is history.

“You see what I’m saying, Mindy?”

“I’m sorry Pete,” she snaps out of it. Pete Driscoll, public works manager, always hovering. “I’m in a daze this morning.”

“About the tree lighting ceremony?” Pete repeats. “Dan wants to move it up.”

“That’s fine,” she warms to the sound, his name. Dan. The man.

“So I’m thinking maybe 3:00, 3:30?”

“That works for me,” Mindy flutters her lashes. “Oh and would you tell Dan to wear that camel hair coat? The mayor should look the part.”

“Will do,” Pete flashes a grin then turns to go. “Morning, Ted.”

“Hey Pete,” the janitor shoots a wave, ignores her completely. Oh yes, he will rue the day.

“Morning Mindy,” Babs shuffles in. Really should speak to her about that coffee mug, “Bitch, Bitch, Bitch” in jagged red letters, very unprofessional. The whole staff, if Mindy’s honest with herself, dressed any old way, schmoozing at the drop of a hat. Since taking over as city clerk Mindy’s first order of business has been to tighten things up around here. And to a great extent she has, defining duties, updating forms and trimming waste, always waste. And things do seem to move more briskly, but the general appearance hasn’t changed much. Would it kill them to wear something nice?

“Sharon?” she calls over the vacuum, louder than she meant to.

Sharon looks around and now it’s up to Mindy to shout.

“Can I see you for a minute?”

But Sharon can’t hear and then Pete’s back, picking through his mailbox and Mindy sits seething. Be damned if she’ll scream over that damnable vacuum, damn him. Sharon starts over but the phone rings and she stops to answer, looks to him and the vacuum falls silent.

“Hi Dan,” Sharon smiles. “Yeah, she’s here, hold-”

Mindy picks up in time to hear, “… bother, just tell her McGillen won’t budge. Tell
her she can reach him at home.”

“But she’s-”

“Really don’t have time for her right now. You’ll tell her for me, woncha, Snooks? Big thanks.” Click.

Sharon looks to Mindy and shrugs. “… Dan said-”

“I heard what Dan said,” sharper than she meant to. Thinks to add something soft but the goddamn vacuum revs up.

“One more thing,” Pete startles her again. “Here’s the invoice I was telling you about.”

He hands a bill for $48 dollars, Miller Brothers Masonary. Masonary?

“For the basement?” Pete looks at her funny.

“I’ll take care of it,” she smooths the bill on her desk. The vacuum thuds the baseboards, six, seven, eight times.

“OK. I’m off then.”

“Could you wait a minute, Pete? I’d like you to cover something for me.”

“Sure Mindy, what’s up?”

“Ted?” she yells. The vacuum stops. “Could I speak with you for a moment?”

There he goes, rolling his eyes, tossing Sharon a wince, sauntering, no other word for it, sauntering over like here we go again.

“Yes Mindy?”

“I’ve gotten some complaints about the bathrooms. The floor behind the toilets are a disgrace,” she’d bet her life. “And there’s an inch of dust under the radiators.”

Ted looks at her, then at Pete, all the while reeling in the vacuum cord.

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“Every word.”

“… And?”

“And … it’s no wonder nobody likes you.”

Two hours later she’s still in a state, still feels the blow. Oh, Pete came to her defense, not exactly leaping but taking her side, for the most part, in that smarmy way of his. The nerve, a fucking janitor! No one’s spoken to her like that in years. Not even the roofer who sued and lost. Not even her ex! She can’t be expected to take that kind of abuse, and she won’t take it. On the phone with the cleaning service before he’s out the door, then the library, courthouse, police station, all the other places he cleans. And, of course they said they’d had no problem with him, but she could hear a note of uncertainty. They would not want to come down on the wrong side of this, his boss, notwithstanding. Mindy knew better than expect much from that one after their run-ins when she was on the council. Two of a kind, as far as she’s concerned.

The day running away and the effort to shake herself out of it, to get something done, McGillen, must call him. Bought in on the farmer’s market but was threatening to pull out, as if losing both supermarkets wasn’t embarrassing enough. Call him at
home. Work her charms, as Dan would say. But Mindy’s feeling less than charming. Punches the number anyway, sweet talks the Misses, Christ the crap she has to-

“Hello Jack? Mindy over at city hall. How are you Jack?”

Jack’s surly and not charmed in the least, pissing and moaning until Mindy just wants to hang up, but shoulders on, for Dan and city council, and the whole damn town by extension, as if they give a damn. Her job, damn it, and no malnourished mop pusher is going to rattle her. But the best she can do is talk McGillen into meeting this afternoon. 3:00 … 3:00, why does that ring …

Dan, the tree lighting, oh … God damn it!!

Really hits her on the drive home. Babs with that look and Sharon hardly saying a word all day and then McGillen taking a hard line, demanding assurances, as if they were swimming in surplus instead of robbing Peter to pay Paul. By the time she made the tree lighting Dan had left and she had to endure Bob Welch and Pete, for Christ sake. And she could swear she caught a tone, especially from Welch who heard it from Pete, no doubt, like an old lady with his gossip. And what did Pete mean “the new gun in town” when he introduced her. She’s been city clerk for three months, or close. New gun, like she was … what?

Then running that stop light with the cop right there! Flustered as a teenager, fumbling for her registration, who knows where Ray keeps it? And she could swear she saw the cop smirk. Ted cleans the station and she pictures them laughing it over with the director, Mr. New York cop and all the problems that go with that!

Home now and two drinks later it’s even worse. No mail, no messages except from her mother, his words echoing like a cheap horror movie.

“No one likes you.”

She watches TV but can’t concentrate. Nothing of interest, but she can’t face the silence so she leaves it on. Ray’s still at his lodge meeting. She’d told him, of course, and he seemed unusually attentive. Said not to let it “get inside her head”, which means what, exactly? But she knows what it means, anyone would. Don’t obsess. That’s just what the janitor wants. His words were meant to fester and so they are. Next she’ll be counting the people who like her.

The bartender at the Swan, always a big hello, but that might be just for the tip. Make him a probable, under the bank teller, Margie or Maggie, whatever her name is. Maggie, she’s sure. And then her brain just stops, no more names come to mind, though she knows that’s absurd, a bartender and bank teller? What about neighbors, friends, relatives? … Well, life is long and differences arise, can she help that? Friends go through ups and downs. Families drift apart. It happens to everyone. And she’s been so busy she doesn’t see many people outside work anymore. Work! There you go, let’s see now …
And the next day, still out of sorts, the whole feel of things. Sharon distant, Babs in her office with the door closed. So they’re never going to be chummy, like a TV show, but these people don’t dislike her. It’s not an issue. This is work and anyway, Mindy’s not running a popularity contest. Oh God how she wished she’d said that. How you never think of the perfect comeback until it’s too late.

Dan calls to tell her she missed the public works meeting and she simply can’t believe it. Had her dates wrong, a capitol sin. And here she’s the most visible board member, especially in her low cut Danskin. Quoted extensively in the Beacon as a key cog in Dan’s machine. She thinks of it as a machine, a giant steamroller or something, a thresher, that’s it. Tries to picture one, as if that might fix it. Missed a meeting and a key vote on the farmer’s market. Worst of all, Dan’s unhappy with her.

She finds out all she can about this man, this Ted. Just calls around and asks point blank. Not that there’s much to tell, married thirty years, Democrat, clean slate top to bottom. She drives passed his house and is stunned to see it’s one she’s always fancied, rustic and cozy. Hard to picture him … then there he is, sweeping the sidewalk. Rail thin, obnoxiously thin and she looks away before he spots her.

And it just gets worse as the day drags on. Grating on her nerves instead of fading, wearing her brain out, that’s how it feels, until she can’t focus, makes stupid mistakes and forgets things. “Nobody likes you”, or was it “no one likes you”. It scares her to think she can’t let it go, that it’s affecting her work. Must speak to Dan about it, claim the man’s unstable, possibly dangerous, though it sounds a bit hysterical, even she can see.

“Mindy?”
“Hmmm? Oh, I’m sorry Babs. I’m … just trying to decipher this … masonry invoice.”
“Telephone,” Babs points with the coffee mug. “Line two.”
“Yes, thank you,” she picks up and pushes the button.
“Mindy speak-“
“Have you seen it? The Beacon?” Dan cuts her off.
“… What? No why, what’s wrong.”
“The fucker backed out! Front Page. McGillen Severs Ties.”
“I haven’t had a chance-“
“You said you were making progress, the old bastard was coming around.”
“Well I thought he-“
“You thought?” Dan’s voice goes funny. “Look, Mindy, I called in a lot of favors to get you appointed. I knew McGillen would be a tough nut, but I’ve gotta have a feel for what’s going on.”
Mindy can think of nothing to say.
Finally Wednesday, cleaning day, but he doesn’t come, instead his boss, the owner. Ted’s in the islands, he explains and she feels the air go out of her. The islands, sprawled on some beach while she’s left to suffer the looks and whispers. No one even posing as a friend, an ally against this, this janitor!!

Sharon’s at the front counter blabbing up the postman when she hasn’t said ten words to Mindy all week. Work piling up, look at this desk, stacks of applications, half answered letters, legal notices and hardly anything in the out box. Secretly relieved she didn’t have to deal with Ted but dreading another week, the problem unresolved, the words still echoing.

Friday she drops a vase of flowers and no one helps her clean up the mess. Oh, they offer, but in that half-hearted, smirky way they do everything around here, Babs pretending not to see the dust she pointed out in the corners, bending closer, as if it weren’t plainly visible from across the room. Then that delivery man stirring things up, refusing to use the back entrance and leaving the whole load in the front hallway, cartons of paper, file folders, ink jet cartridges, and then Brenda getting huffy when Mindy asked her to take care of it. What she’s here for, to assign and delegate.

Bad as her days go, the nights are worse. So tense she can’t sleep, worried about everything, Dan’s change in attitude, not quite disapproving but not nearly as chummy. And she’d started out so well and she just can’t believe it. How something so stupid could derail her, three little words, the spew of a bitter old man.

“Nobody likes you,” not “I don’t like you”, or even “people don’t like you”. His words chosen for the effect, you don’t draw blood like that without giving it some thought. Their little tiff some weeks back gave him plenty of time. She thinks of him, right now, lying awake just blocks away, the smug smile as he savors his revenge. Oh, he planned this all right. Never figured him for clever but she has to concede. A cruel trick, that’s all it is. Sew the seed and see if it grows. A simple trick, a distortion, as if saying something ever makes it so. And she clings to that thought and she feels herself relax ... and drift ... off ...

... Nobody? You couldn’t prove such a thing. That it’s unanimous, the lowest blow and he had to know it. Even Hitler had friends, Charles Manson, but not you. And he doesn’t even know her, that’s what’s infuriating. A vicious slur, meant to undermine, unless he was right. What would be worse, knowing no one likes you or not knowing? Her thoughts tie in knots and the cat starts to stir. 4:30, God help her.

By the weekend she’s exhausted and Ray pouts when she begs off his mother’s. Grammy is the last thing she needs after the worst week of her life. Mindy drives to the market but forgets her list then tries to wing it. Except her brain won’t work so she has to drive back for it. Wanders the house in her coat, takes a drink to calm her nerves, then another when the first one works. And with her stomach empty it hits hard, braced in the doorway, jumping out of her skin when the doorbell rings. Thinks not to answer, but it keeps ringing so she turns the knob and pulls the door open.

“Dan! What a surprise,” she pulls it wider. “Come in, come in.”
He brushes past and she feels the draft.
“This janitor thing,” he comes right to the point. “Why didn’t you come to me?”
Oh no no no no.
“It’s nothing, Dan. I’m taking care of it.” she stumbles backward.
“Well, I gotta tell you it’s burning up the grapevine. I mean really, Mindy, if you can’t handle the cleaning staff, what can I expect from you?”
“Wh? … I’m perfectly capable-”
“With this market deal going south and the law suits what I don’t need is another image problem.”
“I don’t see how a jan-”
“We went over this, don’t you remember? Townies are trouble. This is just the sort of thing that works against us in the campaign. Believe me this back fence stuff spreads like wildfire.”
“I’m sorry Dan. I didn’t think it was important enough to-”
“Probably related to half the rednecks on the hill. Damn it, Mindy. I didn’t take you on board so you to alienate my constituency”

She watches him pace, one shoe creaking, bald spot catching the light. He keeps talking but Mindy doesn’t hear, suspended in a dream, her living room, Dan’s shoe, the open bottle on the sideboard. Caught in the whirl of her own unraveling.

When he’s gone she sits with the bottle staring at the wall.

At first she can’t be sure, but then he turns and it’s him, Ted, all smiles from some banter with the pool players. Mindy steps closer to the window, let’s a couple pass then trails them to the door. She pushes it open and loses herself in the jumble by the coat rack. He’s with someone, young kid, tattoos. She takes the one empty booth and keeps her coat on. The place is noisy and smells of cigarettes, though they’ve been banned for years.

“What can I get you?” the barmaid smiles.
“Oh, uh …” Mindy tries to think. “Red wine, please.”

Years since she’s been in here, back when she and Ray were first married. A few familiar faces she can’t put names to, townies, barflies, tourists, no one from her circle. And she has a circle, damn it, wider than his she’d bet the ranch. No one could spend as much time on the phone as she does without a circle. Friends, by God, though she won’t do the checklist thing.

“Here we are,” barmaid sets down her burgundy. “Can I get you something to eat?”
“No. Thank you”

“Enjoy.”

Loud laughs from his end of the bar, heads bob in boozy agreement. And she knows she hasn’t thought this through, what she’ll do and say. Watches through gaps in the crowd, his movements slow and easy, like an exotic bird, a flamingo. He’s in thick with the barmaid now, hand to her hip as she sidles up. Mindy watches the hand,
feels the warm wine rush. Thinks of Dan and that night at Odette’s …

Back in the car and losing ground, couldn’t go through with it, slipped, out without even paying. Now she’s cowering in the dark like … what? Like a stalker or pervert, half drunk and pitiful. She’d meant to go home but couldn’t face it, bad getting worse with no end in sight. Talk to him. Try to reason. But she can’t even picture it. What’s between them is non-negotiable.

They step outside and she slouches low, staring at his face in the dim street light. The tattooed kid offers a ride but Ted says he’ll walk. They smoke and talk then head off in opposite directions. She waits until he makes the corner and pulls out with her lights off.

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Babs sets her mug on the desk and flips through the stack of bills, most overdue. If that pea brained mayor thinks she’s gonna grovel with creditors he’s got his head farther up his ass than she thought. Even Mindy couldn’t wring an extension from the Miller boys, and she was good, Babs will give her that. Nutty as a fruitcake, but good with the runaround. About the only thing she was good at, besides diddling the pea brain. Reap what you sew, Babs grunts, though five years for a hit and run seems a tad stiff.

“May as well throw these in the mix,” Sharon waves today’s mail. At the bottom is a postcard, Ted on the beach with his leg in a cast. Babs flips it over.

A million thanks.

1.5 to be exact.

Yeah, she’s gonna miss that Ted.
Elvie
Doug Mathewson

Well, huh.... Well, I'd have to say it was back when we were trying to be rodeo stars, say the second summer of the three. If you wasn’t getting drunk every night and raising hell you’d be looking for something else to do so I started going to these services they got in the back of a big old storage trailer. The guy, Reverend Bob, or Pastor Joe, or what ever the jimmy cakes he called himself back then, would talk about leading a good life, a Christian life, just a life of doing right by others. The Golden Rule and all that. Not that campfire Jesus shit my Daddy always warned against, just being honest owning up to how you carry yourself in this life. So Bob would talk some and pray some, then maybe try and get a old time hymn going. Remember this one time, well more than the one, somebody started in talking about this reincarnation business, how it was different than the resurrection of our Lord and a different thing too than all the saved folks rising up in the final days. Said you come back, but not as you was, or even close. Maybe as somebody else or an animal depending. There were a fair share of jokes about who’d be what, till I don’t recall who took offense. Some of the boys liked the idea of a second chance at things, then one old hand pointed out us being runaway farm boys, rodeo trash, and day labor we’d do all the same stupid shit all over again.

So at these trailer prayer meeting, she’d be helping out. She was just a kid back then and this would have been late for her. I remember over her pajamas she wore an apron with twin Dutch girls holding watering cans. Her mother had some sympathies with what Reverend Bobby so she and her girl, the two of them, they’d ladle out pink lemonade while the good Reverend would call for a blessing from above. That lemonade hit the spot for sure, being hot in the trailer and all, but yeah, it was all them years back, the first time I saw my Elvie.
Watching the Seasons
Doug Mathewson

Him being more your uncle than mine, you’re close kin and me only poor relations, I thought it best you talk first when he began about his property, leaving a will, what would happen to the land.

Imagine you’d be thinking about horses. You always been talking about them since you were little. Playing horses. Dreaming horses. Talking horses and living on a farm. I wasn’t thinking about anything. Coming back and Janie being gone. I didn’t like to think about past or future, they both hurt, so I left them alone.

We signed up together right after she got out of high school. I was a year behind and quit. So we were GI Joe and GI Jane. Come back in a couple of years, have some money, get a place. Maybe she’d go to school. I’d need a job, farm on the side for us.

We coulda been a commercial on the TV. High school sweethearts off to war, except Janie got killed. Some fool Lieutenant got them all blown up and not half of her come home. Not from the weight of that government rubber bag.

Knew you’d take more than you should from your uncle, but not in a thieving way. More than your share, is all. You best move in now. Learn your way around, and no lie, he needs the help.

I’ll stay on, you want. Keep to myself, and watch the seasons. Hard sometimes, trying to forget and remember at the same time.
Snow begun to swirl, just getting to be dark. Cut enough wood for one day, my brother Paurl and me. Been cutting along the ridge that divides the old farm in two. His hundred acres on the back side of the ridge and my hundred in front. He took the truck and I started walking back with my saw and Maize, my wife's old dog. Real quiet, nice out there along the ridge like that. I’d set the saw down to answer a not particularly urgent call of nature and the dog gone exploring when I heard her voice.

“Well look who's out here watering' the flowers.”

...... She'd been dead now for years, Lurleen had. Wasn't sure I heard right. I zipped up at least before turning around. Sitting on a stone wall, there she was. Wearing that little blue dress with yellow flowers on it, smoking her Pall Mall.

“Yeah, it's me alright, back from the dead you could say, but I'm not back... just visiting.”

I must of stood there like a hooked trout with my mouth open, blinking away and trying to clear my throat. She was pretty as a summer day, with her hair done nice and that smart aleck grin of hers.

“Oh, come on Tommy, loosen up will ya! I just wanted to say hello before I went to see him ...... How is he ...... How's he doing now?”

“Paurl?, okay enough I guess, but since you left he just stays close to home. I mean, I got a town job and all, but not Paurl. He been alone back there just sitting since you died.”

They'd been married, I don't know, four, five years when she took off. Not another man mind you, just wasn't of a mindset to live way out here, be poor, be a farmer's wife. She'd gone west, had some kinda waitress job when she got killed. Car accident.

“Truth to tell Lurleen, he’s not so good. Took you leaving hard. Real hard. Still does. Keeps to himself and workin' his side. He's my brother and all that, but a I gotta say, I just wish he’d find another woman or get a hobby or some god-dammed thing and stop moping. Do something! Nobody gives a shit what!”

We were both quiet after that. Maybe I said too much, but I started feelin’ uncomfortable (uncomfortable with a ghost mind you) and thought I should change the subject.
“I gotta ask, Lurleen, ...... what's it like being dead?”

“Alright,” she sighed. “No better than livin', just different. Never cold, never hungry, and not bored like you'd think. Remember those View-Master things we had growing up? You could put in a little cartoon or somethin' about state parks, it's like that, only you don't get to push down the lever... it just happens. Things keep changing, never know where you'll end up.....but I wanted to set things straight with your brother. Not sure when I might be back.”

“ I don't know,” I said “it's good to see you and all, but Paurl, well, you know how he can be, he's different.”

“Different!” she laughed, “Ya think? Thought maybe I pop up out of the damned fireplace and give him a fright, but that won't solve the problem. I need to explain, explain it wasn't him.”

“Lurleen honey, what can you ever say that'll patch things up? Paurls' sitting back there feeling sorry for hisself, and your dead! Nothin's gonna change any of that!”

She looked down, nodded some. Then it came to me.

“Course ......, you could take him with you.”
Michelle in Furs Under the Bridge by the River
Paul Luikart

Michelle mostly turned her tricks down along 11th Ave. Lots of good old boy business types throughout the year and personal injury lawyers who never wanted kisses even though she’d throw them in for free. Once in awhile a UTC frat party in the fall but they paid like shit so she only did them when she really needed cash. Though there was something strange—if not a little intriguing, if not even a little beautiful—about seeing a boy become a man in front of his brothers while she ground her ass on his thighs and crotch.

Michelle was tall with long black hair barely going gray and she considered herself beautiful, at least for her line of work. She clung to some of her dreams though others she’d flushed down the toilet a long time ago. She wanted a man, a fireman or a foreman, somebody intimately acquainted with danger, who told it like it was, or somebody who could boss other people around. She wanted a laughing little girl with tight curls on the nape of her neck. She wanted a silver Corvette, a convertible Stingray with leather seats, as loud as anything on the road.

On Christmas Eve, about nine o’clock, a thin, middle ager with black rimmed glasses picked her up. In a Highlander with a Boyd Buchanan “B” sticker on the back. It smelled like coffee and spearmint inside.

“I’m guessing we’re not headed to your place,” she said.
“No.” He didn’t look at her. “What about that motel on 23rd?”
“The Chatt Inn?”
“Oh, you know it?” His voice rang with sarcasm.
“I bet you’re no stranger to the place.”
When they got there, he paid for the room and they went inside.
“I’ll give you $200 and don’t ask me any questions,” he said. He fished in his coat pocket and pulled out a Ziploc bag filled with bills.
She took it. “What do you have in mind?”
“To start with, lay down on the bed on your belly. We’re going to leave the lights off.”
She did and he climbed onto the bed next to her and it creaked and sagged.
“Scoot over here. Put your head on my shoulder,” he said and after she did, he said, “Now tell me we can’t afford the lights anymore.”
“What?”
“Just tell me. Whisper it into my ear.”
“We can’t afford the lights anymore?”
“Now tell me we can’t afford the rent. Pretend to cry.”
“You want me to—”
“Real tears are better, if you can.”
It didn’t take long for her to conjure real tears and through them, she whispered that they couldn’t afford the rent anymore.

“How now tell me we can’t afford baby Saoirse’s medicine either,” he said.

“Who’s baby Saoirse?”

“Our daughter of course. She was born a year ago and she has TB.”

“We can’t afford the medicine,” she said, and then, feeling a rise in her spirit, “I’m afraid she’s going to die. Our only daughter.”

“She won’t die.” This time, he spoke in a flimsy Irish brogue. He squeezed her tight and pressed her head into his shoulder so the warm, sweet smell of his deodorant fuzzed her brain. “I won’t let her. I won’t let her die and I swear to God, one day I’ll dress you in furs Nora. If I have to break my back. I’ll get on at the docks in Indiana. They always need help unloading the ore boats.”

“I’m Nora,” Michelle said, “So I’m clear.”

“Yes,” he said, “and I’m Padraig. We’re nineteen and it’s the 1920’s and we live on the South Side of Chicago.”

“I’ve never been to Chicago.”

“That makes it better,” he said, “We’re immigrants.”

Baby Saoirse died and when she did, they both cried and cried. The man sobbed big tears and she held him in her arms and dabbed his face with toilet paper and when his sobs turned to little chuffs and finally to a full, deep silence, Michelle said, “Father O’Riordan says she went straight to heaven.”

“Me, I don’t want to go to Heaven. Not to a God’s Heaven who steals innocent little girls from their loving parents.”

“Don’t say that,” she said, “Hush now.”

“No, I’d go,” he continued, “I’d go. Just to see the look on God’s face when I pluck her off her cloud and bring her back.”

When the time he paid for was up, she stood and ran her fingers through her hair. In the streaked mirror, she watched it fall down her shoulders in thick tresses. He said, “Can I drop you off someplace else?”

“How about the basilica? Saints Peter and Paul downtown? I like to catch Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Don’t act so surprised. Mary Magdalene was a whore too, you know.”

“What will you do after Mass?” he said.

“I bet the Fathers get lonely Christmas Eve. Can you imagine?” she said.

They went out and got into the Highlander. Christmas music played on the radio. Drummer Boy and Bing Crosby and Three Kings. A block from the basilica, he put the big car in park.

“You know, I don’t consider this adultery,” he said, “My conscience is clear.”

“Well, that’s funny, because I’m in the adultery business. Yet somehow, even on Christmas Eve, my conscience is clear too.”

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They sat for a few seconds looking at one another across the armrest and the stark white of the streetlights washed their faces and left a pale residue, from forehead to chin, on both of them.

“Maybe that’s because I don’t have a conscience anymore,” she said.

“Have you ever been in love?” he said.

“I lost track of how many times I’ve been in love a long, long time ago. Have you?”

“I’m married.”

“So?”

“Yes, with my wife.”

“Anybody else?”

“No.”

“Really.”

“Okay, yes. When I was in college. A boy in my freshman English class. Richard Hoover. He had brown hair and a pudgy belly and a Southern accent. All semester, I couldn’t stop watching him and thinking about him.”

“So what did you do?”

“Nothing. I fell in love with my wife.”

“What happened to Richard Hoover?”

“He left after a year. Dropped out or transferred or something. I don’t really know where he went or what he did or where he is today.”

“But you still think about him?”

“Of course.”

There was a long silence until she said, “You want to come inside with me?”

“I’m Adventist.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She opened the door, but he grabbed her arm.

“Thank you,” he said, “That’s all. And Merry Christmas.”

Michelle sat at the back of the sanctuary near a few bums and drunks, while up front the Father talked about hope and heaven and the light of the Christ candle. And even though she wasn’t Catholic—she wasn’t anything—she took the wine and bread at Communion because she liked how the wafer dissolved into a slimy, gluey mush on her tongue and how it all went down her throat and disappeared after a big swig of sweet wine. When the service was over, she filed out with the other parishioners and shook the Father’s hand.

“Merry Christmas, Father,” she said, and felt stupid for not saying something more holy.

She walked and walked, in the cold and in heels that rubbed her Achilles tendons raw. Blood soaked into the fabric of the shoes. At the Kankus at McCallie and Central, she bought two big plastic bottles of Natural Ice. Then she sat on a curb in the parking lot and drank one. When it was empty, she tossed it at the trashcan, but missed and the bottle plunked onto the asphalt on the other side. She stood up and started walking again. This time the world’s colors spun around her footsteps.
Under the bridge, where McCallie crosses over the train tracks, Michelle found what she thought she’d find—the stiff figure of old Roger covered up with quilts, propped against the bridge abutment. Empty Natural Ice bottles made a plastic halo around his entire body. She knelt beside him and pushed on his arm and her finger sunk into the layers of jackets and shirts. Roger groaned.

“Roger Dodger,” she said, “Wake up. Merry Christmas.”

She unscrewed the cap of the unopened beer bottle and put it in his hand. His fingers, dried out and covered in sores, closed around it and he lifted it to his lips and the beer spilled into his mouth and out, down through his beard, his neck, and into the layers of jackets and shirts.

“Hey, baby,” he said. His eyes rolled toward the sound of her voice.

“Hey, old man.”

“What time is it?”

“Christmas.”

“Well, merry Christmas. Did I ever tell you about my Christmas in Vietnam?” He lifted the beer again and choked down another long swallow.

“Plenty of times.”

But he told her again, told her about the Saigon whore whose name nobody could pronounce and how all the Marines called her Alice and how, on Christmas Eve love hit him right between the eyes and all he could see when he looked at her down at the end of the bar was a shimmering woman in white. “With a juicy ass.” He always giggled at that part. That night he paid top dollar for her and spent the night running his fingers through her black hair and professing his love in hiccupped whispers. He proposed when the sun came up.

“I love you, Alice” he said, “I mean it.”

She said yes. But by New Year’s—American, not Vietnamese—she was dead. Somebody found her torso in the latrine.

Michelle could never tell, in all the year’s she’d known Roger, when he was telling the truth or when he was lying and in the end she thought there must always be a bit of both. Maybe there was a Saigon whore, maybe not. Maybe her name was Alice, maybe not. Maybe they fell in love on the other side of the world on Christmas Eve decades ago. Maybe he even proposed. Maybe she was dead. Maybe not. Maybe Roger never went to Vietnam at all. Once, she heard his nickname—Dodger—wasn’t just a rhyme. Somebody said he spent the sixties in Montreal.

Whether it was true or false, whether any of it was true or any of it false, Roger always cried at the end of his story. Michelle thought it was at least true that he must have been in love with something. Finally, he wiped his tears and patted the back of her hand and said, “It’s Christmas, baby.”

“I know it’s Christmas,” she said, “You know, not everybody is as lucky as you. Nobody is as lucky as you.”

“You got that right,” he said, “I am one lucky motherfucker.”
She dug her hand through the layers—through Roger’s jacket and sweaters, through the turtle neck and t-shirts until it was flat on his belly. His belly rose and fell in quick bursts and his skin was freezing despite all the clothes. She pushed her hand down over his bellybutton, down through the elastic of his long johns until her fingers snagged in the thicket of his pubic hair. She found his prick—cold too and half hard—and she tugged and tugged until he whistled through his teeth and his hips stiffened and his whole body quivered. Then he was still. She leaned over and whispered into his ear, “Roger, you sexy motherfucker. You’re an animal. They shouldn’t have let you out of your cage.” In a couple minutes, he was snoring. She kissed her fingertips and touched them to his forehead and finished his beer in three swallows.

In the morning, there was a Christmas breakfast at the Community Kitchen. Michelle sat with silver-headed Hank in his dinged up wheelchair, Claws the meth head who never cut her fingernails and Nick the Asshole, the nicest kid on the streets. One of the volunteers, a lady about fifty years old, with black boots and tight jeans and a bronze colored sweater, brought coffee in Styrofoam cups. Michelle watched the steam curl up from her cup and spread out and disappear.

A few minutes later, while Michelle listened to Hank talk about his old job driving Triple A wreckers, the lady in boots came back. This time she wore a big jingle bell on a string around her neck. She carried a bulging Walmart bag and a portable CD player that she plugged in by the coffee urn. In an instant, “Jingle Bell Rock” filled the dining room.

“Christmas spirit, Christmas spirit,” the lady shouted. She grabbed jingle bell necklaces just like hers from the Walmart bag.

“Christmas spirit, who needs Christmas spirit?” The lady’s eyes were wide and her smile seemed hard. She skipped down the cramped furrows between the folding tables and tossed jingle bells to everybody, stopping now and then to shake her hips or bob her head to the music.

“I wish I could see my grandkids today,” Hank said.

“Where are they?” Michelle almost had to shout.

“Down near Atlanta. I miss them.” Then Hank spread his arms out in a grand sweep of the entire dining room. “Besides all this, what about you? You got any plans?”

“I might go sit by the river for a while. It’ll be nice and quiet,” she said.

“It’ll be cold. Might even snow.”

“Snow? Today?” she said, “I thought they called for sun.”
They rotate in place, swaying, one footstep at a time. They sway in time to the music from the stereo playing in the next room, to the slow rhythm and blues, song after song for lovers, songs meant to be played at the end of a dance, songs for the tired, the lonely, the tired and lonely who have found their someone that they’re spending the someone for the night, even if it’s the same someone they’re spending the rest of their nights with. These two—these two dancers, Larry and Joy—sway to that music atop the kitchen island. They have found their someone and the party, which had been going a long while, is now over.

Pull back and tilt down slightly, just far enough to see Larry and Joy in black and white still dancing atop the kitchen island, swaying in place. Below them in technicolor as they and the music fade out, Larry enters the kitchen through the back screen door. “Bottom corner, bottom corner,” he mutters and heads for one corner of the kitchen.

He groans and kneels in front of the counter and opens the cabinet door there. “Aaha.” He reaches inside a box in the cabinet and pulls out a large industrial-strength garbage bag. After a moment, he pulls out another one. With a groan similar to the first he stands up, kicks the cabinet door shut, and starts back toward the screen door. He stops at the kitchen island and looks around with a puzzled look on his face, like he’d just heard something, some music maybe. He shakes his head and goes back outside.

The backyard is big enough that a stage set up in one corner of it takes up hardly any space at all. There’s enough room on the stage to comfortably fit a jazz ensemble, complete with baby grand, drum kit, and space enough for whoever’s soloing just then to move front and center without stepping on anyone’s toes. The Smooth Time Seven was playing up there until a half hour before Larry came out of the house with the garbage bags. The lawn was filled with thirty banquet rounds and chairs enough to seat ten at each. Hours earlier, before the guests had arrived, the chairs were neat. Now they were half-pushed in, scattered from their original tables, and in three cases on their backs on the ground. The tables themselves were covered in nearly-empty plates and half-drunk plastic cups of water or juice or something from the well bar. As Larry scanned the tables, he became sure two bags might not be enough.

“Here you go, hon.” Annette, one of the myriad of aunts, walked toward him, weaving between the tables. She held out a hand. “I’ll take those.”

Larry gave her one of the bags and kept the other. “I’ll help.”

“Oh, Larry, you don’t have to.”
“No, I—” His voice faltered, like he’d forgotten how to speak. He felt the need to do something, no matter how minimal. It was either that or sit upstairs in a guest bedroom, bawling his eyes out for the however-manyth time that day. “I’ll help. It’s okay.”

Annette smiled and nodded and said she’d start at that end over there. Larry went to the nearest table in the opposite direction, sat in one of the chairs with a grunt, and contemplated the mess in front of him, happy that they’d had the good sense to go with disposable dishes; cleaning all of them would take well into the night. He put the half-full glasses to one side with any idea of emptying the contents into the nearest flower bed before throwing them into the bag. The plates went straight in, napkins, half-eaten hors d’oeuvres and all. Every now and then he came across one of the memorial announcements that had been given out. His eyes slide across the words “In Loving Memory” before putting the notices in the bag along with everything else. Across the yard, Joy’s sister Hope sighs loudly, complains about the manual labor, and polishes off all of the unfinished drinks she’s cleaning.

The public address system played indeterminate jazz music. Every minute or so Larry would look up for the source of the sound, like he’d just heard it for the first time, and focus on the stage, expecting to see the band still up there. The Smooth Time Seven was made up of septuagenarians who were looking for something to do besides sit around and be retired. Joy’s father was one of the founding members of the band, serving as the piano player for a decade before emphysema caught up to him a few years earlier. When his wake was held—in this very same backyard—the band had played that afternoon with a rotating cast of piano players, Joy among them. She’d sat in for one number and the band had given her space for an extended solo. Larry heard it in his head every time anything jazz came on the radio. He’d heard it again all through the wake today and was glad for the first time that he’d never learned to play himself. He’d have surely been called on to play if he had.

Slow pan to the right and drain the color to find Joy on stage the day of her father’s wake. The other band members spend a dozen bars nodding at each other, backing off their volume bit by bit, giving her space to fly, to free form, to solo. She is oblivious to the nodding but not the receding volume, and as the melody comes back around to its starting point the musician in her takes over and she’s off. Larry, standing nearby holding her shawl and shoes, mystified that she can play at all, let alone so well. When she finishes and the polite and enthusiastic applause fades away, she stands up from the piano bench and comes over to him. Her eyes are puffier and redder than they had been, the streams of tears fresh. Larry holds her for a moment, then wraps the shawl around her and leads her back into the house.
Inside, he steadies her against the kitchen island. The hired caterers dance their
dance of food around them. As one of them passes empty-handed, Larry grabs her by
the arm. The young girl looks slightly mortified. “Three fingers of bourbon, neat,” he
says, and she dashes off into the dining room where the liquor cabinet is. A minute
later she’s back with a rocks glass full enough. Larry takes it with a thanks and the
caterer grabs a tray of petit fours and goes outside before she can get grabbed again.
He gives the glass to Joy. “Drink.”

She spills some of it with her shaking hands before getting it to her mouth, then she
sips and sips again before putting the glass down and falling into Larry’s arms, crying
again. There are words somewhere in there, but the tears and everything else
obscured them.

Larry put his arms around her. “It’s okay,” he said, kissing her forehead. “It’s okay.”

Pull back into the yard where the color is back in everything and rack focus to Larry
still sitting, watching this scene play out through the doorway, again and again and
again. For everyone else, the kitchen is visibly empty. Where are you? he thinks.

“Larry?” Annette has come over to him. “You okay?”

It’s two beats before he responds. He’s been fielding versions of this question all
day, and hasn’t yet found the one answer that will make anybody believe him. If he
says what he’s thinking, he would say, “I feel lost.” He doesn’t. “Yes, I— I’m fine. Just
taking a moment.” His trash bag, not even half full, is next to him on the ground,
forgotten.

“Tell you what,” Annette says. “We’ve got enough people out here working on this.
Why don’t you go and make a start on the living room?”

He blinks once, twice, then says, “Alright,” and heads back inside. On his way past
the kitchen island, he looks it over again—he could’ve swore he saw feet on it earlier—
but goes by it, then down a short hall and into the front sitting room.

This room survived the wake largely unscathed. The only people that had been in
here were the Smooth Time Seven before their performance and for a few minutes
after. They hadn’t left much—a couple of glasses and cocktail napkins—and Larry
figured they would be taken care of soon enough. He went to the baby grand in the
front window. Its lid was closed, and scattered across the top were framed pictures of
various incarnations of the band. As he stands there, bleed the color from the scene.

“That one there,” Joy says, pointing at one picture toward the front which Larry
picked up to examine more closely, “was taken not too long after the band first got
together. The one with the sax is Billy MacArthur.”

Larry blinks. He remembers her saying that, here in this room, about an hour after the guests had all gone from her father’s wake. She’d had another drink or three by then, was a little steadier on her feet. And he was— he was standing right where he was now, staying near to her, being the dutiful husband. He struggles for a second to remember his response. “Looks like a big guy.”

“Oh, he was. Very big. Could get that sax going pretty well too. Did some big band stuff back in the day. He passed three, four years ago now. Heart attack in his sleep.” She points at the next guy over. “John Henry Jones. Original drummer. He did a lot of uncredited session work back in the day, or so he said. But he could play. Doctor told him to move to Arizona for his health. He died three months later in a hit-and-run while he was out walking his chihuahua.”

Larry nods and contemplates the picture. Her father had a surprise embolism burst in his sleep, not having any clue when he went to bed the night before that he wouldn’t wake up. Larry knew then—and understands better now—that a lot of Joy’s tears had more to do with not having a chance to say goodbye or have any of a dozen conversations with her father that were now theoretical. He remembers that the conversation had a next line back then, but he goes with something else as he puts down the picture: “So now what?”

Joy stares out onto the lawn. A lantern at the end of the drive is the only illumination, and it doesn’t light up much of anything.

“I mean, what am I supposed to do now?”

Joy tilts her head down—does he see a smile on her face too?—and remains silent.

“There you are.”

Bring all the color back. Larry spins around at the sound of Annette’s voice, and a heartbeat later notices that Joy has vanished again. “I—yeah.” He looks around himself, like someone who has been caught doing something, feels some blood rush back into his face.

“Are you okay?” Annette advances toward him, frowning.

“Yeah, I’m—” He stops and fidgets with his hands for a moment. “—fine.” He picks up the two plastic cups that were on the piano. “I’ll be done in here in a minute.”
Annette nods and leaves the room. Larry puts the cups back on the piano and sits on the sofa, head in hands. *I feel haunted*, he thinks.

“I don’t like the wake thing either.”

Larry looks up. Hope stands where Annette had been a few moments before.

“Doesn’t seem right. Doesn’t feel solemn, like we’re doing the dead a disservice to their memory by having a party.”

Larry sighs and wonders how little he would have to say before she figures out he wants to be alone. Then he wondered if she would even notice he wasn’t responding.

She doesn’t. “It isn’t what Dad would have wanted. He said a few times that when he went he just wanted a nice service, something quiet. He didn’t want people to make a fuss. And his wake upset more people than it made happy. Joy was a wreck. You remember.”

Larry drums his fingers together, not fast enough to be considered stimulated, not so slow that it could have been mistaken for random movements.

“I hate that they drag the old guys out to play some jazz. Hell, they only ever play anymore when one of them dies. Then they go out and hire a replacement so they can do it all over again. Joy didn’t want to play at Dad’s wake. Didn’t want anything to do with it. She only played to make everybody happy.”

“I’m— I can’t do this right now.” Larry stands up and leaves the room, goes up the stairs in the hallway, and locks himself inside the bedroom he is using during his visit. He paces for a minute, exercising out his anger at Hope’s words. *How dare she*, he thinks. *How dare she make this day harder than it already is?*

Take everything from vibrant to grayscale, as three words are spoken from the bed after a sigh. “Never mind her.”

Larry stops pacing, takes another moment to calm down, and then lays atop the bedcovers. “What am I going to do?” he says. “What am I going to do now?”

“Go on. Live your life. That’s what.” Joy is next to him, wearing the same dress she was being buried in.

They had a conversation on the same topic late the night of her father’s wake, in this bed. Hope had made an ass of herself then too, spending most of the wake under the influence, insulting everyone who came within ten feet of her in a voice that at times competed with the band, and ending the night by telling Joy to stop being a baby
and crying. Larry hadn’t responded to Joy’s advice beyond scoffing, which had been a mistake; she’d wanted an honest conversation and he wanted to avoid it, figuring she wasn’t completely rational after so big of an emotional upheaval. Tonight he tries a different tack. “You’d be okay if I started to date again?”

“Well, no,” she says. “But I also wouldn’t expect you to live like a monk for the rest of your life either.”

“I don’t know.” He squirms a little and turns to face her. She smiles at him, the same warm smile she always had when she tried to reassure him. “I’d feel odd.”

“How so?”

“Well, I’d be there with a different woman and still thinking about you. It’d be like I’m kissing you by proxy.”

“Then you shouldn’t do it.” She reaches out to pat his hand and he can feel it, feel something warm. Her fingernails glisten bright red as she touches him, so dazzling it is hard to ignore. “Listen, if I die and you find someone else, then you should give her all of your energy, all of your love. Keep a space in your heart for me, though, I hope. But don’t be afraid to live.” She moves her hands away and the red and the warmth dissipate.

Larry rolls onto his back again. “I don’t know,” he says, noticing the texture on the ceiling. “I just don’t—”

A knock comes on the door, followed by Annette’s muffled voice. “Larry? You in there?”

Bring the color of the ceiling from muted white to eggshell. He takes a moment deciding whether or not to answer. “Yeah.”

“We have leftovers out in the kitchen if you’re hungry.”

He isn’t, but he knows saying so would only bring more concern. “Okay. Thank you.” He hears her footfalls recede then rolls back onto his side. Joy is gone. After another couple of moments, he gets out of bed and heads downstairs.

He finds the kitchen empty of people. Two veggie trays and a meat and cheese platter are out on the counter, probably (he thinks) assembled from the leftovers from four or five others judging by the haphazard layout of the items on them. All of it looks unappealing to him. In the back of his head he hears his mother chastising him, telling him to eat, that he needs food, he would feel better after a good meal. He picks up a plate, looks at the selection for a moment, and sets it down again.
From behind him, he hears the stereo in the dining room turn on and a jazz tune start playing. He thinks he recognizes it, then knows he does once he hears Joy say, “I don’t feel like doing this.”

Pan slowly to the right as Larry leads Joy through into the kitchen by the hand in monochrome. “Nonsense,” he says. “You need this. You’ll enjoy it.”

Joy smiles but her eyes are still puffy from all the crying she’s done. Larry backs her up against the kitchen island and lifts her so that she sits on top of it. He goes around to the other side, climbs up onto it, stands and offers his hand.

“You’re crazy, you know,” she says.

“Yeah, yeah,” and he wiggles his hands, motioning.

Joy lifts her legs and spins so that she is sitting completely on the island. She takes Larry’s hands and stands up, shakily for a moment and then more steadily. Up close, he sees her eyeliner starting to run. “So?” she says.

Larry puts her hands on his shoulders and his arms around her waist. “We dance.”

They dance, swaying back and forth to the slow, doleful music piping in from the next room. They rotate in a small circle there on the island, and after a couple of minutes Joy extends her arms a little and puts her head against his chest. And on they dance.

Pull back through the doorway into the dining room and tilt up slightly to see the couple dancing on the kitchen island, and below them Larry in technicolor, staring up at them, crying, wishing that everything now wasn’t so black and white.
Like Anyone

If you wake up and sleep down on your neural star clusters
like anyone who must work in spite of western remorse,
then you’re like anyone who falls in love or stands in defiance.

If you live where sunlight scans darkness of the planet,
pouring over what exists on the surface where we can work
but only so fast, until it’s night again with billions of galaxies,
then you’re like anyone else wearing shoes or chewing a carrot.

If you work the week because you need to, not only for the money
but sense of purpose in the air around the others you’re with,
then you’re similar to anyone who follows her Farmer’s Almanac
in the likely direction of providence, in a medicinal bison flash,
where direct sense may well move sideways on the iron core
of collective sleep liable to give meaning to your waking up.

You’re like anyone who inherited the desire to not be rejected,
the sense of circadian rhythm, and avoidance of catastrophe.
You’re like anyone who’s experienced the shock of consciousness.
She Walks Between Villages

Her elephants rumble out their relative positions a few octaves down. Her sun’s come through the way wood’s shaped day after day for years. Her ancient world has had wide-spread grasses growing in a warm wind. She’s familiar with canyons of rain and space where box elders branch over the door where you enter in front of a long wave out of the forgotten and the end of the continuum which establishes the scent of ripe oranges. Her neocortex is like bread made out of uranium and sea lions diving. Her color tattoo of liberated sexual medicine appears on the inner thighs of a hill where exotic plants stretch up to secluded homes like old flames. She’s let her hips roll when entering the hall with both hemispheres intact. She drives on gravity while her subatomic mother brushes her long DNA. Her praying mantis attending the university of leaves learns what to do. She pitches awake on the sea of resemblances engendering her capacity to work over the week and walk between villages like an East Indian sadhu adapting to rigorous conditions on a blue planet in the cosmos.
Threshold

Before you go, of course, be sure to open the door. You can’t much step through a stationary front screen of hermetic hell-fired locomotives blasting and rumbling in, their twenty long tons groaning and squealing like bridge steel failing in a quake when the trains, simultaneously, reach the station. And yet even if you’ve passed through the threshold, you won’t enjoy your constitutional if you’re swamped with flooding of your farmlands, whether by seawater or bituminous heavy oil drilled out of Canada. If so, you might want to start moving your feet right now, before present erections include a refinery bolted up around you with so much momentum you’re stuck working for it twenty-four hours a day, if you prefer to keep breathing and assimilating your nutrients. Look, we’ve reached significant levels of saturation of people on Earth, a point where one road drops off to a dead end, you could call it, and only the other, no longer worshipping fire as a gift given by gods, could lead to a future humans are able to survive.
The Scent of Rotting Tomatoes and Fish
While We Sit Here in Denmark

The right to assemble symphonic violinists draws on depths of the collective in the midst of saucering galaxies, but the right to do whatever you want wherever you go does not exist.

It’s Olympic versus common woman and man in a peak hailstorm with Dick the Bruiser making fresh supplies of castratos.

The right to demonstrate below-average aversion to decapitation may exist, but the right of a president to incite time-released riots by fast-feeding the ignorant a banquet of racial hate and filthy rich lies was omitted from the Bill of Rights.

Maybe centuries of colonization have attempted to surrender across rising oceans of language and yet more than enough exquisite damage stands across generations to defy proportional breakthroughs.

The document establishing supremacy of the astronomically rich over other citizens can be found only in missions of organizations that serve mammoth money-mongers.

The right to act however you happen to is not established.

The right to treat one of the ecosystems we depend on like an anonymous who-the-hell-cares demolition project does not exist.
Mint Conditions at Birth

You can’t walk through a front door without the last few centuries fighting to survive.
We’ve come here from the earliest forests in common and find one another in one another’s eyes.
The tiniest beings written into us outnumber cells ten to one, entities that co-evolved with us that we depend on, that attend complexity in cells, species living as parts of us, working for the common good.
Isn’t it clear we aren’t angels in training programs, but parts of trees and the mushroom underground from which they emerge?
Spreading pine needles, crawls of vines, fractal unfurling, communicate with us and one another cell to cell.
We’re not in one place only, and not separated from the whole.
The moment just starts the way it stops, all in a burst, swallowed up in thousands of years of spear-tip readiness.
At Sunday afternoon dinner, before the discovery of penicillin, how much was known, how much imagined?
As wild clover advances, retreats and advances, the laboratory doors swing open and then shut on the reinvestigated starlight in molecules.
Ten years pass by in a flash, and the encyclopedia’s rewritten.
Doesn’t the next rain already fall to the ground in seeds?
Doesn’t mineral presence heave ahead into long-term blends?
Where mint surfaces of sleeping up and run in the back-roar, haven’t uncalculated fractions feathered?
Does a growing taproot ambulate? Isn’t this where trees are being?
Where loss reconstructs raven ingenuity, any cry you might speak was passed along by ancestors.
The neural net’s been cast when speaking taps into more than it knows.
In a gear-grind, the work-truck instant goes past unpacked.
Late-morning leafhoppers on their sunburst ultraviolet footholds reach pumpkin leaves in a flash.
When the hour no longer slips into its notches, the split second parts for the split second which parts, for the split second which parts.
So it’s arriving, but already here. When imparting it’s whole, always whole, always the next.
More than once it may have been heard, diesel locomotives stacked four deep roaring night caravans of heavy metal into the sudden future in which a classical violin is practicing in all the blue blazes, absorbing and releasing the more unseen parts of this era.

In an instant everything has changed, and this is an age already thirsty and hungry enough for more than one of itself,

Everything’s packed with so much waking and sleeping in these astronomically small rooms where anyone’s been.

The mammalian experiment of cells has been making us as we appear. Names hammered up by the road may be leading to more within people.

Digits click through transience of self. Overworld waters alter further endangered species that are parts of us.

Unknowing makes long moves of meaning quick as the flash of blood ties. Transcendental birth into arms of the mother has a little grip, and all things must fall in between.

In eggshell memory, as molten as sleep is around waking, a century of advancement waves goodbye to the old days driving off in the family Hudson, which disappears with grandchildren after rounding the green corner, the way it was when innocence was more intact in the long days before discovery of microbes.

At least around meal times this may be true. The next grains continue to arrive on their quantum slipstream.

Meanwhile, civic ignorance and its significant other, arrogance, appear to be jabbering up a storm.

As working fingers and thumbs flip through months on their calendars, longing burns in the hearth.

Flying over as we are, in these multiply-winged combustive neighborhood transport jets, who can say where we’ll touch down next, in the midst of what conquest or abject colonization, what professional cotillions or bountiful flowerhead pungency, what usurpation or liberation?

Will we hear the voice return with bell ringing or gourd shaking to say, This is the place, the more-than-enough place, where you’ll keep the fire and eat, where you’ll wake and then sleep?
His box was holding up well to the latest rain. In fact it was doing better than he had dared hope. It was a good sturdy box, double-walled cardboard of a sort he had never seen before, nearly as sturdy as wood, with reinforced corners. He had also found a plywood sheet that slid perfectly into the box and that maybe had been part of it. The box was coated with some sort of wax inside and out. Maybe it was plastic and not wax, he couldn’t tell. He had found it a couple of months ago, between the back of a small factory and the railroad tracks. The printing on it indicated that it held a KL-40 lathe made by the Kuwata company. That was the sort of thing that was normally shipped in a crate. A crate would have been better in the long run, but the box was holding up well. Even the printing hadn't run so far, despite three days of rain. He had written his name on it with a marker when he had found the box: "Property of Carl Harkins." He used a permanent marker he had found at the burger stand near the bridge, but unlike the official printing, his claim had smeared anyway in the first rain. The waxy or plastic coating, no doubt. It didn't matter now; everybody by the tracks knew it was his box. He would come back sometimes to find clothes or tools he had loaned to someone waiting for him in the box. He had some gear that he loaned out now and then, or rented in exchange for beer or sandwiches if the borrowers were not personal friends: a chef's knife with the tip broken off, which he had found behind the Chinese restaurant, a couple of screwdrivers, and a short little saw. There was no reason for a saw to be lying in the muck where the main line tracks went over the slough, but there it was, right where everyone passed to use the plank walkway of the bridge. Harkins was lucky in finding things. It paid to get up early, just like Ben Franklin said. They called him "Lucky" Harkins sometimes, but it was just his restlessness. Instead of sitting around drinking all the time, he walked.
He walked. He usually walked up and down the mainline tracks, and sometimes he followed the local tracks that veered off in graceful curves to the industrial flats. He followed them just to see where they went. Just to have something to do with the day besides drink and complain around a bad-smelling oil-drum fire. The fires were built with greasy paper scraps and pieces of broken pallets, and no one knew what had been in the oil drums. Probably not even oil. Walking kept him warm, though it kept him hungry too. But he found little jobs now and then because he walked. Unloading a truck or a train car, or cleaning a factory floor or a loading dock. He liked work, and he liked earning money. Maybe someday one of the odd jobs would turn into a real job and he could live a regular life again.

He found factories that made all sorts of things, sometimes things he had seen or used back in regular life, sometimes things he had never known existed, or at least never thought about. Pumps, there were lots of factories that made pumps around the tracks, little pumps that lived behind walls or in engine compartments, massive pumps that lived in skyscraper basements, or in factories that made all the chemicals that waited in stacks of clean new drums by the truck yards and rail spurs. He knew how to be friendly and not seem strange, and people hired him now and then and seemed to like telling him about their work. He worked often enough that he ate most days. So he walked. And he found things. By a nursery, a low open-fronted shed looking out on rows and rows of spindly little trees, he found a garden trowel with a loose handle. He had used that to dig a trench around the back and sides of his box to divert the water flowing down the low bluff behind it when it rained. And now it was raining, and his box was still dry inside. He sat in it with his knees drawn up, looking out at the railroad tracks with their fringe of tall weeds twitching under the rain. On one side of him, in the box, was a rolled-up towel with his tool collection inside it. On the other side was his knapsack with his clothes and personal things in it. His blanket was draped over his shoulders. The rain dripped from the opening of the box but didn’t fall inside. He had
made sure the box tilted downward towards the opening. He watched the rain fall onto the weeds and the shiny-topped rust-red tracks. He wouldn't walk today. No one would be walking except maybe Wacko. He was pretty sure it was a Wednesday, the day Wacko had chosen for his regular visit to Harkins's box. He tried to keep track of the days but it wasn't always easy.

Wacko, for all that he didn't seem quite right in the head, kept track of the calendar. Wacko always knew what day it was, even though he talked nonsense a lot of the time. Also, Wacko had an umbrella. No one else who lived by the tracks had an umbrella. Not even Lucky Harkins, who had borrowed Wacko's one day, leaving Wacko to sleep in his box while he, Harkins, went up the spur line to unload a truck for ten dollars. It made Harkins smile to think about it while he huddled under his blanket and watched the rain fall onto the tracks. That day he brought Wacko a canned beer he had bought at Alvarez's little store by the burned church on the way back. Wacko didn't drink it right away. He took his umbrella back and wandered up the tracks towards the road bridge. The road bridge, where the road out of town went over the mainline tracks, was where most of the folks lived. On rainy days, they huddled in their coats and blankets under the bridge and drank around their oil-drum fireplace. The underside of the concrete bridge was stained black from the smoke of the passing locomotives and streaked from years of rain, but mostly it stayed dry under there. If Harkins hadn't had his box, that's where he would be. Drinking with the rest of them. He liked them, and he wouldn't not drink if he were there; it would be insulting. But he didn't like getting drunk, especially not on rainy days. On rainy days drinking made him feel like he turned gray inside. The laughter and jokes of the huddled men never helped once he turned gray, and all he could do was to fall asleep under the stained gloom of the bridge. He would stay in his box as long as it lasted.

He peeked out into the rain, and saw a black umbrella wobbling along the mainline tracks. Of course it was Wacko. He was wearing a heavy nylon jacket with
the hood up over his raggedy black watch cap. The jacket had once been dark blue
but was now almost black with grease and soot. Wacko's baggy cargo pants had
always been black. Harkins could hear Wacko singing something as he walked along
in the rain, following the railroad tracks. Once in a while Wacko twirled the umbrella,
and water spun off it all around him, glinting. He came along the tracks as slow and
inevitable as the freight trains that pulled out of the yards on their way to other cities.
The freight trains didn't sing though. Maybe blowing their horns at the grade crossing
beyond the bridge counted as singing. Hell, thought Harkins, I'm getting to be as
wacko as Wacko. The thought made him laugh. Wacko must have heard him, because
a grin broke through his short black beard. He called out, "Hello, friend!" Harkins
waved. Wacko veered from the narrow path worn into the dirt by the tracks and came
to stand in front of Harkins's box. He squatted down and smiled at Harkins. "Come on,
lucky friend. It's time to go! Look here." Wacko pulled a folding umbrella from one of
the vast pockets of his coat. "Alvarez gave it to me. Said was for you, because you
helped him clean the store, and he didn't pay you enough last week. Now we can go!"

"Go where?" Harkins said.

"We go meet my family. Come on! Now you got your own umbrella. Better than a
box!"

"Your family?"

"You bet. You my friend. We go meet them now. Come on!"

Harkins sighed. There was nothing better to do, and he would have to leave the
box to piss sooner or later. At least now he had an umbrella. Alvarez didn't owe him
anything; he was just being nice. It was a cheap umbrella anyway. Harkins heaved
himself out of the box. "Wait a second," he told Wacko. He opened his new umbrella
and made his way over the mud to the low bluff between the tracks and the
warehouses. The bluff wasn't even head-high, but at one place there was a little cove
in it with a shrub on top that hid him from being seen from the warehouses and the
A tiny waterfall of rain trickled down from under the shrub, and Harkins felt a little bad pissing into it, but what could he do? The piss steamed in the cool rainy air. He could hear Wacko singing quietly behind him, sad-sounding music in another language. When he turned around Wacko stopped singing and said, "Okay? Let's go!" They followed the mainline tracks a short way, then Wacko scrambled up a splintered wooden stairway that wobbled underfoot when Harkins followed him. It led to an asphalt street where shabby houses intruded into the cluster of warehouses and small factories. Harkins had not walked in the neighborhoods much because there wouldn't be work to find, and because he felt self-conscious now among regular people, even people as poor as the ones who lived in little clapboard houses with bad paint. Harkins and Wacko walked along side by side, their umbrellas bobbing in time to Wacko's singing. The houses had narrow yards full of weeds. The yards were barely bigger than a big car. Each one was surrounded by a broken fence that failed to guard sun-faded plastic toys and rusted bicycles. They came to a cross street where the houses on the other side were better cared for. Wacko led him along the cross street. After a few minutes they came to a low stone wall surrounding a grove of trees. There was a wrought iron gate in the wall. The gate was open, and a sign beside it announced the Groveland Cemetery. Wacko led him through the gate, still singing.

The cemetery was neat and tidy, the grass deep green and mowed but not too short. There were trees everywhere. There was a little stone guardhouse by the gate, and an old man huddled in it who watched them pass by. Wacko waved his umbrella at the old man, who nodded without waving back. There was a church on a low rise under a gathering of trees, and to one side of the road a low brick building that looked like some sort of office. Wacko led him along the main road into the cemetery, singing more quietly now. Harkins noted that the graves near the front had headstones, but the graves farther back were just flat plates set into the ground. Every once in a while there was a monument, like a little stone house that he wouldn't even be able to stand
up in if he went inside. Not that he wanted to qualify to go inside. Harkins didn't have any close family who had died yet that he knew of. Of course, since he had ended up by the tracks he didn't talk with his family too much. They always sounded nervous now when he called. Alvarez let him use the store phone now and then, but it made Harkins himself nervous to talk to his family with Alvarez busy nearby and customers waiting. So he left them alone and tried to forget.

Wacko stepped off the road and onto a grassy slope. Harkins followed him through the slow heavy drops falling from the leaves of the oak trees that shaded the graves. They were still in the older part of the cemetery, but near where the stone wall had been cut and the road extended to the new section with the flat plates. They stopped at the last row of headstones, which were crowded up to the stone wall. Wacko stopped in front of a pair of headstones that stood closely side-by-side. "Here they are!" he said. "Nice and comfy for them now!"

Harkins read the headstones. One of them said, "Louise Williams Kuwata." The other read, "Shoji 'Sean' Kuwata." The death dates were thirty-some years apart. Harkins looked at Wacko. "Kuwata? Like my box…..."

Wacko shook his head. He was leaning down slightly under his umbrella, staring at the headstones. "Not same family. Not rich like that. My father was gardener. All his life, gardener. My mother was beautiful black lady, died young, when I was little kid. Both families angry. I never met my grandmas and grandpas. No one liked half-and-half kid." Wacko straightened up and looked at him. "My father sent me to boarding school in Japan. No one liked half-and-half kid there either, but I stayed long time. That's why my English so bad. Used up his money, and look at me now." Wacko held his arms out wide. The rain pattered on his nylon hood. His grin still showed through the short black beard. "We lived across the street from Alvarez store. Yeah, right here. My old blocks! Wait a minute."

Wacko turned back towards the graves, folded his umbrella, bowed, and
mumbled something in what Harkins supposed was Japanese. He turned back to Harkins. "Now you know a little bit my life. Okay, let's go!" He opened his umbrella and led Harkins out of the cemetery.

They walked slowly through the rain, passing the little wooden houses that became shabbier as they approached the warehouses and the railroad tracks. They came to Alvarez's store. Harkins reached out from under his umbrella and touched Wacko's shoulder. Wacko stopped walking and looked at him. "Which house?" Harkins said.

Wacko grinned wider and waved the umbrella at a narrow two-story house by the alley that separated the residential block from the first row of warehouses and small factories. Its white paint was flaking, and a broken wooden chair tilted towards the edge of the tiny porch. The chair had been painted white long ago. An old dog lay with its chin on its paws behind it, following them with its eyes but not otherwise moving.

"How long since you lived there?"

"Long damn time. When my father died, his brother sold the house and told me go to hell. Not nice." Wacko spoke through his eternal grin. "Hey, I got some money. Let's go buy a beer from Alvarez!"

Wacko strode across the street, twirling his umbrella. Harkins followed him into the little store. Alvarez was leaning on the counter. He was a bulky little sad-eyed man with a drooping black mustache. He straightened up and put on a smile when the two came in. There was no one else in the store. Harkins hurried up to him.

"Mr. Alvarez, thank you for the umbrella. It came real handy today."

Alvarez shook his head, smiling. "Don't worry about it, Carl." He leaned towards Harkins and murmured, "I got them free—sent by mistake. It's good to share your luck." He straightened up as Wacko brought two beers and laid them on the counter.

"Two beers, okay!"

Alvarez smiled. "One dollar," he said. Harkins knew the beers should cost a lot
more than that. They were good beers.

"Mr. Alvarez," Harkins said. He put a five-dollar bill on the counter. "Can I use your phone again? Long distance. I haven't called my family in a long time."


Wacko smiled at him. "I wait, okay! You go talk to folks. I talk to Mr. Alvarez."

The two men nodded, and Harkins went back to the tiny white-painted office to use the phone. Usually Alvarez had him use the phone by the register. It felt odd to Harkins to sit at a desk again after all this time. As he dialed the phone, he reminded himself to ask Wacko what his real name was. They were friends now, and he really ought to know.
dark resonates

Distance widens into dark. No human travels chalk its inner shell.

A phone rings in a church; I do not recognize the verse.

It has a quality of honesty, or else, miscalculation.

Each gesture that narrows the reach is a window

where winter knows only the ghost time imitates.

Behind the random eye’s repose, a heart interrupted

by a Swiss watchmaker turns towards its ancient hills

mosaic lights. Unanswered.

I do not think I am mistaken.

A chance to talk not taken. Resonates.
the fall of Troy

Failed rhythms
in the desert of Picasso.

I revel in how primitive,
light works time’s ark by lever
our machine

days patterned first by last.
The yellow gleam
of video stores

behind this shivering pane
of glass the towel
dropped on the hotel’s bathroom

floor.
c-fibers

And sometimes it does nothing, hangs there mistaken,
travelling beyond speed

a table crowded with drinks
and my eyes are sluggish

but all I see is the two of you smiling.
Fierce brightness in dilation and where one arrives
is still arriving by its fingertips.

Every c-fiber firing
like a breeze outside. The only memory
I question.

Cold blackbird blue, that sky
and I think you were laughing.

Almost natural.
from Dream Fragments  

Primeval

Just before dawn and we're in kayaks on the glassy surface of a lake, heading into a lily-choked channel that leads to a dam. Loons are not crying, but geese, heading south, honk above our heads. Soon god-rays of the rising sun arrow through the pines, and you ask, "This forest primeval...is it my dream or is it yours?" I stop paddling. "So where have you been all my life?" "Waiting..." you tell me.

BALLOON

We are in a giant basket high above ground. It's quiet except for the whoosh of propane puffing out the rainbow striped balloon over our heads. "Where to," you ask. "Paris or Rome?" "Florence," I say. You laugh. "Just to check out the size of David's hands?"

LIBRARY

The scent of old books is in the air. Weightless, we're in an eddy in the midst of a library where uncountable numbers of books bob around us. Though there's water everywhere, nothing seems wet. When Middlemarch floats by, you snag it. "Shall we drift in?" you ask. "Yes," I say, "I'll change Dorothea's life." You, feet first, are already edging between the pages."And if I can convince Lydgate," you murmur," maybe then you and I might..."
"Rats don't dance in the cat's doorway," you tell me, and I know what that means. That cat has sharp claws, can see in the dark. She is hungry, moon-mad and in mourning for her life. And us? We are human rats, you see. And she, my love, is still your wife.

We are standing at the doorway of a room where the floor is a slick mirror of ice. I'm wearing skates, so I enter, pivot, etching a figure 8. You're still in the doorway, and your feet are bare. "Don't," I tell you. "If you come here without blades, if you look down, the face you see next to yours may not be mine."

I'm not sure how we got ourselves into the pages of Natalie Babbitt's book, yet we are at Treegap with Jesse Tuck as our guide and the Man in the Yellow Suit pursuing us, daring us to drink from the spring of everlasting life. No, we will not drink. Only yes to now and to the screen of the low-hanging boughs of birch and whips of willow. So take my hand, and stay with me here in this pale, papery silence.
by alan catlin

Still Life with Severed Hand and Forged Painting

The hand, a right one, lies palm side up, useless fingers bent in a near clutching cup as if holding an invisible globe, a ball of some sort, a tarnished gold ring facing outward on the third finger for signets, franking no more, lifelines crosshatched and scarred, wrist seared black at the point of severance, a defaced portrait of a young noble lady staring downward, hooded eyes nearly closed, thin lips unnaturally white within this dark interior marred by scored red linings, black singeing ash.
Interior with Young Man Standing on a Window Ledge

Here, at the convergence of walls, two windows, the closed one, double hung casements, bottom panel opaque, upper filled by pale blue sky, a fringe of cumulus, the open one, on our right, is where the young man has crawled out on to the building ledge where he stands, looking up at something unseen without clear intent, neither anxious or unnatural, strangely relaxed seeming, his empty briefcase hanging loosely from the wrist of his visible right hand, desk in the interior foreground, clear, polished not even a blotter just a computer monitor, screen saver by Magritte: a brown suited man wearing a black derby hat, staring at a falsely blue sky within, a telephone desk ensemble unplugged suggesting: NO INCOMING CALLS TODAY.
Man Bent Over Wristwatch of Dead Boss

kneeling on concrete sidewalk, Rolex removed from limp wrist stained by blood spatters, smears on grey summer suit coat sleeve, white, embroidered with initials shirt clearly visible though the man's head is not, is hidden by special pages of a Wall Street Journal, his employee considering the removed object as a talisman, a trinket, a spoil of some undeclared war fought just this side of the grave.
"I am no longer human in the rain"

after a line by Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs

but something discarded,
part animal part beast,

a freak empowered with
the wisdom of fears,

shunned,
battered,

worn,
and made effiguous

after all the burning rites
are completed,

the bad medicine,
gris-gris gone awry,

savage mojo misapplied,
a fetish the voodoo woman
to clamp to her chest
with stick pins and razor blades,

casting unthinkable spells,
plagues of unreason,

reading futures in
the entrails of

the sacrificial requires
six senses and a third

eye for seeing
the butcher's reward,

beheaded chicken flocks,
blood spurting dreams,

an alien rain turning
cloud births into dust
Dreamcatchers

hung as wind-chimes on
back lit porches

swayed by
imperceptible
tidal shifts,

lunar moods
spraying
moon dust,

interior lights
turning
metallic music

makers into
fingers,
toxic creepers,

tentative vines,
sprouted tentacles
whose touch

withers spines,
drains
the life out

of still borning,
sleepless
nights
"The gaze of ice, as if snowmen made Neanderthal"
after a line by Clayton Eshleman

in the morning
they were gone

the bones of their
memories sunk
into tidal pools,

dead seas

flying fish
drank from
& became buoyant,

their breath
the fog
that brought

polar winds,
dry ice;

cave painters
tell a different
story
The Patience of Landmines

in no man’s land

the cratered fields

the coiled fists of barbed wire

razored grass

and the persistence of rain

making mud in the trenches

the silent hours after dark

where time waits

for the dawn to surrender
The Seventh of November

Think:
night blooming Cereus

skin of orchid petal softness

Think:
corpse flowers

sidereal motion where orbits fail

rings of Neptune

Saturn

Tropics of Capricorn

Cancer

Think:
plain old cancer

inoperable

fatal

something always is

it doesn’t matter what
“What do you mean, wolves”
from Sarah Messer

In the place haunted by
chrysanthemums
ginger root
carrot stems
the stuff horse radish is made of
primeval as vinegar sweat stains
cerise stains on bark encrusted knees
the sun rusted like a barn door hinge
left open after all the cows have fled
Fog, the Fossilization of Fog

Hard to breathe in
like mercurochrome and ink
chain linked like fences sown with pine tar
and resin
the flotsam and jetsam of breathing
after the falseness of dawn
the discharged light
tingling like wind chimes
on glass
Balloons, Dropping from the Mouth

Like the ones Dali made

or the ones by Ernst

made of lead

melting

as wax does when

exposed to a flame

as balloons do

too close

to the sun

helium filled

graf zeppelins

rapturous with fire

Oh, the spectators said

the loved ones

Oh Oh Oh

falling like punctured balloons

from the mouth

of the sun

Oh, the humanity
by Fred Dale

Permission

The mirror was as long as the trough, and tilted down, so that a glance up would lay bare the roots at work, a produce display for those who shop with their eyes. When the door opened and another patron stepped up, I closed mine, thought about places I’d been willing to follow a drink—a calm akin to sleep, blown to shit by his unexpected touch, a gesture for a door handle. When I shoved him into the wall outside of the bathroom of the gay bar, he said I’d wanted it, like closing my eyes to his presence was a kind of permission, or was he intuiting persimmon, Homer’s lotus, a treasure to be picked? Sculpture, like bathrooms, is a tactile art, a tease, an object in suspension expecting to be rubbed free of its body. But there’s an etiquette to these things. Volcanoes must be ecstatic given what they know of the future. And when I angled my arm to end his night, a friend stopped me cold, said this was not our place—the leather-strapped pool players taking quick notice. As a black man on the white side of New Orleans, he was right. It’s tension in the limbs that loosens its fruit.
Proving Things Over Dinner

To prove to my co-workers that I played ball, that I ran with the big boys, I decided to show them my form, stood up from the table, took a healthy sip of my cosmo, visualized the basket fifteen feet away, squared my shoulders, looked over the defense, dribbled back a step and let it fly, careful to finish with my shooting hand pointing down, the perfect release, the perfect spin. Some nodded. Someone might have said—Damn. That boy can ball!

To prove I played golf from the tips, I set my salad fork down, stood again, measured the space between my feet, saw past the kitchen to the flag pole in the distance, awaited moon silence, then hip rotation, left arm straight, eyes behind the ball, the explosion of downswing, the club finishing high. A few folks followed the imaginary ball. Stunned, they probably thought, Okay—like Okay. Kid can swing it.

They couldn’t believe I was a drummer, too. For this, I remained seated, abandoned the Catfish Cindy, stretched my arms, flailed to the Pumpkins’ “Cherub Rock” playing in my head, the hi-hat work, the steady kick drum under the table, the unexpected cymbal crashes, the wet blowout of hard earned sweat, the agony the audience needs. They cheered, lifted lighted cell phones, like calling turtles to the beach.

To prove I could handle myself in the boudoir, I quit the rich creme brulee, grabbed the table, thrust and grimaced, lifted a leg for no reason at all, watched myself in the ornate, wall mirror, imagined my eyes closed tight, the ribbed protection rolled inside out so I got all the pleasure, spanked the breadbasket, sent it flying. A couple men panted. A couple women, in the range of such manliness, grew dynamic mustaches on the spot.

I wiped my mouth on the napkin after mentioning I did a bit of writing, disengaged the chair, the forty-year port, focused my energy, fenced it off, crouched rikishi-like between tables, clapped my hands together, awaited the thrilling stampede of silence, of nothing much to say—got to proving myself. A busboy, stoned to the gills, cleared the table. The manager, eventually, put the lights out of their misery.
Excuses For An Acorn Tattoo

On her death bed, my Maw-Maw held my hand, whispered, you’ll never be the mighty oak.

In the parallel construction of the big question, the answer is not tree. It’s acorn.

A star looking to start a forest, burned from me the essential ingredient.

When the squirrel catches its outline, it includes me in its bigger thoughts.

My wife said surprise me; my mother said don’t you dare, but the owl winked.

A lonely child gets to imagine his own shape—a cupule palming its ball of seed.

I feel the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, each field, each gate, each cliff, each step.

It’s a kind of cleavage, a yelling fire delivering a fog ample enough to walk away in.

It’s a far better punishment than nipple clamps, or electrodes, or coconut shavings.

The body’s manifold mysteries cannot possibly be left to the body’s choosing alone.

The water backing out of the bay says trust me to the boats scrambling to learn their lean.

Black ink, when concentrated to a point, grows its own gravity.

A corpse without children needs someone to do the talking.
Roadkill Bingo

Draw them in, the indigenous life that titillates the land,
twenty-five boxes worth, animals looking how they do
just before the rolling light catches them licking free the highway’s sauce pan.

There will be roly-poly armadillos, opossums, vultures, scurvy dogs
by the bagful—the usual glitterati.

And the exotics:

    a Roosevelt Elk, a waxy winged flying fish far from home,
    a wolverine, clumsy Yetis.

How about a wtf square for the unknowable carcasses,
    the assorted hunks of whatever?

Be bold, too.

Include a hitchhiking loner,
    landscapes that no longer crack us open,
or, a missionary undone by his tunic,
    finding the snake your children
prayed to the roadside, a square they needed to X.

In dusk’s shy wave,
    we await the bloated bear for the win,
shouting BINGO,
    a song for us, the road killers, the arkless.
Blood Work

The doctor suspected things, said we needed to know what the cells discussed in secret.

But when I gave the technician the wrong code to my heart, something crazy, a systolic and diastolic like 800 over 600, she stopped the procedure, and signed the cross—said:

I’m going to pray for you now.

My friend with Leukemia realized he was in trouble when the doctors cut him and his blood came out like a strawberry jam.

He told me, too, the secret of gravediggers, how after we’re buried, when no one’s looking, our bodies move around, search for comfortable positions to sleep in.

I thought of him as I pulled out the needle, slumped from the chair.

Who was I kidding? This gesture to health, nothing more than the return to barroom floors, the return to filth.

A row of old people, waiting their turn, did nothing for me, not a cool hand lifted in comfort, only murmuring, like cell to cell:

the young must figure out dying for themselves.
As the tour guide at St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 spoke about the statue Peter Fonda held & called mother, I crawled into Nic Cage’s open tomb, a pyramid under construction. No Egyptians. No massive blocks hewn & dragged through the reeds by hundreds of slaves. Just your basic nine feet of smooth concrete, a Latin inscription that translates to the title above. I couldn’t resist the simple act of disappearing. Their light out-lives them & that’s why they’re stars. Over 100,000 souls call this place home: the Creole, Homer Plessy knows the color of our eternity, & Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen, says three x’s on her tomb will save you. On my back, settling in for the long haul, I thought about that young man at my front door, who asked, once, for permission to dig up his wife’s favorite cat, buried on the side of our house. He said it was wrapped carefully, he took his time, placed it in a sealed Tupperware bin, that his wife often drove by the house, renting various cars through the years so as to not draw our suspicion. And while I made up that last part, he said she’d park & stare & cry at the sight of her tomb, a box in the ground without a pyramid to aim her soul in the direction of heaven. I got him a shovel, myself a beer. Mid-dig, he said his wife’s birthday was coming up, greatest gift ever, he said. But her cat was gone, shoveled away with the arrival of new plumbing. Don’t tell her, he urged, though we had never met. She should have gone in the box with kitty, Egyptian-like—been there when she awoke, had a lap for her to curl into, fingernails to assuage the scalp, death’s bold misery. In this odd moment of rest, I thought of love, the sound of tomb, how the body in contemplation learns to forget itself. (And I thought, I’ll wait right here for you, Nic Cage. You won’t be long. And you’ll need me. We’ll call on Isidore Barbarin and his coronet—an aisle over, in the musician’s tomb. Get us a parade. Get the dirt to jumpin’.)
Suicide By Train

The Engineer said he quit after the third one.

Her eyes. Her eyes—

    their witches dragging

him through the cabin, the glass, the rushing

night, the diminishment.

    Until he divined,

from the inside,

    her life smashed on the tracks.

The engine feels nothing

of the thing they are, the moment when they

disappear—

    the body holding up no better

than a balloon,

gone so quick,

    you wonder if they were ever there.

Eternity is the smack of a train.

    Oh, but that third one.

When she vanished,

    like a daughter stepping

from one room to the next,

    he was not prepared

for the leg, an ax thrown in anger

    over the head

end of the train, all of the proof you get back,

sometimes,

    from a child at war.
Waiting To Speak

Earl is deaf, or he hears selectively. We’re not sure which.

When he walks with us, the trampled ground calls to him
the things it wants him to know.

And he listens— up a blade of grass, cell by cell,
node to node— such delicate savoring,
it draws the awning of his eye. Planet scents,
the meeting of the United Nations of Animals—
all in absentia, their secret, muted currents.

Earl listens. Reads the leaves.

Adds his voice. Moves along.

For the rest of us, a leash away,
it’s evening, the emptying of the bowl,
a graze of finery lost on the young.

Venus and the moon close enough to bicker.

My wife tells me
she believes in the eruptions of flowers, 
that they do this
because they have a lot to say,
like monks vowed to silence for most of the year, 
but not all of the year.
And when they are allowed to crank it up,
watch out.
Such sweetness for bees—
perennials, the held back heft of a hushed voice,
the way sculpture’s a position of air,
the way blooming keeps them focused.

Animals have a vow of their own, 
and every day, Earl, in haste to make history,

sniffs around for the signal—
the one that’ll tell him it’s okay for their words,
cloistered for millennia, 
each syllable a petal to open,
to surprise us.
I Am The Wall Rat

I crawl through plaster & lathe, along remnants of scratchy fellows, corpses like the idiots dotting Everest’s moon-air trails. I’ll perish here, thin mausoleum, whale beach, salmon headspring—fight spiders.

My poor body’ll hold its rat shape for a while. Then heat & maggots will have their say. You know the sped-up film of it: peppercorn berry eyes collapsing, the body, a bag of blood sucked dry.

I’ll inch out of my definition, the woodless burning of innards, death scent, the proof that our spirits leave us, how ultraviolet light lets you know what you didn’t know was there.

Bring forth the mourners, the fat black flies who appear with a snap out of these ship-strong walls, like they walked through a curtain of rain, multiplying into a business, all wings & eyes, waiting around,

ushers sitting Shiva.

Each one takes a memory.

Each one confused, watching the window for answers.
A Coin Awaits A Sailor

The Old Point House idles where thrones divide,
a coin affixed to its bar, a promise
awaiting the return of a centuries late sailor—
a disaster to rival the cliffs, a heartbroken son.
In this evening’s slow drip, the blue tide packed away,
spines of boats feel for the bottom of Angle Bay,
a place of nothing much,
no aqualunged ghosts walking digested ships,
or bloated cities founded by myth—
just a murky, drying surface the sad color of the moon.
In the Afternoons of Wallowing

In the window, I see her reflection, just as the sun is pushing through clouds, there she is waving back, though I don’t say this to anyone.

I have lost myself to a grief that doesn’t know me, and on those days, I am the deafened of never hearing her voice and the blinded of never seeing her face, I am a fool lost to the thought of a child without a mother. You’re an idiot, I tell myself,

a sad sap wallowed in pain, her dresses still hanging in the coatroom closet. There are days I put them on, reach inside her favorite pockets for something beautiful – old trinkets that used to be hers, like a flowered French comb or a bottle of valium, emptied after her last attempt at suicide.
Calibrating a Childhood Musing

I have my father’s old Winchester unloaded and stowed in a tall Chinese vase beside my nightstand. Even though it’s an odd souvenir from my childhood, it helps me sleep in the event there’s an intruder. Though it couldn’t save me, I imagine myself with my fingers on the trigger, half-cocked and ready to fire. It’s almost like having him there to save me. Except it isn’t.

When I was little he used to take me hunting. We’d bring broken-necked birds home to my mother who’d pluck them bare and prepare them for our Sunday’s feast. I used to float his duck decoys into my wading pool and watch them glide back and forth in the sunlight. It was almost like having wildfowl taking a dip in the water with me. Except it wasn’t.

Sometimes I think it was strange that my mother allowed him to take me on those trips, surrounded by men with guns, shooting beautiful winged things right out of the sky. Once he went without me and brought home a live jackrabbit stuffed in his pocket, like a consolation prize for not going. Except it wasn’t.
I’ve thought about selling that rifle now and then, wondered how much it would be worth if I ever had the nerve to get rid of it. But there’s something sacred about that old gun. The memory of how we used to walk through the cattails, how he’d point to the wide-open sky and say, *watch this*, and a flurry of wings would spiral down through clouds; like a wounded angel falling from heaven. Except it wasn’t.
Fragments of Light

Death by a thousand cuts
are never seen but hidden below
or in-between a piece of fabric
covering the wrists--

the place where memories hide
beneath skin, casing
the fragility of a vein, and
all the scarring within.

Death by a thousand cuts
can be easier to ignore than
one large wound to the brain, the way
my sickly father fell and knocked

against the nightstand drawer
then got up again like a sign of courage
or maybe just a martyr
with a headful of attitude.

Death by a thousand cuts
can bruise a heart to emptiness,
like watching bird after bird
fly into a window unaware

of what's ahead. You begin
to stand back, gesture upwards,
towards the sky, anticipating
another broken wing,

you try to intervene, attempt
to alter the pattern of things,
but you feel your skin turn cold
as you watch, stranded between

feathers on glass.
Epistolary Thoughts From an Aging Schoolgirl

They thought I knew you’d died so I lied
and pretended I’d heard that too...
And when I stood in the courtyard

where we used to hopscotch
with long lines of chalk nearly visible
in concrete squares from yesteryears

I thought how ironic that I’d be there
without you. All those promises
from fingers pricked to bleeding,

pressed together like a steeple’s door.
But you always had that faraway look
in your eye, as if something crazy

was looming within, as if you’d choose
a wild ride over wellbeing and I just knew
when they said you’d passed it was better

not to ask, because I’d always thought
I’d see you again and knowing the truth
would’ve broken me in ways I can’t explain.
Down by the Watershed

We stood face to face across a river, flinging stones like baseballs in a field. I was young but you were younger, when life wasn’t about anything except who could outfox the other in a game of truth or dare.

By the end of the day my mother would say I was nobody’s daughter, and the very water where I waded and tipped toed through just to be close to you became a place I’d never want to see again. If only an angel would have intervened after you’d done your best to wipe me out with a fistful of sand. My aim, much better than yours, blinded your vision for at least an hour. Not that I towered over you but I had the advantage of size, though the whys, never seem to matter, especially when the eyes have it.

Meaning yours was black and blue, and you took delight in watching me get the beating of a lifetime right there on the beach. Hey I wanted to finally say, I’m sorry for that unfortunate situation. Sometimes, I sit back and think on the way you used to egg me on
still after all the years something
tells me, if we’d go back in time,
you’d take joy in tempting fate
if the same outcome would grant
you another few decades of reveling
in the glory while my mother
was still alive and maybe even now,
long after she’s died.
Minutes From My Doctor’s Appointment Just After My Parents Died.

It’s hard to breathe, pain level: 3
Somehow, I slipped leaving a parked car. It’s what swallows a life that holds a person hostage after all.

I miss saying goodnight tucking them in and closing their eyes by touching each lid gently, lashes to lashes, particles of what once was sinking in air.

I remember my mother’s hairpins crisscrossed like stars in the dark at bedtime, when she moved there was a shudder of magic, a flicker around the room.

If only the bars on my father’s bed would’ve kept him in, he might not have wandered far. He was always searching for someone as if he misplaced himself.

He was still beautiful without teeth he’d spit pomegranate seeds into a glass jar like chewed-up hearts, one then another.

Once, he sauntered through the doorway of a lady’s house and asked to stay over. When I picked him up, he said his mother would be worried.

I never thought it was easy to get old but there’s something sinister about watching it take over. Hands wither up, legs get weak and I could see death hiding.

I’m trying to answer your queries but feel lost in the memories, of someone else, of bathing her in lavender oil, of reading his favorite prayers, of cleaning out their drawers…
Just a tiny fracture they said and asked if I was pregnant before the x-ray. That was the best part, that question and the long pause before the answer…. no, definitely no. It was that room I guess, all linoleum and steel sanitized and grey, that moment of being an orphan, when the nurse took my vitals, I wanted to scream, I wanted to take them back.
In the Heartache of Loving You

It was easier not to say it than to admit
love was part of anything important

enough to regret. A life can vanish
into tomorrow without ever knowing

what might be lost forever. Sometimes
years get mangled up in the memory

of hearts. If I could file you under long-ago
your card would be stained with a tinge

of melancholy and a hint of almost Vanilla;
an intangible scent yellowed with time.

Life never feels like a journey unless you remember
all the things you miss. I miss you, and the chance

to let you know it. This was my lesson, to realize
there was something good about that.
I can’t go into Value Village no more. So, me and Milo wait in the car. Mom doesn’t let him ride in the car, except when we come here ‘cause she doesn’t want me to wait alone. She thinks Milo will protect me from stranger danger. And he will. Unless the stranger has a dog treat and cotton candy. Then, tell the truth, the stranger’s got both of us.

Milo’s named after the cat in the movie Milo and Otis because he’s the same color. I know. It made sense when I was 4. Everything did. My parents were still married. We lived in a big house with a yard. My mom and I didn’t spend weekends at garage sales or here at Value Village finding bargains to sell at our apartment. I didn’t know about sex or voodoo.

Saturday mornings were mine all mine. I would get up, make a bowl of Fruit Loops, and then watch cartoons all morning. Mom and dad would sleep ‘til noon. Sometimes later.

One morning, my parents had left a DVD in the player. They did that sometimes. “Classics” they called them. “Pretty Woman” or “Men In Black” or “Road Warrior”. Adult movies that I wasn’t supposed to watch, but I watched. This one was different, though. At first I thought may be it was a UFC fight. My dad liked to watch them and drink beer and punch the air. Then I saw that the people on TV were full naked. And then I saw them kiss each others junk.

“What in the hell are you doing?” my dad yelled at me when he saw the screen.

I jumped and spilled my cereal in my lap. It had gotten soggy and I wasn’t going to eat it.

He turned off the tv.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Sex.” he said. “It’s what married people do.” I must have looked confused because he said. “It helps them stay married.”

“Oh,” I said picking soggy loops off my Dora the Explorer night gown and putting them back in the bowl like either of those things made sense.

He took out the DVD.

“Don’t tell your mom.”

“Tell her what?”

“What you saw.” He started helping me clean up the mess. “It’s only for adults.
Married adults.”

“Are those people married?”

“Ahhhhh yeah.” He grabbed some Kleenex from the box next to the tv and clumped the soggy loops together. “They have to be.”

“Are you and mom on a DVD?” I added pieces of cereal to the pile.

“God, no honey. We just watch them.” He gathered up the wad of Kleenex and rainbow mush. “Forget about it. We’ll talk. Later.” He headed to the kitchen. “When you’re older.”

“How old?” I asked. He didn’t say.

When he came back, he brought me a new bowl of cereal, and sat down like it never happened. Like he was one of those actors at kids church when they acted out a bible story. One guy would be a shepherd and then he’d go backstage and the next time you saw him, he was a soldier or a beggar, a totally different guy, but you could tell he was still the same guy. Then dad did something he almost never did. He picked Milo and Otis out of the stack of DVDs on the floor and put it on. We watched it all the way through.

I didn’t tell mom, ever. Dad moved out a month or two later. That was 4 years ago and we still haven’t talked about it. Maybe it’s not later yet. He left the DVDs. I watched all of them, alone and with my friends. They said they were gross and nasty and sick. But when my mom isn’t home, they ask if we can watch them and we do.

When we moved from the house to an apartment, the DVDs were mine. In the new place, everybody had a thing, something that made them different, that no one else had. Mine was the DVDs. I used them to make friends.

An older girl, Kat, said “that’s how plain babies are made.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Plain babies just normal people that come out of women’s bodies.” She said being all tough. “I’m special. I was made from a storm of lightning and wind and sea. That’s why I’m named Katrina.”

“You ain’t different.” I said trying to match her toughness. “You made of stank and meat. Like all we. Stanky meat.”

Kat puffed up her chest.

“You don’t know me. You don’t know what I’m made of. You take that back.”

“F’no.” I said copying how other people said no when they meant it.

“I do voodoo on you. Make you sick. Make do what I want.”

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“What’s voodoo?” I asked
“It’s magic. It’s what my momma’s people do.”
“Only thing your people do is meth.” I said, which was mean but true. Everybody in the apartments knew it.
Kat looked like she’d been hit.
“She’s teaching me.”
“To suck...” I said.
She slapped me so hard my face tingled and then stomped off.

Next day, walking home after school, I caught up to Kat.
“Teach me?” I asked.
“You got better grades.”
She smiled big then made her mouth flat and serious.
“I only know the beginnings. Momma’s learnin’ me.”
“More than me.”
I could see she was thinking.
“K. but voodoo ain’t free. That’s the first thing my momma teached me.”
“I ain’t got cash.”
“Lunch?”
“I do free lunch. Same as you.”
“Gimme yo’ juicebox.”
“Deal?” I said sticking out my hand because my dad always made me shake on a promise.
Kat looked at my hand like it had cooties. I took it back. She stared me in my eyes. I was trying not to blink first. Suddenly, she leaned forward and kissed me.
“Deal.” she said.
“What did you do that for?”
“Voodoo deals aren’t made with no weakass handshakes.”

My lessons started out with hexes and curses and such. Little things: making people trip over their own feet in the hallway, causing them to spit out milk at the lunch table, giving them dandruff or B.O., making them forget what they were gonna say. Eventually, we worked up to dolls.
“Dolls are simple but they’re hard. Kat warned. “Make the doll do something and it makes its person do that thing. That’s what everybody knows. What they don’t know,”
Kat said jutting out her chin, “is that the most ‘portant part,” and by ‘portant I could tell that Kat meant hard, “is the ‘nection.”

“‘nection?”
“Making the doll know who it work on.”
“Don’t you just say their name when you cast a spell?”
“It’s more complicated than that. You have to cast a spell and then you have to mark them.”
“Mark?”
“Yeah. So the doll knows whose its person.”
“Can’t you just tell it?” I said and I know’d I was wrong by her face.
“It’s not a dog.”
“Then how do you mark it?”
“With spit or snot or blood or a Sharpie.”
“Like a marker?”
“A perm’nant maker.”
“Oh. So it lasts.”
“Yes, then you mark the person and the doll, same. O’wise, when you go to work your magic on the doll, how it knows what people ‘nected to?”
“So if say I wanted to do voodoo on my dad, I gots to mark him?”
“Yes, and the doll.”
“Just once?”
“Maybe. Maybe a lot.” Kat said looking down.
“How many is a lot? I only see him on Wednesdays and every other weekend.”
“I don’t know exactly. It’s Voodoo. It’s not box brownies.”
“Say what?”
“I don’t know. Momma says that when I ask too many questions.” She jabbed her pointer finger hard between my itty bitty titties. “You just need to mark him like you mean it and make it stick.”
“Like how?”
“Like you wanna be a voodoo queen YOU gotta figure it out. Ain’t no queens got somebody telling them what to do or how to do it? Queens make it work.”

Finding the doll was easy. I already had this GI Joe doll that mom’s friend’s kid, Cedric, left over at our apartment. So what if it was his favorite toy and he didn’t leave it over. Talking ‘bout his GI Joe’s powers and being all he could be because he was in the army and a man, I just wanted him to shut up and go away. And when he did, I had
GI Joe, which reminded me of my dad. It didn’t look like him exactly, but something about him was dad-like. Like my dad dressed up like some other guy so he could be with me but no one would know.

Connecting the doll and my dad was gonna take some strong voodoo powers because they ain’t nothing alike except in my head. I tried kisses and magic marker smiley faces and even snot smears. Nothing worked. Then one Wednesday he was helping me paint my toenails rainbow because that was a thing in my school. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet and then red, orange, and yellow again ‘cause there ten.

“Can I paint your toes?” I asked as he wiped away extra red from my pinky toe.
“Naw…” he said. “I don’t wear nail polish.”
“You could. Johnny Depp does and you like him.”
“I’m not a movie star.”
“Please. I’m really good.”
He laughed. “So why am I painting your toes?”
“Cause it’s hard to paint your own toes. That’s why they got nail shops.”
His face flashed mean like I’d seen it when my mom cusses him but then he smiled.
“One toe.” He said, “and blue.”
“The big one.”
“No the pinky.”
“If you want blue, it has to be the big one on the left foot.”
“Say what?”
“So they match mine.”
He smiled nicely like he liked that idea.
“If you want to do the left pinky, it’s red. Right is yellow.”
I spread my toes.
“Don’t do that!” he flinched. “You know that freaks me out.”
I laughed and thought of voodoo when he shuddered.
“Big toe it is,” he said taking off his work boot and sock.

Mom was easy. She did her toes just like mine without even me asking.
Her doll was one I’d had for a long time, too. A Zombie Pixy Punk doll with teal hair named Raven. It didn’t look like mom because mom had to look like a business woman so she could do business, but it was totally mom.
I marked the dolls and I cast the spells and I waited a couple of days to let it take case that's what Kat said. Then I did them like the people on the DVDs. I stripped them naked and put them on top of each other. Dad's doll on mom's. Mom's on dad's. Dad’s behind mom’s. Side by side. Upside down. And waited.

Nothing.

Every time they met to pick me up or drop me off, nothing. Not a kiss, not a hug, not even a handshake. They didn’t go in the bedroom and close the door to nap like they used to. They just stood there, and didn’t look at each other, and talked about me.

“Can you watch her on Tuesday? I got a meeting.”

“When you taking her to the dentist? Court says you supposed to.”

“She needs new shoes. Look at her rainbow toes hanging over her sandals. What do you do with all that money I pay you?”

“All that money ain’t all that.”

Nothing kept happening for weeks. At school lunch, I told Kat I wasn’t given her my juice boxes no more.

“Why?” she said all surprised.

“Your voodoo is doodoo.”

“Shut yo’ mouth! You just doing it wrong.”

I told her how I doing it exactly how she told me. When I showed her my nails, she shook her head.

“Nah, you confused it. You can’t have the same mark as your parents or else how the voodoo gonna link your mom and dad to their dolls and not you. You lucky it didn’t work or them might have tried to sex you up.”

“That’s stupid sick.”

“No. You stupid sick. Fool, marking everyone the same. What you thinkin’?”

That day, I didn’t give her my juice box but I went home and cleaned off my toenails. Then I put my mom doll on my dad doll and scotch taped them together so they wouldn’t come apart. I left them like that all weekend.

Still nothing.

Kat came over on Monday and saw my dolls taped together. “You already had those dolls, right?” Kat asked.

“Yeah, both of them. They’re two of my favorites.”

“You gotta get new dolls. Special dolls. Not dolls you play with. Voodoo only dolls.”

“Truly?”
“Voodoo don’t share.”
“You never told me that. I ain’t got no money to buy new dolls.”
“They don’t have to be new. You ain’t even gotta buy them. You just gotta mark them and then be able to work your voodoo on them.”
“So like they could be my friends dolls?”
“That ain’t nice.” Kat turned on me. “Don’t be voodooing my dolls!”
“Not yours. Like at a store or Goodwill or something?”
“I’ll ask my mom but that should work. Only they got to be marked.”

My momma and me at Value Village buying and bargaining almost every weekend. It’s like a hundred yard sales in air conditioning. So after Kat learned from her mom that other people’s dolls would work, I made my plan. I watched the DVDs again to remember the different ways what those people did with their bodies. I loaded my purse up with all my nail polishes.

We got there and I got to work. Value Village ain’t nothing but a giant room so my mom lets me go where I want long as I meet her at the front door every hour cause I don’t have a phone yet. I had to be sneaky ‘cause all the people know me and my mom. They let me touch the merch’ and play with the toys mostly. But this time, I wasn’t playin’. I was voodooin’. I started at Ms. Martha’s Closet because Senora Guadalupe, who runs it says people buy more if her table has a white name, pays me no mind. I pick out two dolls and open the blue nail polish, then the red. Senora Guadalupe starts sniffing.

“Are you painting your nails?”
“Just fixin’ one. I got a chip.”
“Rápido. That stuff give me a headache.” She nodded and looked back at her phone.

I dipped a toothpick in the blue polish ‘cause the brush is too big. I put a dot on the male doll’s white boot where the big toe is because the boots don’t come off. Then I did the ladies. Her shoes were removable. I softly, secretly blew on both their feet until they were dry. His waist didn’t bend so I sat her down and put his head between her legs. I tried to make it look like I just got bored and dropped them there. I pretended to play with some of the other toys on senora G’s table. Then I told her hasta luego and I went to a table on the other side of the village and did the same.

“Do it a lot.” Kat had told me when she learned my voodoo wasn’t working. “Like a lot of times with the same dolls or with a lot of dolls.”
“Both.”
“Both?”
“Can’t hurt.”
So, I did. Mark. Blow dry. Set up. Leave. Repeat. I must have done ten mommies and daddies before we had to leave.

The next Wednesday, my dad came over to pick me up as usual. I went super slow: forgetting my homeworking, searching for a shoe. He stood by the front door staring at his phone. “Could you help me find it?” I asked. “I don’t know where anything is in this dump.” He said. “Just wear another pair.”
Mom doesn’t even come out of her room.
They don’t even speak.

Next day at lunch, I told Kat.
“The voodoo is broke. It’s getting worse.”
“How?”
“No love. No dates. No kisses. Not even hand holding. They still look like they have laser eyes and are going to burn holes through the other every time they see each other. If they even see each other. Last time they didn’t even.”
“You don’t rush voodoo,” she scolded me. “When it’s ready, it works.”

So every weekend at Value Village or Goodwill, I did the same thing: mark, blow dry, set up, leave. No one paid me no mind. Until I look up from blowing on Barbie’s foot into Senora Guadalupe’s eyes. “Porque?”
“What?”
“Why you do that to my dolls?”
My face got super hot, “The paint from my nails must have …”
“No.” She snapped. “Why you do my dolls nasty like that?”
She pointed at one of my earlier hexes. The girl doll was on top of the boy doll only upside down so their heads were between each others’ legs.
“That not right.”
She grabbed my arm.

We went up and down the rows to each table one by one. Pointing to my hexes, clicking her tongue, she told them, “Fue ella” or “It was her” or both to make sure they knew. Our last stop was the security guard.
“Are you sure...” the guard started to ask, but Senora Guadalupe’s eyes shut him up.
The guard called my mom over the loudspeaker. “Would Ms. Paterson report to the security desk.”

By the time my mom got there, Senora Guadalupe had gone back to her table. “She can’t be here.” The guard said.

“Are you kicking us out?”

“Not you. Just her.”

“What on earth did she do?” She looked at me. “Did you steal something?”

“She didn’t take anything.” the guard said, his baby face almost looking old. “It’s how she was playing with the dolls.”

My momma didn’t say anything. She looked at him then she look at me like when I know she is trying to burn the badness out of me with her eyes.

I just kept looking at her rainbow colored toes, screaming in my mind, “Work voodoo! Work!”

The guard finally said, “Mame, she has to go out. She’s been acting inappropriately with the dolls in Senora Guadalupe’s stall.”

“Inappropriately? What the hell does that mean?”

He gulped and pointed to the exit. “Now.”

She grabbed my hand and yanked me so hard I just about fell. When she shoved me into the backseat, slammed the door, and headed back into the village, I knew she was going to talk with Senora Guadalupe.

When she came back out, she didn’t say nothin’. Not then. Not at dinner. Not the next day. Nothin’. I kept waiting for her to hit me and call me nasty and sick and dirty and ask where’d I learned that. But she never did. The next weekend, she told me to put Milo in the back seat of the car and drove to Value Village as she always did, parked the car, cracked the windows, and took a hard look at me before going inside alone.

All these weeks, I’m just waiting for something to happen. I asked Kat every time I see her, “When?” She said, “Voodoo do voodoo when it’s time.”

I just gave her the look.

She felt me. “There’s a whole lot going on we can’t see. It can get all mixed up. Hexes, curses, ‘ncantations can block each other. May be someone else has a spell on them not to stay broke up.”

“You telling me somebody else’s voodoo be beating down my voodoo?”

“No...Yes...I don’t know!” She stomped her foot. “It’s magic. Sometimes it happen immediately. Sometimes later. Sometimes never.”
I felt my stomach get sick.

“What do you mean “later”? Is later like never minus a day? Are my mom and dad gonna get back together when I’m grown? Then, the next day one of them is gonna drop dead.”

“Could be.” Kat shrugged. I’m still waitin’ for mine to work.”

She locked pinkies with me and we walked home not saying nothing.
by Thomas Piekarski

Coloma

I’ve come to Coloma because there’s nowhere else to go. Paris is filled up. Ditto L.A.

I’m standing a short stroll from the replica of Sutter’s mill where Marshall discovered gold.

The original mill was equipped to supply many a camp abundant lumber to build with.

But this was not to be. Sadly the mill shut down before long as Sutter went broke, his vast lands trampled by maniacal gold seekers, rogues who plundered, stole his dreams and left him but a pauper.

The May sky grandiloquent blue. I’m staring down at the river from a hundred-year-old bridge, transfixed by ice-cold snow melt swirling rapidly downstream.

This water much more valuable than all the gold ever found, for California farm lands that supply a major percentage of food feeding our families depends on its molecular magic. Without this priceless water we’d be staring down the barrel of a loaded gun held by Destiny.
Without this water food prices would soar and millions go thirsty.

In future years we will need an abundance of luck coupled with ample largesse of Mother Nature to avert these consequences.
 Locke

Large gold-painted busts of Confucius and Sun Yat-sen adorn opposite sides of the entryway from a skimpy sidewalk to the vintage Chinese heritage museum.

The Chinese settled this diminutive town in the early 20th century. They founded it when their shanty village at Walnut Grove burned down, and most resilient pooled what savings they had to acquire this plot of land from a wealthy gent named Locke, then constructed an insulated community.

Locke stands essentially as it did when those Chinamen tilled fertile fields that lined the broad river, built shacks and a main street of wooden shops, today more than a little rickety. At one time Locke thrived as a gambling Mecca strictly off limits to the sheriff, frequented by workers from Sacramento and delta towns, hell-raisers who, flush with cash, engaged the Chinese locals, boozing and gaming.

A lit match could turn tinderbox Locke into a huge bonfire some day, but that is of scant concern to the few remaining citizens of this allegedly haunted place.

Sitting atop a picnic table, pine chips coat the earth all around me, hyacinths bloom, and bird chirps constitute an orchestra. I’m contemplating how white supremacists in Walnut Grove likely burned the Chinese out, the way they did south of Monterey.
The lone establishment that’s not Chinese is Al the Wop’s tavern and greasy spoon dating to the second world war. My Pop once told me about when he and his chums from the purchasing department chugged at this old dive, whooped it up, and bragged of how they got away with being on the take.

Our Tsar

There is something about unrequited love that bursts a bubble in this angry man. He casts about groveling and grumbling, spoiling for a fight, miserable in his thin skin. He would blame anyone but himself. Perhaps chemically imbalanced, but would expert diagnosis confirm this in time to spare our republic from his intensive savagery? When one would love himself as well as the wrong gods for the wrong reasons, the likelihood of success is considerably lessened. Such bumptious love wreaks havoc on his psychic skeleton. His nerves become frazzled, words commit to little or nothing. Then when you blend this with imbedded rage the outcome is certain to be deconstruction of ways and means.
Who Will Stick Up For the People?

What god or king or demagogue can assure us
that every countryman gets fed,
that politicians be true their word,
that women are afforded equal rights,
that smokestacks will eventually die?

Pouting about the chapter where love lost its way
is the high school teacher whose students
will have to go without physical education
because the budget was cut to the bone.
Those responsible like to tout the good book
claiming they abide by its imperatives
but their actions ooze blatant hypocrisy.

Honor hobos who rode over the divide with bindles
like undead stuffed in filthy rail cars,
like Nixon or Chief Joseph or Goliath,
steel wheels screeching over tracks,
truckers and farmers they passed
waving, giving them a hearty high-ho!
But lo! the fallen warriors have returned,
unleashed from deep graves to roost
upon steep chapel spires, on fire, riddled
in disbelief of the republic’s shocking nosedive.

Accused of being dope peddlers blacks rounded up
and locked in hot jail cells, sweaty
and seething with hatred for the white race,
their rebellion pent up, pockets fleeced.
And in some cities they used pepper spray
on the marchers, while here at home workers
broke and destitute crammed the capitol steps
begging for a livable wage, scared that before
long their jobs will be replaced by robots.
Some day we’ll look back and know why it happened
to the little girl who couldn’t beat lupus,
to the refugee who hid in a basement,
to the accountant who defecated in an alley,
to lakes gone dry or poisoned,
to the bus driver whose house was foreclosed,
to the senator bribed by Russians,
to Zenith, Pontiac, RCA, Blockbuster,
to subways gurgling ocean water.

This land is your land and my land from Tucumcari
to as far as our imaginations can take us.
And feeling highfalutin is the homeless bum
who lights a cigarette beside his tent
camped out by railroad tracks,
alchemical jazz notes ringing in his ears,
cheap steak cooked medium well, out alone
where buffalo roamed under full moons
and the air was fit to breathe. Nowadays
emails battle spam filters, and future history
as if artificially inseminated deduces
there once was a shining city atop an emerald hill
that was vomited as afterbirth of a dead universe.

Armed with Tommy guns loaded and pointed at you
Al Capone’s mob is imbedded in your psyche,
America. You’re the land of inverse justice.
The people recorded, the people sorted, unequal,
and they know it. Millions of your working class
exiled to lives of utter mediocrity, battle worn
prisoners sniveling under the giant thumb
of Dow Chemical and those thug Koch brothers.
Official Business

When I walk outside and watch my neighbor in fashionable knee-high boots mindlessly surfing the web on her cell phone I'm struck by what lack of anticipation. Not far behind is an unwed mom, a teenage girl with stained jeans who strolls her baby down the block and can hardly wait to conceive another.

I'm saddened by the mangy cocker spaniel with no place to call home. It sniffs paper cups and candy wrappers, hoping for a little residue to lick.

And then I drive over to the big box store where shelves are loaded with foreign goods. It makes me feel the American Dream is grossly misunderstood, or dead.
Before you say anything--before you even think anything--I know I shouldn’t be doing this. I know it’s the kind of thing that’s dangerous to put down on paper, and I know I should probably shut up and get some rest. I mean, at the very least, I should wait until morning. But here I am, and my hand won’t stop moving.

I’m sitting at my desk, and the clock on the nightstand is blinking 3:46. It’s giving off the only light in the room--this soft, enticing, sapphire light that washes across the pen in my hand and the ink on the page. You know, it almost looks like it’s glowing. Like I’m writing with the center of a flame. Can you see it, in your mind?

You need to. You need to be here with me to understand. It’s silent, save for the sounds of rushing cars hanging in the air outside. Coming and going every once in awhile, like ghosts on the wind. My heartbeat sounds like rain in my ears, and the clock is ticking. Can you hear it? Ticking. Ticking. It won’t stop. I wish it would stop, I wish it could. I wish time would pause and stumble backwards, just a bit. Just a week.

Stop. Stop--I should stop thinking, but I can’t seem to...can’t seem...I...

God. I’m tired. I should end here. I should leave you now.

I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I

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It’s 4:31 now. I must have drifted off. If I had any dreams, I can’t remember them.

You know what happened--everyone does. Or, at least, they think they do. You know about the body that they found in the river last Tuesday, and you know that the rapids and the rocks had torn the skin and filled the lungs and turned the water red. Maybe you followed the story long enough to hear that she jumped over the side of the bridge that morning, in which case, congratulations, you’ve heard all that there is to hear. From them, at least.

But I bet you don’t know how she looked when she tripped over the edge, how her hair billowed up around her in the wind and how her spine snapped to one side when her body hit the rocks. You don’t know how the water turned pink before it turned red, how it frothed and churned and clawed and dragged her under...

And you definitely don’t know how we argued that morning, how she snapped and shoved me to the side as we crossed the bridge. You don’t know how I shoved her back. How she tripped. How she teetered on the edge for what seemed like an eternity, and how her gray eyes widened as she lost her grip.

No. Only two people know that, and one of them is dead.

----
The clock reads 5:13.
I’m sitting on the edge of the window now. It’s open; I can feel the breeze licking my face, and dawn is beginning to gray the night sky. The crickets are chirping. In a few moments, I’m going to climb out of the window and run down to the woods. I’m going to throw this notebook into the river and hope against all hope that somehow, somewhere, someone will find it. All I ask is that you tell them what really happened.
This clown could be set on Left Bank

Through the mirrored door
he came instead of me
as after ultimatums at the drain
of the old ankled bathtub.

I said, “Oh, you’re still here.
    Did you hear me
talking to myself?”

No, it wasn’t real life. The doll with
corkscrew curls my shade in his decor.
Or the tall dark stuffed clown I found.

Neither was the dream,
the party from the airport
of my psyche
unaccountable relatives,
coaxing Christians,
an aside: skip them

when in Sunday school I liked
the part about Pontius Pilate’s wife
then we were close

no, that was not real as distrustig
a neighbor who didn’t seem to register

cheap cold duck empties after “Film du Jour”
or the sober glares from the tiger lilies
while he mowed the Sunday lawn.

Completely conscious I find I misjudged men

yet I believe the party snack
he liked in the carnival mirror
of sleep was a story-in-progress.
Sandpaper

about the time when worship stymied her
she bought a fluted vanity table
$15 with some happenstance
stains and salient scratches
plus arguable hours
of friction-filled
sandings

what became like massage at a shoreline
fingertips drenched in cursive grain
or the prescient flow of melody
each carving and drawer
part of a sand castle
the lathed legs
a ladder

climbing the wreck was like wrestling with a man
when all is dully exposed and yet unfinished
the within of wood penetrating time
like scrolling church woodwork
where a god worshipped
brings goddesses
what’s her name
to their knees
No change

One day you learn downtown between the blunt bus stops that there’s no change in Minneapolis and they’ve got your car that day.

Except if you stoop under crystal-cool cliffs and buy nylons at a shoe store a thin magazine at a bookstore what do you need at a drugstore?

“We can’t give out change” recite girls at registers, rolling their quarters.

Not having been around enough a vagabond asks a dinette cashier at the Greyhound depot for change.

She automatically answers, “Can’t do it.”

He doesn’t understand the facial slang and persists with an issue shut as the cigarette machine hoarding a jackpot of correct change.

Why doesn’t he buy a depot donut?

He looks in the eye Minneapolis apathy and its advantage in not installing change machines

and then he has a “why” fit tantamount to being robber or beggar so that everyone gazes at the prevailing announcer on the PA.
Embarrassment embellished with Minneapolis’ vice for drama. How could everyone have known Unless they learned their lesson the hard-hearted way?

A twice-told tantrum

acclimatized to the chilly tiff with the longtime dweller who, passing fatigue at the foyer, says, “It never changes here.”
The snug-nether-hours soothed by rituals of play acts and snow.

He stencils his stoic walls

scheming a scenery change on limbo, one comprehends while waiting for the outbound bus.
The new oldies

One day the owner of the used bookstore heard gibberish at his oldies station
his greeting was muscle cramp
    when the door opened
and the street beat of 2004 swelled

Sinatra and Orbison couldn’t
soothe his customers. His clerk
wouldn’t be enlivened at
    the feminist yore
of Leslie Gore’s “You Don’t Own Me”

which might mean unmentionably
that oldie bestsellers could be obsolete
    as anyone
craving top hits from before 1970.

Scrabbling for another nostalgic station
the oldies were kid stuff
    until after the hiatus of a season
a new oldies station beamed mirage-like
a pops music history station.

    It hurt almost
the honking emotional upheaval
when everything is over
so excitable the songsters
    flying to the moon before sex liberation
before rockets
and so sad when asking
about being loved tomorrow

those tomorrows re-lived felt
dangerous as high altitude.
Robin blimp

Orange cargo piled up
the robins are sneaking out of September.
Disguised as leaves they mount gangplanks
like a smug export of tomorrow
all packed for the winter until their day in April.
They are a drum roll a dozen and prominent as dignitaries
migrating like a maple-orange blimp
the rage of spring camouflaged until the brief
Goodyear ad they present in their rounded-up ragtag.
King of the evergreen mountain

For us the crow maintains
he is king of the evergreen mountain
the April gales bump him off
to another Christmas angel peak

or to weathervane suaveness
until an insolent treetop sparrow
must be denounced and chased to
a lower rung view of crows

poised Poe-ish on gables
vigilant as cops at stoplights
until they caw at a sparrow-haired
jogger and then they

strut to a road’s center line
to tease oncoming cars
and swoop to the gutter
as if drivers care about crows

homing beyond the ravine
where boughs of them relax
territorial as a sign at a
new neighborhood addition

not a king among them
co-existing or quarreling or
chortling Har har har
at the sit-coms in the trees.
by Jeremy Jacob Peretz

my Ocean

when i dream i see You
my Ocean
of turquoise and emerald
silver and pearl
and i feel Your warmth
and the soothing comfort of Your everlasting presence
the ebb and flow of Your tidal forces
the perpetual churning of Your primordial maternal energies
in my dreams i can smell You
my Ocean
frank myrrh cinnamon copal
raspberry bordeaux pineapple melon
corazón de melón
cake seaweed ogonori brine garlic cacao
in my nostrils Your neroli pollen blossoms
fresh coastal coral breezes roll off You emanating Your powers all places
stirring and dispersing Your scents around through the air
my late-night visitor who brings love
not the hot love of a ‘foreday morning calling siren
but the cool eternal love of a moonlight night
a Mother who has raised so many wise youth
like a Grandmother of ancients
birther of creations and creators

i hear You too in my dreams
my Ocean
i hear Your cries
and i hear Your beautiful words of praise and encouragement
of devotion and undying love
these are the words of the fish the eels
flying amidst Your waters
and the snakes slithering through You too
the squawk of the duck
and the swan and the dove and the fowl and peacock
Your words come to my sleep like a swell vacillates off shore
the misty salt air that seeps down vivifies my mind-heart’s wilting sprouts
You are the nurturer
that sustains us wrapped up in Your embrace
that brings us that brought us
in my dreams i know You
i recognize You by Your fragrance Your voice Your touch Your rough warmth
and i thank You when i wake
and i try hard to remember You all day long
my Ocean
Touching fused or one

Skilled artists’ hands at work
folding binding wire rod frame
fashioning flamingo stilt leg posts
and fluttering butterfly wing shields
stretched out storks with t-rex heads
dancing posing showing off their struts

Time taught reflexes grasp welding torches
molten raw materials of bronze heat and vision
melding and wielding a zoo of shapeshifting forms
birds of paradise with open beaked petals embrace face
to face reluctant expecting wanting more pulling away yet
twisted as two wound up giraffe necks joined at the four legged hip

Braiding together strands of metals into starfish shaped structures
supporting pounded flat alloy sheets hollow bodied drum torsos
creating a sea monster leviathan rearing its pointy floral faces
above the clouds perspective to see clearer where both bodies
are not necessarily one and the same though two entangled
standing on their own four bent kneed akimbo flexed feet

Acts of weaving and sculpting pressing pressures
hot alchemy of elements reddened rendered to
form the animals and insects we are mantises
praying at and for one anothers’ throats in
love and malice compassion and hate
two together touching fused or one
Paul and Garry

Why do I want to reach you Paul and Garry?
Guada and Big P what is it you mean to me
That I created a 7 x 5 foot memory
A board to bring connections constructed of 8 panels:
Looking down their noses from on high
London and Paris and red white and blue stars and stripes
Who is that sitting at the cemetery gates?
An elderly man in dapper red shirt black pants and deep-creased Stetson
A young boy (or girl?) with a feathered-hat and basket stands cautiously
Waiting at the four-corner crossroad in-route to deliver provisions to prisoners
Little Holy One from Atocha connecting between and betwixt worlds
With two flags horizontally flowing
Between the Sun and the Moon scarlet plum sauce clouds and apricot golden glows
<em>Ontario Village Cayo</em> marks the base of the flag on the left with palms blue and red bands
<em>Sub umbra floreo</em>: under the shade of the palms we can flourish
On the right reads: <em>Guadeloupe FWI</em> (French West Indies)
With green and white bars red arrowhead gold star
And butterfly that shape reminiscent of the island pair
All electrified magnetic conductors linking lands and needs and sacrifices and demands
On the bottom deep-blue mirrors shells quartz doorknobs locks and keys
What is Simbi in the pools to help link us?
Razor wire problems and deportation solutions
You told me if you ended up back there it’d be your head a lost opportunity
A halo of lavender sprigs with a few sunflowers
Tracing the Sun’s path in the sky throughout the day throughout life’s stages
Birth mid-life death
At the base are mirrors reflecting back a world more spectacularly glorious
Than any we have here to see
Complete inverse of our reality so inviting
Where sleeping dreams can walk your feet across through a universe
To a reunion of life without worries and needless strife
When you can love and be love
Making sense of the birds’ morning chatter on your doorstep
Taking time to sit and be with a work of disquieting art
And loosing oneself in its raucous stirring realities
That friends are gone who only work can reunite
The girl kept her heart in a purple velvet box by her bedside. Every morning, when she woke, she removed her heart from a latch under her ribcage, her hand reaching up into the damp warm mucus of her insides. Her long, thin fingers, like spider fingers, untwisted the cogs and mechanisms that held the heart in place until it dropped with a soft thud into the palm of her waiting hand. The girl arranged her heart on the velvet cushion of her jeweled box, on the bed stand. Her morning routine was fixed and reassuring. Remove the heart. Replace the latch on the opening under her ribcage. Wash the hands of the thick mucus that sealed her chest cavity. Brush the teeth. Get dressed and ready for school.

At school, the girl without a heart could then endure the long hours of Algebra, English, History and Spanish, the incessant droning of talking teachers enunciating, Hoy Carlos no acabo’ su tareja, peers buzzing with gossip and boredom, the worst of it in Biology lab, where the girl dissected frogs that came in sterile, vacuum-packed plastic pouches bought from catalogs that advertised “Young Scientist Dissection Kit!” in large, cheery fonts. The girl, without her heart, did not need to consider where the frogs came from, if they were ordered from a company specializing in raking herpetofauna from ponds in South Carolina and Georgia, nor did she have to spare a thought for those whose job it was to fetch the frogs, knee deep in mud, from beneath the leafy greens and over fragile lily pads. She had no need to imagine the machines that shot the frogs, the fetal pigs, the lizards, and stray cats with embalming chemicals, then vacuum-packed and stacked them in airy refrigerated rooms.

At night, after dinner, after brushing her teeth and wearing her pajamas, she would reopen the latch beneath her ribcage and replace the heart inside its mechanism of cogs and screws, the girl’s spider fingers apt, after years of this practice, at screwing and unscrewing the right bolts, nuts, and washers, setting them firmly in place while the heart continued its placid beating and pumping, undisturbed by her toiling, by her assemblage and dis-assembly of biomechanical complexes.

The girl dreamed of pastel rainbows and crayon-colored seas, stick-figured children chasing striated beach balls across emerald green carpets of grass. Flocks of V-birds dotted a sky that knew no rain, perpetually drawn to a lemon-drop sun that sweated orange and yellow lances of light. The heart, at night alive in the dream-world of the sleeping girl, but protected by its velvety cushions during the day, grew fat and content. Each morning, the girl noticed, the heart occupied a slightly larger space on its plush and bejeweled coffer, and it would soon need a roomier box. This was especially true if, in the morning, she would try to draw her dreams with crayons on the rigidly lined notebooks on which she was supposed to write her teacher’s dictations. The mere thought of her heart pumping peacefully on its bed of purple cushions played her mind like fingers on a harp, seducing her attention from the teacher’s atonal buzzing, and
luring her via secret cosmic interfaces into the dream world of the heart.

Sometimes the teacher’s assistant looked over the girl’s shoulder and cried, “She is doodling again.” The other children clanged and whirred in their sits while the teacher glided over to her desk, crumpling the drawings to the rhythm of her ticking tongue. “It is forbidden to draw,” the teacher explained. “Didn’t you turn off your heart before you came to class?”

The girl nodded.

“Then, why do you persist with this disturbing activity?”

The girl said: “My drawing is an instinctual response to the manifestation of diverse and vivid dreams, which are themselves the manifestations of the psychic forces that are in collision or collaboration within my subconscious mind.”

“Outrageous,” the teacher ticked as she confiscated the last crayon scribble the girl had manifested on her ruled notebook, the picture of a perfect strawberry. She reported the girl to the principal’s office, putting checkmarks next to “spontaneous behavior” and “subversive elocution.”

The girl sat in the principal’s office with her hands folded in her lap, while the principal lectured on the dangers of escapism, and his assistant tinkered with the hatch in her chest, oiling the mechanism and testing the circuitry. Still, the girl dreamed, and while she dreamed, the heart, safe in its sequined velvet box on her bedside stand, grew.

Over time, the heart would occupy a collection of jewelry boxes that grew in size like Babushka dolls, mahogany finished and scalloped bottomed, lacquered and musical, Chinese enameled and sterling silvered, gold, cameoed and mother of pearl. While other girls whose hearts, left unused, shrunk and shriveled inside the husk of a walnut, hers grew so large with her dreams that she soon rested it on a silk cushion under a bell dome, wherein the heart’s ticking hummed and resounded like clinking crystals, harmonics rattling the girl’s empty ribcage, loosening screws.

The dreams, too, became sonic, choirs of angels singing praise to the blade of grass, cherubs intoning canticles to sunflowers and hymns to the seafoam, vibratos that resonated across the ether. The girl slept with her forehead pressed against the glass dome, crouched, crumpled on her knees, sleep overtaking her, while the heart labored to feed itself via radio vibrations on hers and the dreams of orphaned children, which flew like bats through the night, into the silvery webs that the heart’s oneiric symphonies wove through the black, starless sky.

One morning, she kissed a frog-skinned boy whose hair oozed a faint scent of embalming fluid. She liked that his complexion, under the sun, glowed in a pale shade of chartreuse. It put her in the mind of an absinthe dream, in which she floated like liquor over a sugar cube and melted on the tongue of a snail. The boy and the girl held hands at recess, studied together in the library at lunch, took SATs, ACTs, and career aptitude tests on weekends. So focused on the study was the girl that she hardly noticed how, right before her eyes, the boy had turned into a lizard-skinned man, his
purple tongue unfurling to catch insects, his mouth snapping shut on the small lies of his affection for her: “You are very clever,” and, “Your whirring is mechanically exact.” When she tasted his kiss, she smelled the rain and shamrocks like the color of his eyes, but she didn’t feel much, except the muffled, long-distance vibration of her heart’s beating. Only at night did she fully appreciate the companionship of the lizard boy, when the heart, under a pewter dome the size of a church bell, unfurled crystalline odes, vitrified las and dos spewing like diamonds from a nightingale’s yellow-rimmed beak. Then she savored the exotic thrill of the boy’s kiss, the novelty of her sexual attraction divorced from the mechanics of reproduction diagrammed in biology books that otherwise possessed hers and the lizard boy’s thoughts.

She worked after school in air-sealed, refrigerated malls, serving meals assembled on Petri dishes, warmed on Bunsen burners, plucked with tweezers from fragile porcelain bowls spun out of mud, out of clay, and glazed by torch-fire. The world, she observed, was a dry, cracked scab pulverizing under the industrial obsession of her age, but inside the mall, as if inside the fat-heart’s dream, people were swathed in cellophane wrappings, gleaming with Morse code flashes that emanated from their myriad digital portables. On break, observing the flow from the gallery at the mall, the girl heard her heart’s long distance beating in her mind, and she experienced a most unusual occurrence—a lucid dream. The urge to grab those crayons and paints so thoroughly forbidden to her when she was in school seized her. Separated from the heart, she nonetheless was caught in its web-like vibrations, sensing them on the hair of her skin, pleasurable shivers of invisible frequencies traveling up her spine, tickling her pineal gland, where, the ancients had written in their now all but forgotten books, was the seat of God.

Her long spider fingers dipped into paint and traced the twine of ribbons of color, amaranth, vermillion and Venetian red, gradual shades spreading like hands on linen sheets, staining what had once been white with a prenatal vision of plasma formations. After completion, she experienced a desire: that what she had painted should be seen. After the mall closed for the night, she used her key to get in its cavernous emptiness and hung the sheets from the mall’s gallery with the help of her avocado-hued boyfriend, noticing only barely that, when she had kissed him earlier that night, he had tasted like spiders.

“Why are we doing this?” he complained, his periwinkle tongue snapping, as he tapped out his repeated complaints. “This is crazy. We’ll get arrested. How have you talked me into this?”

The girl remembered the principal’s diatribe on the day that teacher had sequestered her strawberry drawing. She placed a hand on his chest, on the hutch where she knew he had dutifully removed his pea-sized lizard heart, yet she thought she could feel a faint vibration.
She said: “Subversive behavior is the mechanism by which the established values and principles of a system are undermined, contradicted or reversed, to protest an established social order, and its structures of authority and power.” But seeing the light dimming in her boyfriend’s eyes, she added. “I have tasted a variety of strawberry ice-cream flavor combinations, and it is my informed opinion that strawberry-basil is the best.”

In the morning, when the mall opened, the painted sheets impressed themselves like bruises in the minds of those who beheld them. A woman looked up, saw the red swirls, the billowing sheets, and believing herself to have fallen into a dream she screamed. Her toddler rose from his baby carriage and pointed, chanting “dah...dah...dah...dah!s.

Reactions progressed in stages as people gradually became aware of the sheets: from people’s initial, self-congratulatory indifference they turned to each other agitated, some crying: “It seems red, but not quite like...” and another, “Perhaps they are flowers, but inexact.” There was a temporal phase of denial, when shoppers passed by the sheets with heads lowered, fists clenched and lips trapped between teeth, then a bargaining, which some undertook with store owners, then with each other, though no one quite knew what agreement they were attempting to settle. Then finally, all at once, everyone erupted in a causeless and bewildering rage.

Riots exploded. Store fronts were broken into, merchandise looted. Molotov cocktails crashed against the shields of helmeted police, flames licked at the sheets, charring them before they blazed in the glorious colors of their swirls. The wounded hugged each other, then rolled on the floor of the mall over the litter and shards of glass, crying and laughing hysterically, while policemen broke up the pressing crowds with cudgels and tear gas. News channel helicopters buzzed above the mall all day. “The painting must have disrupted the flow of photons and quarks,” some speculated. “Satellites have picked up unusual vibrations,” news anchors reported, “and authorities are at this moment honing in on the source.” Reporters, demanding answers to the inexplicable eruptions of unchecked emotions, shoved their microphones at the mouths of politicians whose eyes flashed with the clicking cameras as they tried to reassure the public that justice would be swift.

The girl watched the riot on television, while the heart pulsed safely under its dome. It had been some time since she had tried to replace that vital organ into her chest cavity, to slide it through the viscous membranes of her insides, to reconnect its cogs and mechanisms. It had grown too large, for one thing. It seemed to drain her of energies, for another. And she had grown used to the soothing rhythms of its predictable beats while she slept. But when the news camera honed in on the woman with the toddler crying in the back of an ambulance that she could feel a rhythm of heartbeats crowding her head, she thought about a box large enough to contain her obese heart, perhaps a cherry-veneered coffin with velveteen-cushioned upholstery.
“Do you think we’ll get in trouble?” the girl asked her boyfriend, who said nothing as he stared at the images of violence on the screen, his skin glowing a butternut yellow in the glare of the HDTV. Then he got up. She heard him open and close the refrigerator door. Later, she found him in the freezer, his eyebrows crystallized, his smooth iced skin a sheen of emerald. He had gone into hibernation.

The girl slept with her cheek pressed to the pewter dome, slumped against it, a trickle of saliva sliding down her chin, the heart’s rhythmic pulsing inspiring jungle dreams of tribal rituals, painted faces dancing around a pyre on a faraway beach, the slap of the waves, calling, calling.

As she slept, the SWAT team came. They came like ninjas, in black bulletproof vests and black tabi socks. They lowered ropes from the rooftop of her residence building and rappelled down to her window. Their gunshots shattered the glass, the glare of their flashlights blinding. They would hoist the heart with chains and pullies, lower it into a steel tank, torch it sealed, and bury it twenty feet deep into the ground. It would not be enough to stop the heart’s reverberations from penetrating the earth’s core, and for years, its pulsing would cause Irish limericks to contaminate the chants of whales in the northern Pacific, unsuspecting bank tellers would dream of a purple sunshine, and immured bureaucrats yearned unreasonably for week-long vacations in exotic tropical islands.

Through it all, the girl kept dreaming.

In one of those dreams, feeling the cool sand against the soles of her feet, tempted by the shock of water wetting her toes, the girl dove deep into the dream abyss. It was a warm immersion, the waters closing instantly above her, sealing her in. She made her body into a spindle, her hands conjoined above her head, and she swam with the current into the depths of the sea, the water, heavy above her, but ceding to her form as she descended. Already, through the murky green and salt-sting in her eyes, she could feel the heart’s pounding sending waves that caressed her skin. Then, as she grew closer, that pounding resounded inside her mechanical bones, with a welcomed rattling of screws and washers. She saw it, then, the heart at the bottom of the abyss, crowned by the lip of a perfectly round crater. It pulsed as fiercely as ever, red hot like lava. She would not have known how to stop herself, even if she had wanted to, and she did not want to. Was she still in the dream? Did it matter?

She swam toward the crater, the heart looking fierce and raw, and hungry as it drew her in. It would devour her, she knew. The closer the heart, the louder the booming of its beat, the more her memories detached themselves from her mind, flakes of hopes unshared, the kisses of the lizard-skinned boy, their wet tongues sizzling like burning coals... all of that rose to her conscience like disturbed ashes in a fireplace. The gothic spires of the ancient’s cathedrals she had seen in textbooks and recovered postcards, and the vermillion brushstroke of her sheet-painting, too. The words of unwritten poems in her head; the half-hummed singsongs of children playing
in a park, children so young their hearts still ticked undisturbed inside their chest cavities... the memories, the dreams, bubbled on her skin and detached, and swarmed into a spire, moving fast toward the beating heart. As each memory struck its skin, the heart responded with a sound, and all the sounds of all her memories together formed a name, an offering for the girl.

The girl felt no fear as her hands reached the heart’s smooth, reflective skin. It gave with a pop under the pressure of her hands, and her fingers slipped into the viscous, pulsing muscle, then her wrists, then her elbows, then the crown of her head. *It smells like strawberry in here*, the girl thought, as the skin closed around her toes, and she became one with the heart.

The police searched the apartment and found no trace of her. They woke and rudely unthawed her lizard skinned boyfriend in the tub, soaking him in warm water, his skin shining bright mint, but even under the interrogation lamps, he could not remember her, nor could he explain how he found himself in her apartment. And so it was with the girl’s former teacher and her employer at the mall.

Once the heart was buried deep, the authorities explained its tumorous growth and disruptive frequencies as the effects of a solar flare. As for the girl, she never existed. She was a consensual hallucination induced by radiation, they said, and buried her file deep into the vaults of missing persons and unresolved cases. In no time, the world settled again into mechanical order. Yet there remained a few believers, who claimed to hear the girl whirring in their heads, who swore they glimpsed her smiling teeth reflecting light from a passing car, who saw her twirling and skipping as she sang a name they could never later remember. And if perchance they dreamed of her, splashing with vibrant paint the blank canvas of their minds, they woke up humming in harmonics.
I. Backed Up In (The Bowels Of) A Cold-Water Walk-Up

*Babele* is what my *Bubbe* from the Old Country called me as I romped (she sat) on the throw rug of her *heymish* living room where Mom, Dad plus I existed.

From the floor she shoveled in all kinds of *geshmak* goodies (*maches* herring, *gefilte* fish or chopped liver) both gloomy New Country parents, away at work, would’ve been upset about.

When they returned at the end of each day, Mom *kvetch*ed Grandma the gamut of questions about whether his stools were balanced, (too loose, too hard)?

When I graduated to babble then toddle, the *nachas* term of endearment for this grandchild became *boychick* (and it stuck the rest of Bubbe’s life).

Before the *mensch* passed (coronaries coated with *schmaltz*, *kreplach*, *kugel*), Dad who was an MD like me and thusly a *mamish* catch for her *davka* only child, asked that same GI litany about her.

Now having already survived ten years more than *Bubbe*, stricken bodily functions (which seemed to take care of themselves like *bubkes* when I was younger) *bashtimt* no longer do.

* In Yiddish, thick spread like cream cheese
II. 3X3
1. ARCHAIC TO NEW TESTAMENTS [3]

i. Churchagogue Doodling During Skyler’s Bar Mitzvah

Ehad eloheynu -- Deuteronomy watchman blessing plus curse, wondrous One whose celestial womb covers meteoric Earth, fashioner of moonlit gateways to heaven's steepled dome, kadosh kadosh through homeless brains and genitals; on occasion of forty eclectic desert years' tears, our broken barn's on a smoggy chartreuse hill above this burning world's dumpster-diving dessert trash below a figure 8 overpass's crucifix rivulet of electric cars baruch she'ma urban sparrow-chirping among rooster birds of dawn or Big Ben's mother hens.
Noah’s Ark, Noah’s Bagels
Houston Astros play baseball
at sweltering Minute Maid Park
where after an unprecedented start
with juiced pitchers throwing
lots of shutouts they sit atop
the whole American League
except when slipsliding into
fifty inches of liquid the size
of Lake Michigan courtesy
of Noah’s youngest brother
Harvey whom their gods above
sent to liquidate Texas humanity
which did not heed warnings
to reduce gas guzzling/ smog
or maybe to get the attention
of our globe’s most powerful
nation and its new President
or perhaps just a peak at coming
attractions to reduce Bangladesh
over-population or simply climate
change caprice -- bottomline almost
everybody eventually will resides in
the same overheated homeless boat.
iii. Trevor Noah’s Ark

Aardvark or snakeskin stilettos are inappropriate for the First Lady to wear visiting Hurricane Harvey, but given that she lives within a permanent disaster zone, let us perhaps just try to cut her some slacks. I’ve always wanted to get inside Melania’s silence to find out what maybe really goes on.
2. ISLE OF MAN [3]

i. Cognitively Reframing Our Homecoming

"The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next."
_The Left Hand of Darkness._
Ursula K. Le Guin

Three-month silent retreat, spaceship alone no map, I spend two-thirds of my time with eyes closed on purpose.

Zazendo primal scream, closet Vipassana let’s the love in non-self -- other eight hours we pretend sleep.
ii. Defecation Meditation

Robotic mantra each day of week
since hip replacement surgery --
on constipating narcotics for pain:
May I be happy. May I be healthy.
May I be safe. May I have a BM.

iii. Cerebral Cotton Ball Brothers

I belong to Stanford groups:
the first almost 22 years,
the second now nearly 10.

One I’m among the oldest men,
the other I am the youngest.
Each enlightens me a lot.

Nobody’s druthers -- the way
-- a few having reached it --
to dementia -- teaches tons.

Those of us who forget easily
tend to arrive at once-a-month
lunch during awfully odd times.
by Natalie Safir

Sleeping with Knives

Sleeping with knives is not the best idea. Especially when you dream your ex-husband stabs you with an injection needle slightly above the rib cage while your children stand by just happy to see their father and ignore your plight. I cried out in my sleep the pain was so sharp and I can't get a handle on it. All I wanted was to find the location of the History class I was assigned to and the hour of its meeting. Awful secrets were locked in that room. Facts about my past I should have known.
The Drill Point

When the drill point pushed up through the floor near the table where we were lunching leaving a small yellow pile of sawdust around it, we were talking about death, how close by it seemed. I wondered who was trying to escape from hell and how amazing they had such a useful tool, just at the right moment. The sound scraped at our ears reminding me what hard work it is to die and you have to pick the right place. A live ghost might emerge from below and confront us; we'd have the chance to ask all the questions that are so disturbing: what's it like, do you feel anything? can the soul really burn in hell? perhaps we'd shrink away from the tough answers, yet my best friend just went forward into the great unknown without telling anyone and I cringe thinking how loathe I am to make such a journey, the dish ran away without the spoon -- unless I believe what my friend seemed to know before she left -- there will be silence and the perfect stillness of the moon over a winter pond the last clear night of the year.
At the Ocean Shore

Living is that line at the ocean shore continuing into a distant blur farther than it’s possible to see
Memories, our persistent sisters fill in spaces at the hem of the tide line jeweled in the curling foam running in as our childhood days return sweet with sensation, fragrance, striving -- we are kids at the beach again stretching before limitless vistas
I am on my bike heading for Coney Island to gobble a hotdog, feel ocean air on my face head for home, leg-weary but happy or with street friends on our way to a teenage day in Brighton Beach The gritty sand will not wash away easily nor the sting of our skin from too much sun years that collapsed into nothing, untreasured for their abundance a rushing spill of salty water that had neither beginning nor end comes back to me as I face up into it, cheeks beginning to smart despite the sunblock I have lathered over my mature skin dappled with damage from reckless burns that blistered and oozed, the care free summers of mindless exposure.
Heart Beats

Aging heart drums,
a tired fire of muscle
requiring a backup system;
battery operated wafer
buried at the chestbone
still strives in all its thickening

Heart, a florid horse jumps
the railing toward quickenings of joy
a beast fleeing the bow of an executioner
It quakes held hostage in the hotel of the mind
walls covered with an eclectic array
of expressionist paintings

How is it to escape what it knows?

Cells of the mind’s paraphernalia
strain in their electric bindings,
shock proof heart desperate

for an undiscovered melody
never before performed in love’s cathedral
bangs at the bars of the body’s cage
Defeated by Invisibility

We are defeated by invisibility, what lies around the next curve, emptiness at the end of the road;

confounded by a thicket of symbols – what the imagination of others has invented.

The specter of death cloaked in black is an invisibility we recognize, advancing

with the tide or creeping under the door to our bedsides; but it is we who move closer

to the formless, know nothing of its nothingness yet fear to meet it.

But there has always been me, we blather, what can I put in its stead?
Colors Are
from a poem by Wallace Stevens

The colors are so much as they are:
crisp orange, daylight green
the blue of deep thinking

Too actual to be anything else,
a collaboration of eye and brain
explained by the physics of light

Colors are undeniable truths
without the theoretician’s scheme
the physicists hypothesis
or the rhetorician’s tongue

Yet their effect issues from
what my fleeting senses transpose --
As I change, vibrations of my retina
produce varying shades for my self

Is what I consider the actual only temporary?
Can we say that sense exceeds all meaning?

These colors, as much as they must be
define my world, locate me

What I rely upon, as the sun
in its immense power, offers them to me.
by Elijah Armstrong

A Language

I said to myself: *In all hours I am made insensate to the world by the words of my silent voice. For what a panoply of sense those words summon! this one is poison-green and salt, that one rasping and cold-round as a coin; or it burns the fingertips, or smells of honey and sweat, or wrings the guts. What thing outside of me could compete? —Yet still, I said to myself, there are gray letters, silent sentences. The sight-sounds of words are not what they might be.* Therefore I began to devise a new language, where the sight-sound of each word was wrought so as to contain that word’s *self.* What pains I suffered in those years! My throat bled to test each closure, each rasp, each many-modulated vowel; my eyes bled to examine the bent characters I had devised. —But presently the work was done. Now come, learn my language: learn the violet songs, the shuddering lamentations; learn the sour three-pressure execrations, the sciences in many-refracted colors; learn war cries, whispers of terror, ecstatic shrieks, rendered in a thousand noises and a million tottering antic characters, rendered as they always really were; learn the words that my wrecked throat cannot any more speak, that my wrecked eyes cannot any more see, but that echo, echo behind my face.
That Nobody Gets the Joke

Sometimes I imagine, when you have made me impatient
(which is often),

that you have an orchestra playing in your head.
Well, of course you do; doesn’t everyone,

throughout the day’s sights,
have their own symphony

of interwoven projects and loves and griefs,
set into counterpoint as rich and profound as a fugue?

But the orchestra I carry
has the same instruments as every other, and plays the same music:
music I know (everyone knows) by heart,
music you could hear in the supermarket or the elevator.

The music I play is unobtrusively quiet,
and I don’t have to listen to it when I don’t want to,

when I want to just go about my business;
and I can talk about my music with other people,

and sometimes they know the piece so well
they can hum along, and smile with me. Your orchestra

is a shifting assembly of jagged pipes, patches,
flickering electricity, gut-strings stretched over metal frames,
crowds of sooty musicians sweating to work the instruments —
a seething, deafening, endless polyphony
breaking or bursting, folding in on itself,
or sustaining a single shrieking interval

that doesn’t resolve for days.
It drowns out the world.

When you approach another — wanting more than anything
that they listen to your music, that they join your orchestra —

they can hear only the bitter dissonance
and cannot imagine…
A Yeats Infection

Certain forms will descend to the firmament
And ride to the edge of the star-riven sky:
And, having half-known their sublimity,
I will hide my face, for my heart is rent
Whenever I feel their succession and flux.
What words of regret or of love can I say?
I feel them yet in the blood of my face;
You, being one yourself, have no peace;
And I, although they may wane or wax,
Being severed, I must be carried away.

Exegesis

starts larks and you and i
being who has mouse fall den
until the breakèd down-
beak-claw and till away
out calendar a sigh-
-ing pyx discretiôn
cladistic i’th’ undone
he, heathwork in a bee
he he he he he he
paul sparkling stars i won-
der if you like happy
mouse pisces eighty or
fool sanguinary clout!
gloom pussurating rot
an happy birthday near
an happy, all, i swear
out with! an! out, o out
a down yes chariot
lung taoiseach matador
exhorted with a weir
invisible grateful trout
fourteen dogs given there
by Kim Cope Tait

Dear Jim Carrey

I don’t believe you, but if I did
I would be knocking at your door
to find out how. How you escaped
the fear that wellness might actually be
a creative vacuum into which
you could be sucked at the height
of your stability.

Can it be?

Oh, the mania of
maintaining the artist self. How,
eyelids razed, mouths agape, we
stagger between the darkness of what
we know we must be--way inside: the
speck of dust, the irritant--and the light of
approbation. Recognition after all: the pearl
glistening inside the small muscle
of self. What we say we don’t need but
what breathes and breathes us in the end.

Don’t disappear.

I see that lifetimes have stuffed themselves
into a single figure: you. How did they
all make it through in one magnificent
birth? You must feel like there are
fire ants parading in your veins.
Electricity rippling beneath your skin.
And then-- quiet. The quiet space in the
universe that we claim while we occupy it--
quickly because it’s gone in an instant and
for long intervals we can’t remember if we
believe in it or not. In its wake: mostly shame.
Don’t tire. Don’t go for so long that you can’t any more.

And there’s understanding, too, that it’s all maya, all illusion, the “bubble,” as you say. Knowing that we are everything and nothing. “Me and the tea cup.” But then there’s the daughter of Andy Kaufman and Andy Kaufman’s ghost camped inside you for a time, because why not? And there are the words you sprinkle in her hair. The tears that collect in her eyes while you hold her like a father. How everything is changed--for the better--because you touched it. As him. As you. Even as Tony, who gets choked up as he draws the curtain.

Don’t long for your absence.

It’s not true what you said. We don’t only long for that. For quiet, yes. How tired we feel sometimes, and how easy at certain turns to think Yes, this is it. Enough. All is well. When lying down for the long sleep calls to us like a siren and we go on only grudgingly as if it’s a promise we made to someone, and though we can’t remember who, there’s no breaking it. And how fierce the love that drives us, how misdirected, how alive, how--complete. Yes, it’s a spiritual journey, and you. You’ve gone a great distance.

Oh. Don’t succumb. Don’t climb into that pocket.
I want to put my hand on your heart and slow your frequency with my love. Not with my body. God is my body tired. It's not the thing. The thing is to touch, with the hands, and heal. Lately I have begun to talk to ghosts. Not alone, but for other people. Ones who long to know. Long to touch. Light with light. Jim Carrey, there is an ocean in your eyes and a moon traveling the white perimeter of your skull. Tidal draw that speaks the profound sadness of your kind.

*I am here I am here. I will see you in the Great Beyond. It is you it is me it is Andy it is now.*

Good bye and good bye is not a forever thing, and yet I must urge you. The sense that you have of holding a planet in your hand. It is real it is this. Don’t drop it. I will see you there, Jim Carrey. I will see you there.
Undeniable

In the moment I think our connection is made, I become aware of how it will disappear, leave
in its v-shaped wake a pinpoint of remembrance and an entire triangle of nothing, fretted with tiny
waves, insignificant disturbances. The vanished thing I knew for two seconds…or two years…
as real. Even ‘love’ is a pallid, anemic little word in the face of such a vast sensation. Perhaps when every
belief I have has been blasted by experience, when they all lie around me like so much litter,
so much debris, the one that will remain is this: what matters is the few moments we finally connect
with another. The moments we become them for an instant, and they us, swim in the waters of the other
as self—these. These are the undeniable evidence of the divine, because how, except by transcending
the body, all limitation, on a parallel plane, could I ever feel this—this most profound of sensations—this, which
we might call love but is more aptly described as living.
Promise

If I say the words,  
do you promise to understand?

Are we writing the same poem  
in two different languages?

Why do I sometimes feel like  
we are swimming in the ether together?

Your mouth on my ear as you  
make the shapes of words I already know--

I feel them there, but there is no  
sound. Does there need to be?

That’s your question, not mine, and yet  
I feel it pass from between my lips.

Time collapses here. Here. A handful  
of months is a moment,

is lifetimes turned inside out and blooming  
like the perfect wound of time interrupted.
Dis-embodied

Guilt is born
in the gentleness
of my resistance.
Maybe you don’t
believe in it at all.

You are as free
as you want to be,
you say, and I know
it has not occurred to you,
in your greenness,
that this is a truth
I have already embraced.

You have cast your net here,
thinking no more
about the organisms
in my sea
than about your own breath,
your handful of flesh, my
salty citrus scent.

Hauling it in expectantly,
you begin to
feel my words
as they fall softly
onto your shoulders,
words you
didn’t let land
until now.

My intentions are pure,
I said, and now you match
their syllables
with the emptiness of your net
folding upon itself loosely
as you drag it
from the water.
Oh, you seem to say. And Oh.

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Perhaps there is no way
to escape the body.
No way to let the molecules
slide away,
let only the tide exist.
All the nets,
forlorn and empty,
chide me as I collect myself
again, oceanic wave burgeoning,
glistening unpromise
crashing over itself.
Foam lifts, scatters
like flocks of birds
from its lip.
In the silver silence
between the breaking
I too
am gone.
Every Broken Thing

It’s because of the edges,
how they feel under my touch--
mélée of shapes on fingertips,
how we can sometimes see a way
to seal the spaces between broken things.
And sometimes not. Sometimes
multiplicity of form is the only solution
to the hurting. I want things whole--
know that this is healthy and right.
Like a head on shoulders or an
upright spine or life. But there is
something beautiful in brokenness,
something that sends words
leaping into air. All I have to do
is step beneath them and
be very still as they
flutter down on my lifted face, my
open hands. Like seeds like ash like
all the ways I wish I could be
different, though I cannot speak it.
Don’t know how. But perfection lives inside
every broken thing and it blooms outward
like a bloodstain on a mattress--
fresh rose of the breaking. No need
to collect it, contain it, insist on it.
It’s there it’s there I can
see it.
Lifetimes

...how for one person what unfurls beneath the feet is decades and for another only minutes.
“But is it just common experience that bonds minds?” he asks, and the earnestness in the question, in the glossy orbs of his irises, reduces my heart to ash.
You mean in these bodies? I want to ask, because if that is all there is, I will miss you forever. But there is the photon. There is vibration. Essence. The Divine. Oh-and love. Of course. Of course. Mine threatens to shatter me in its magnitude, its unbearable frequency. But the centre holds, and I meet your gaze at last, hold it there, though it aches.
Tree Moving

I have always imagined Mr. Jensen out there, parked in his pickup, waiting for something. Cars on Highway One buzz past, but he is on the uneven soil at the edge of someone’s farm.

I see him take a peach from a tin lunchbox and eat it slowly, surveying the giant oak, the only thing punctuating that open field. No other tree for miles it seems.

Though I know the tree that can destroy a car and take two lives one morning before dawn must be enormous, I imagine him moving it alone, not with a tree spade or an HT truck, but with a shovel, a pair of gloves, a ball cap to shield him from the sun directly overhead. He wipes sweat from his brow with the back of his wrist, digs delicately around roots and roots, and he dusts the soil from each of them like they are the tendrils of hair on a little girl’s head. So much love there is in the act of moving a tree.

I imagine it hanging out of the back of his pickup—again an image incongruous with the story of how he lost his son. This tree that I have imagined so many times could never fit in the bed of a truck, but that is no matter.

In this dream, Mr. Jensen transports it in the back of a white pickup, elbow out the window, a James Taylor song on his radio. I try to imagine where he takes it, but there is nothing. I have invented the tree again and again, but where it goes, where it was in Mr. Jensen’s heart to take it, changes every moment, slippery as a fish:

To a landscaping mound between two birches, where a little girl once played and dreamed herself a doctor and a musician and a caterpillar. Its branches scratched softly against her bedroom window and promised anything but death.
To a ridge overlooking the sea. It is part of a host of other trees that together form the figure of a woman reclining in relief against a Hawaiian sunrise sky. I built a monument to God here once, out of stones, after having peered at the divine from behind my hands for sixteen years.

To the top of a dusty chaparral mountain where a man has buried his heart once and for all, all the better to find it again when he dies. My grandfather built me a tree house here once, with a swing and a ladder.

To the backyard of a boy who wanted to marry me once because I was all the right things. That was before my path crossed Mr. Jensen’s and we two lost in the most significant way, became fixated on a tree and its habitat, kissed our boy goodbye, only really understanding the kiss part.

Mr. Jensen is out there still, in my mind, tenderly digging, dusting, rearranging. He refills the hole with raw earth overturned by his own spade. Takes the tree in his arms, whispers his love, his forgiveness, his belief that this kind of physical action can teach his heart to soften into its suffering, help him live again.
Free

Falling, crashing, mirrors of light cracking,
crumbling, shattering out into space, getting
picked up in the gravitational pull of some mass,
lumbering in its orbit around a foreign sun.

O, I fall into star-shaped pieces, irrecoverable,
angular, alien bodies of a fragmented me.

This is the moment I have anticipated since my birth,
staring into the black pools of my mother’s eyes,
wanting the breast, dreaming of mother’s milk
on my tongue, drowsy caress of nipple on infant lips—
asleep in almost memory as her milk disappears
from her body, medicating away a baby’s birthright.

Nebulous infant vision, aware somehow of loss,
of resistance of rejection of body—without cognition
to name it, even wordlessly. Why I hated my body
until I was 30. Why I pressed my sexuality between
the pages of a book, listless petunia between
parchment paper and my tenacious will to be good.

And walking along this precipice, I imagine tumbling
back toward my birth, anticipate slipping over the edge
of my want and just falling like that, skirts billowing,
blouse collecting the air like love, like kisses I forgot
to receive. Eyes on my bare body as I shed each layer.
The judge in my heart spiraling out and leaving me
naked and terrifyingly free. In the aftermath of explosion,
pieces shuffling off in the orbit of some hunk
of some maimed planet, everything goes quiet,
and it is as if the whole of my self never was.
by Allan Lake

Autobiographical

That wintry night i met the messiah
we'd all been taught to expect, snow-flakes were falling. Gravity to blame.
Within his mansion a warm fire
where naïve strays drifted voiceward,
sipped instant coffee, nibbled sugary
biscuits and ideas, sat cross-legged
on Persian carpets, mesmerised.
Without a crumb of scepticism, i fell
with little resistance
into a mazy fold.

found my way
back out
(so many winters later)
in spite of
gravity
Dance for a Cloudy Day

I dance
from kitchenette to lounge room,
espresso in hand.
Blue Note Plays Jobim
has Cassandra singing
Aquas De Marco.
I am home alone because
Rosita is earning bread
but I’d be dancing even if
she was here.
Perhaps she’d be unable to resist
and start swinging those hips,
pouting her lips.
Why would she bother resisting?
Why the fuck would anyone?
Glove

In the world of imperfection,
the fit is perfect now
but not at first.
So tight I thought
there might be miscalculation. But
an unexpected gift,
leather so fine,
a pleasure to touch,
beyond anything
hoped for, sought.
A gift, tight but then
over time ... and in time
for winter night wanders
along the Elster Creek.
It's a cold world.
You need something
and there it is, deep
in that pocket.
by Brandi McKenzie

*The poet as a reliquary of Saint Stephen*

Each time I think I have pulled me together,
I break. Each time a chip
or a cascade. Each time I remember
words someone or another has said,
has chewed and spat and pasted
upon me, picking up the shards
they saw and doing what they could.
Each time they swept away the dust.
A thousand tiny piles of me asleep
beneath the rug. No wonder there are holes.
No wonder I bear the weight of light
like flaming arrows screaming through the flesh of me.
The pasters glue me beautiful.
Or irretrievable. Somewhere on the floor
the particles of a speech I've practiced
for years. My tongue like holy cheese.
I can hold only emptiness. I’m in ecstasy.
Crude clay or porcelain. Neither. Something.
I fall away in prayer. The wind bears me.
I will abandon the orphan in me

This is the end; I’m closing the door
and wrapping my limbs in swaddling clothes
to be delivered at another stoop. The knocker
will be rapped against red lacquer, and someone lovely
will open themselves once they see me, tucked,
peering up from the basket. This itself
will be the note she reads.

When she lifts me she will see the resemblance
in our limbs, the freckled undersides
of our forearms, the strange inward twists
of each pinkie toe curled like beans against their sisters.
The dimples in hard to describe places.
And I will surprise her most when I coo

in her voice, high to deep, accents hidden:
we could be from anywhere. We could be
anyone, skin chilling as the snow begins
to fall, our grey eyes flitting between the sky
and each other, neither of us certain which is which.
Try to inhale the in between

With every breath it seems the world slips
another seam & each space between
blinks is another potential that old
car crash & these rubber spines like stacked rings,
each piece more ornate than the last gray filigree
of dreams and strains pressures unseen
swelling amongst the things tasked to hold us
together see the rhythms of the dotted
yellow line slip by under a sheen of tires
dashes like unidentified thoughts tying this
and that together all those times lost
past the mirror where things seem closer
sun blind headed west do you prefer to set
or rise all in cycles, the green orbit
of growth like a collapse here's the
revelation, here's the moment can't we
please hit pause please tap the brakes
and lie in the lie in the lie in the scene
Invocation to my wandering child

Your mother is a shell of clay, a golem without word or inscription. Or: your mother is awaiting her clay, a golem all words and inscription. There is magic somewhere, yes. There is a spark in something. But paper or earth, air or breath? Your mother awaits instruction. Your mother awaits your birth. You, full grown, no Hera; you, full grown, no Zeus. These gods are old and their stories tired. These gods are tired and their stories grow musty and old. Beware the swans, child, the winter fields of flowers, beware the boys who spend too long staring into the pond. Beware the mothers, we women who rage and bite blinding glyphs into tattoos on our tongues. All stories spark. All daughters are lost. All creatures we bear bear us too. All monsters we shape are hollow and terrifying. All mothers are shells, waiting.
They brought with them few things. There was no room for more. Families did not hold their old stuff either. None really had storage units. Within each room was one signature piece. Something that really defined them and was most dear. This was not always obvious to the counselor that visited them, but with time he learned to spy what was important.

Getting old is not funny. The nursing home could not erase awful smells that continuously occurred. Residents, from shame or disregard, did not inform quickly when the need to change their adult diaper had been activated. Rooms were cramped. Perhaps Ed Shears was the smartest. He kept his treasure in his head. It would only last for two years because doctors predicted his cancer would end him. His was George Koltanowski. A chess grand master. Ed wanted never to forget George who rose at one point to 8th greatest in the world, but whose real claim to fame was his ability to play multiple chess games blindfolded. Ed took endless glee relating these tales to the counselor. He described the types of blindfolds, the seating, how many opponents and their levels. Ed might get his wish too. Being only in his 60’s and no signs of Alzheimer’s, he likely would die of the cancer with the full memory of George Koltanowski intact.

Spending time with Marisol K. challenged the counselor who was new to geriatrics. She was ancient, and her body wrinkled and severely bent. Arthritis was a problem, but it was the Fibromyalgia that she felt was damning her. She spoke of the trees outside her room occasionally and her son who cut hair and visited daily. She never left her room. It wasn’t worth it to her, though she leaned forward when really engaged in some aspects of the past and its retelling. She said she did not though think of her parents or God these days at all and had not for some time, many years in fact.

Looking at the things in her room there could be red herrings as to what her heart most prized. Of course, family photos, but no. Then there was the tender, multi-colored picture of a flower drawn by a child. It was not that. A sign from her daughter stating she would come every week to gather the laundry, this so staff would not make the attempt and lose things. No. Then they appeared, when the eye grew accustomed to looking beyond Marisol’s shrunken and deeply lined physique. Owls. Tiny owl in each strategic corner of her portion of the room. Metal owls that at first did not seem like owls, and a paper one, and a drawing, as if at the four corners of a compass. True, they were blended in well with other knick-knacks, but so would real owls perhaps. The counselor had something then.

“Marisol, you love owls!”
“Yess!!”
Penny Q’s room was clean. Walking inside one got a sense of order, depending on the day. Some days, more often now, Penny let herself go. She refused to be washed. The counselor knew there had been a change when her neatly stacked cookies, usually eaten gracefully one at a time, where a crumbled, thrashed mess of dozens of broken bits, the corpses of ten formerly whole cookies.

“I’m losing my mind,” she said, “the nurse just showed me when I asked to eat, that I had just eaten, she showed me my empty plate. I must be forgetting everything. It doesn’t look like I am going to Goliad now.”

Goliad was Penny’s rallying cry each time the counselor came to visit her twice a week. It has been like talking with Lyndon Baines Johnson and getting the treatment from him as Penny spoke in hushed tones, only occasionally glancing at the counselor with her hand resting on her cheek. There was no counseling to be done. He felt like a lowly staff captain taking dictation. Her aunt had a home in Goliad willed to her she said. There was an oil field on the property and this was the branch of the family that had married into a famous Texas clothing line lineage. It would all be good. No one would boss Penny around, she who had a master’s degree in teaching. They were just waiting to safety check the electrical features, to old-person proof them, though she worried this was a rip off. The story, in duplicated detail, went on for weeks before the counselor realized Penny was never going to Goliad. There was likely an aunt who died, but the rest was hopeful fiction.

Penny liked the counselor to sit at a 45-degree angle to her wheelchair. From this vantage one could see the glory of her second marriage. Penny could not birth children, but Mr. Q did well for himself and had two children, half-Mexican and very smart as Penny would say, from his previous marriage. There was a colored birdhouse from one of the grandchildren made just for Penny. The girls had graduated from nursing school. Those pictures were on the wall there as well. Still, none of these were her prize. The thing she carried with her that meant the most was somewhat hidden in plain sight as one walked in the room. His name came up more now that the denial of her Alzheimer’s had split apart. He was always previously mentioned, perhaps more, than Mr. Q, but now the tones became more intimate and longing. Penny had had a husband previously herself. This man was frequently on her mind.

The photo was of a beaming, blond, curly hair and a smile and bright eyes that lit up the black and white, 12” by 16”, photo as if it were 3-D technicolor and perhaps holographic as well. It sat in an alcove of her vanity perched, and at an angle, facing the door as one walked inside.

“Mr. A had fought in World War Two, he and his friends were going to save the world, he was in the Pacific Theater and a Japanese bullet got him in the chest on some island out there. He was never the same. He spent a whole year in the hospital and was judged unfit to work after recovery, so he became a teacher. They sent him to college even though he was not good at study and that is where I met him. He was a
lovely and strong man. Very strong… but you could see where the bullet went in his chest, right here, and it broke off a piece of his dog tag. We had ten happy years together, very happy.”

“He looked like he had charisma.”

“Oh yes he did. We adopted two daughters. They died. Everyone has died except for a few. Except for me. I’m 94, but that is when my mother lost her mind and after that it was not long before she died. I guess it’s only God and me now. Mr. A died of cancer at age 35. Right where the bullet went in. The bullet caused it.”

Some were obvious like Edward G. His side of the room, which he shared with Eduardo M., was about seven feet by ten feet. In life, before Medicaid took or made him give away all his assets, he had many things. He had been righteously middle class. It was the savings part that did him in. He never could afford extra home health care insurance either. Just ten years ago he had a car that was only three years old, a 3 bedroom/2 bath house, season tickets, a lawn service, a 60-inch smart TV, HBO, overnight fishing trips, $50-dollar bottles of whisky, a wife, a toolshed, space in his garage for woodworking and six rifles. Now, in a room that often smelled of shit he had a breathing device, a mechanical bed that could lift his torso 45 degrees, a small TV perched ten feet up to where he had to severely tilt his head to watch, six clothing outfits, two pairs of shoes, three magazines and some body wash he won at bingo. He was a big man. Near three hundred pounds. There was an absence of overweight people in nursing homes. For Edward G., the one good thing he still owned was his set of four Pittsburg Steelers, glass framed color photographs with metal plaques discerning various Championships and Super Bowl victories. Terry Bradshaw hung above his head like Jesus Christ on the cross. As the counselor entered the room to visit Eduardo M., Edward G. would stare, eyes squinted, and body without strength. The counselor felt the inevitable motion of life from strength to weakness, and the ironic contrast, as he looked up to Bradshaw poised to deliver a cannonball pass from his atomic arm. Bradshaw himself was probably 70 now.

The counselor guessed Eduardo M.’s prize early in his visits. PEOPLE magazines. They were the sexiest thing available. Sexual expression, in most forms, was generally prohibited in this sort of hotel. People could visit each other’s room and even lay on the bed near each other with the door open, but anything further required a request to live together as a couple. An ex-preacher stored some sex toys in his room. The ridicule from the staff never left him. One man showed a nurse his Playboy magazine and was shipped to another home for sexual offenders. The rumor was he was fresh meat there.

The Keely’s lived together. They had been married 53 years. Each joking often with the other. The counselor was only supposed to visit Mr. Keely, but Mrs. Keely had come to rely on the visits herself. It became apparent that the jokes were how they dealt with life, resentments and all. Mr. Keely’s cancer had made them lose the 2 million dollars they sold their garden supply company for to some major, national firm.
They were stuck at the death hotel, and down to their last five pairs of clothes.

“I’m so damn mad! They lost our socks again! I’m gonna have it out with Grace on this today,” said Mrs. Keely.

“I understand it’s frustrating,” acknowledged the counselor.

“Damn straight. It’s worse than that. I need my whisky!” chimed in Mr. Keely.

“What?”

“Just joking. I only do Strawberry soda. Did I ever tell you we flew the Concorde?” said Mr. Keely.

*Only twenty times already*…

“He doesn’t want to hear about the Concorde today. We have problems to solve,” said Mrs. Keely.

But the counselor could not solve the laundry. It was a mystery of such a hotel. Even nice garments, with the names of the owners labelled on them disappeared suddenly and often at such a place. He knew the Keely’s secret though. What they held onto. The thing most cherished in the room that tied them to a memory of better days. It was not the gourmet menus from the Concorde or the folder with the images of foods their business once provided. It was hidden in the slew of photos of family, history and business success upon the walls. A nicely done colored photograph of the Keely couple standing in front of a seaplane in the wilds of Alaska. They weren’t young in the picture, but still firm and tall in health. They were at the peak of their earnings and memories. It was a wild place and wild time to be free. It was the payoff of all their financial and emotional risks in life. A moment when they were shuttled out to the wilderness, sporting fancy gear and breathing in the truest of fresh air near wildlife and open waters. It was what they earned, who they were and what they deserved. Not this hotel, but the hotel was where they ended up anyway.

There were other jokesters at the nursing home. One man would wheel himself out to the lobby waiting area where there were some couches, books and a television. He always chooses a central spot then reclines his movable wheelchair, so he was resting supine before pulling his blanket completely over his head and letting his arm dangle toward the ground from one side.

Pam F. was simple. She had a nice, red box to hold her things. The box itself is what meant something to her. It held a place in the barren room and centered with its color, functionality and shape. It was the only splash of color in the entire room, save for the weekly event calendar, with its hint of faded yellow. Bingo was the only event Pam cared about. And the day she would leave the hotel by foot or wheelchair.

“Pssst,” said Pam when she first met the counselor, “sit down.”

“Okay, hi, how are you?” said the counselor as he complied.

“Not good. Listen I need you to get me out of here. Where’s your car?”

Letty D. liked plants. At first, she hid the truth that her legs were gone. Diabetes. When she warmed up to the counselor they watched television novellas together and she did not always feel the need to cover her stubs with a blanket. Occasionally she
would smile as she reflected on the happy times of her old town Carrizo Springs. Ivy was her favorite plant, but it was an oddity in the room that became most cherished of her few items. She had not understood it when her son gave it to her. They were little stubs like her legs, but she did not make the connection consciously. Two bamboo roots protruding from a pre-fabricated ceramic pot with a panda bear crawling up its side. She grew the bamboo. Her nurturing allowed it to thrive in her semi-lighted room, up to shoots of nearly one foot. She marveled at the plant that she had never known. She felt like a goddess child for having the success with them.

He hated Jew, but was Jewish. The kids in his old neighborhood had beat him up too much to like his own. In prison he read the Koran five times and due to instruction from Mohammad he willed the last of his money to his sons, though he was fiercely angry at them. It the kind of anger only a schizophrenic could hardly conjure. Half real, half imagined slights cumulating into a potential lifetime grudge. He said his uncles worked with one of the most famous gangsters ever and the man came over to his house often. Wikipedia claimed the gangster was the richest in American history, but Ted K. told the counselor there was no way that was true. The counselor enjoyed these visits the most, though they were intimidating at times. Ted believed some combination of the mob and federal law enforcement had given him special powers to stalk people. Now, he said, the psychiatrist at the state hospital showed him these had all been delusions, but since he was transferred to this hotel, he began watching *Breaking Bad* and some of delusion crept again.

Ted’s friend at the state hospital had been Andrea Yates. He said she was a sweet lady without the pressures of parenthood. Some people just weren’t meant for marriage. His cousin had been gang raped by a legendary rock band and settled for millions. Lots about Ted was special. He read significant books, played champion level chess and liked art. The counselor joked to his colleague that Ted was his *Hannibal Lecter*. It wasn’t the cheesy, pinkish dreamcatcher that his cash donation from the state hospital got him from the Navahos, nor the beachfront poster, nor the Kinko’s printed scans of his children, nor the pacemaker regulator, nor the plastic, roll out chess board, nor the latest biography on Robert E. Lee or a great Hemingway novel that meant the most to Ted.

It was one of two Bruegel prints he had purchased with the last of his cash before signing over to Medicaid. Not the hunter’s returning home, toward the town with the great lake of ice skaters. That was the second one of Bruegel’s he had bought. It was Christ carrying the cross. It hung on the inside of the door entrance. It was perhaps 14 inches by 18 or so. Christ solemn and dutiful, the citizenry around him bestial, greedy and cruel, except, “that one lady in the corner looks like the Mona Lisa, though she is not smiling,” commented the counselor.

“You’re right. She does. And I think that’s the head of John the Baptist next to her.”
Though the piece might have been done by a follower of Hieronymus Bosch, one must be careful making such a correction for schizophrenics.
by Robert Hoffman

Gutter Black Jellyfish

black plastic lung bags filled within a gutter air handles reach out and draw in the crackle end over end a jellyfish crow crawling and racing eucalyptus gutter leaves soiled darkened by rain passing soaked nests shattered eggs and bloated pigeons

Sometimes I Wonder

living is hard without rest running stitching mending wringing riding shoeing planting slicing fingers cutting toes tending to others to lie your bones thinning on straw a mattress and startled awake when the little one rolls you off for comfort and you can’t say no

life expectancy is low at the turn of some other century machines taking the place of slaves that sew and wring and wash while black boxes fill with ice to keep illness at bay for four generations smoking tobacco is the right take to take five the right time to suggest a meditative break three on a match adding space and a decade to life expectancy
Going Without

unrelentingly goaded by my new best friend
I plunged a hesitant right fist into the sludge
silt and mud banks of the American River
past the moss coated roots and twigs and leaves
of grass too decayed to tell between a home
and a frog hole to dig them out and eat them
they looked like the legs of girls and I wanted
to leave them alone not to boast I couldn’t bring
myself to stretch any further and pulled out
empty handed to open a fistful of mud
A Guilty Plea
(for Brenda)

she was the elder black beauty
we talked turnip and dreams
life too short to take seriously

I nodded at the left cheek bruise
and she blushed it was nothing
an inherited family condition

trait and tradition she was shot
murdered by the jealous hand
I said nothing at the wake
For Your Sake

I regret
not being
more animal
than
spiritual
less thinking
than
biological
Whidbey Haiku

Even on Whidbey,
the pines bend at eighty-feet.
I miss Whidbey.
At Binghamton

Not really a re-union; we'd not met these cousins before. But through diligent research, a little luck, the Internet, and planning, we went to Binghamton and met. Their mom and my aunt, 82, first cousins, sat and yacked, making up for lost lives. We could not pry them apart, in fact.

Three third cousins, of 16, 6 and 4, showed no physical resemblance at all but climbing on each other on the floor became one animal.

Now I’ve got New York cousins by the score for birthdays, margaritas, and to meet whenever, who’d have passed the day before, strangers in the street.
Father and Son

A baby makes a woman of a girl.
The man’s more slowly gotten from the birth
of a boy, watching, paying. What’s to do
but spank rambunctious feet off tables you
once footed, that, around a grain of earth
uncultured, there might coalesce a pearl?

A stranger suddenly, say six feet tall,
sweeps in your home, and when your cheek gets kissed
for years of scolding and not scolding, all
those bouts and concerts other fathers missed,
you feel full as a womb! This is your son
made man, a miracle, and what you were
to him, you realize, you ever are:
but silently the man is borne, within.
The Invention of Number

Before there was number
there was only one
number.

But was that number
one, two
or three

or was it zero
crying out from beyond
to be
birthed, nursed, bred,
as a crown prince?

Your answer betrays
your religion as
you speed with me
surely if slowly

beyond the integers of illusion
through the irrationals of conceit
winking at the imaginaries all around
in their complexities

to the other
the endless number

infinity

all:

*
whence in some strange time
before there was number at all
love sprouted the beginning of an else

and where I shall be meeting you again
when all that’s left is the spark and ash
of love and everything:
hope
after all

and we shall know one another
in that realm when only
love shall reign (as when
before there was number)
so bored
that we breathe

on the smoldering
embers
to spark
Islands

The passengers also try to be or to appear magnificent in others’ approach, and invariably fear disappointing on arrival, for they may in fact prove ramshackle.

Meanwhile they're pent in by artifices, moats like seas beneath a rising of their rocks which would be climbed, explored, and tamed; but summon their own winds to pelt like hurricanes that shake down and shake off the unsuspecting visitor. Then they too rebuild, restoring ravaged hills with terraces that look magnificent in the approach but on arrival prove again ramshackle.

Surrounding the larger and peopled isles in the Caribbean, the ones developed with haunts and tours and four-star hideaways for guests and stores of trinkets, souvenirs, and other forgettable memorabilia, lie sundry smaller and unsettled dots of land, insignificant as commas, still as periods, unnecessary as the dotting of a j, where, if you can hire a boat, you can visit and be at peace awhile, away from your hotel or tour or whatever hullaballoo.

Some have no buildings on them. Their rawness—teal from afar, but green on the approach—seems natural. . . . It is! Oh, I would stay if only there were tents, a way to live.
Leavings

We shiver as the leaves of a godtree,
awesome and awful as It rises from
the rot of What long gone boles and branches;
rooted fast yet mysteriously to a strange pulse—Love—
some organs or parts away at the end
of an ever-thinning outgrowth, xylem, phloem,
and rings of congealed bark, burst only for a season.
When we finally fall, we fall closer
to the Source whence we sprang until after
some seasons or cosmos-es we might join
It and help feed an unsprung seed
whence shall burst forth, if there is Mystery,
if there is Love, another organ concert:
root, bole, boughs, branches, twigs, ten trillion leaves.

And we grow as the trees of a godforest,
awesome and awful as It rises . . .

And the woods of an orb
globe of a galaxy
galaxy of a universe
universe of—

What

but
That fast mysterious pulse some organs away, inscrutable as Love,
Which we can only call, should occasion require It,
God.
The Moment in a Service

The moment
in a service
when,
lately,

the priest or minister
parson or preacher
asks you to turn to someone behind you
or reach for someone who's turned to you
and shake their hand and say something like
Peace be with you

makes me rethink the value of kid gloves
and of roped-off, rich-clan pews
and of other, less expensive, ways
of avoiding the triumph of germs

like making a fist and chucking you sidewise
on an unsuspecting elbow
or grabbing your neck
in a brotherly elbow lock.

Of course instead of Peace I might say
Hey buddy, or
Great to see you, or maybe even
How's it hanging?

and one day
I will dare to do
just that

and someone
will suspect me
at last
of being sincere
Reading #1: Passage of Wisdom

Reading is rubbing a magic lantern to release the genie that’s huge, kind, and powerful. You rub it not with your hands but with your mind.

Reading’s diving for buried treasure, collecting bright rocks and shells along the shore. You don’t mind bending again and again, made richer by each salt-washed trinket that you collect.

Reading’s divining for unseen springs in a wilderness of drought. You walk and walk and then the rod—jiggles.

Reading is scraping the tailings of a meteor shower which you know dazzled and made the world look up, and has left a sprinkling of wondrous runes where the glitter fell.

Reading is raking through embers which, with a little breath, ignite and consume with light and heat and life and a hankering if not a flaring desire that you could make a meteor shower, or make a treasure, or meet the genie who could, until you’ve read a lot for a long long time and realize in a flash that that’s precisely the person or thing that you’ve become.
Schism

I can't go yet, I haven't finished changing.
Leave me here if you like, or must. Go on.
Perhaps I'll join you later. Maybe not.
You'll have to trust it's for the best that I
don't go with you, but that I finish changing
which I may never finish. I don't mind.
What's there to miss? What is your great
Appointment with Destiny? I wouldn't dream
of stopping you. That uniform is not
for me, though. I prefer the other sort
of sensuousness, or brash virility,
if you will. Not clangs but this. A snap, a zipper.

A veil draped, dropped. A button. You've been good
with buttons. Now triggers beckon: If you'd rather
push and pull than unclasp, leave me now.
I'll languor only looking like a corpse,
not being, and only feel like one awhile,
but soon I shall be buttoned up and groomed
as you, and at attention for my service:
to stay, with arms agape, ready for change.
Adulthood

is when the child
turns to the parent
and says
“Need anything?”
and the parent sees
the second wing
has been grown, exercised and functioning
for a good while,
that the youth had been out of the nest
to all sorts of restricted zones,
and that flights
would now be experiments
in curves.
Prejudice

The hull is not enough. It needs a mast and wind, and rigging to hold full sails fast in sudden wind gusts, and an able crew. Likewise, a chassis’s nothing without tires, organization to the hose and wires, and fuel. And who is driving? Me and you, whom I have never met, and yet must trust blindly, and when you veer or gee, adjust.

Regardless of the differences in our color, style, or port of origin, your goal is mine, then: continuation. For we are in the boat together, on one highway, whether as friends or perforce, and we have been too far, too long, off course.
Chopin at the Edge of a Field

There he is again, Chopin at the edge of a field where the treeline begins. It can’t rain but does and alone and in that counter clockwise raining

is a storm of doves at thirty hertz, thunder eighty-eight keys wide, its radar a scar of deep reds, yellow then finally that treeline marking

the squall. His music bespeaks a night song, a wideness seriously away and away and twice-removed away.
A Thirties that Never Happened
(to Jack Teagarden)

Low the Texas sun the strings and stories
and long pauses, shaking of heads best left
unsaid in trances, the frontier and
quietness not even jets and the rest
of the world understands us,

how the rest of everyone comes through
these parts a few thousand feet up
over me and us and a lifetime of light
broken only by shadows, their arc too
simple to consider in waning until they
and we sleep.

You have to look hard for meaning, the script
doesn’t follow paths set out for critique;
it comes to rest without a message but the angle
of southwestern light imprints a master pressing
from a thirties that never happened
except as brass on wax.
Under an Otherwise Raining Sky

You couldn’t call it harmony,
the trilling field out across and
around like active points on a brain
lighting up where earworms begin.
In fact it should be a dissonance.
It’s not.

It’s more alongside than barking.
A rolling of hay into circles
under an otherwise raining sky.
A soft-focus garden-evening
when everywhere else
is either disused or ruined.

Thunder coats inoculate,
worn here where only
the edge of weather is.
Still, here in the eye
of commotion
is the song.
The First Morning Again

On the first morning, light is clear
and there’s a fullness gathering,
dispersing not quite a struggle
to live but a living.

A brightness that only earlier hours
bring seems slightly above ground
not ready to settle
just yet.

You can always hear your name
in times like these as everything
moves between over-
and undergrowth.

Like the Wye or the nine bean rows,
I want to stay but know I won’t.
Perfect moments,
a fleet of cloud.
A Turbid Season

The road from Thomaston to Woodland is empty but-for great pines that crowd Highway 36; quiet northeast to southwest, it cuts across a storming of trains, sharpened to a point on the compass.

Through Manchester straight south rolls a main line like river-water, both still and moving.

Down that steel the rumbling coal trains making way to Tampa accelerate just out of town.

Along there some dare cross in front of sempiternity mistaking their own indifference for a clear coast. Crazy how folks never learn but learn the harder way.

Those crossings have no curves; a decision to intersect the rails is all or none as pavement bisects mostly at right-angled narrow-misses. Serrated corners can't make an arc that would merge with the Buddha at his death. Birth.

O vanishing points won't ever meet again except in singularity, sagging under the weight of a turbid season.
Puddin
(a one act play)
by Neila Mezynski

2 women, one man - 4 scenes

(Two little girls alone in the woods one of them bad the other worse.)

Prologue

Dimly lit, two women walk towards each other dressed in housedresses from either side of the stage to stand side by side each with hands loosely clasped in front of selves, no facial expression:

Belle: Those sweet yellow curl toddlin down to the creek; didn’t we bother?
Nell: They didn’t help either.
Belle: Yellow halo..curls, sweet, shoulda taken care of...
Nell: Someone else coulda shoulda ...
Belle: Went out of sight, down to the creek, naturally assume someone...
Nell: Someone come along, pay attention before she ended up in there.
Belle: Sweet chubby legs, yellow curls, save her. No one
Nell: Not our fault.
Belle: Whose then?

(lights darken)
(Lights up: the two women are standing apart on the stage now; there is a table and chair. The two women take turns walking towards the table and chair, sitting on chair then standing, etc, in a revolving manner.

Belle: Any dings yet?


Belle: Waiting, waiting, phone to ring, door to knock, letter send.

Nell: One track pony.

Belle: ‘Trick’, trick pony; get to work on your book, stop talking!

Nell: Harder ‘n ever, used to be, get more decent ideas, free fallin stream of consciousness stuff; so damn hard now.

Belle: Yeah, right, whining crap. When do you think they’ll be back?

Nell: Don’t know, don’t care. We should think about moving again. Can’t sleep, jittery, look at myself in the mirror for some reason. Need new scenery; stop waiting for ideas, men; long as not an axe murderer, don’t really care.

Belle: Can’t leave. He might come back you know. Leavin like that in the middle of the night, why do you suppose? Me and him; had so much fun.

Nell: Their fault, not us, had nothing to do with him leaving. I’m warm and loveable; you coulda been more affectionate, done things with him, stop sayin no, almost always; scared of everything you are!

Belle: Implying it’s my fault, right? You had nothin to do with it ole warm and cuddly? We had dreams and hopes back then; you did things, risky stuff, nothin could stop you; can’t take the first step now, scared to death; just do it, write that book! Get some guts. Neither one of us has any anymore. (quietly) “Do you think it would make any difference to him if he did know bout me?”

Nell: You’re talkin to me about bein scared? You who has trouble takin the garbage out, might run into someone, have to talk to them. Don’t talk to me about bein scared.
You’re scared of living!

Belle: (quietly) I'm not scared, if he comes back ...

Nell: (still railing) I think you should wear a sign around your neck saying I did it, beat him senseless, I did, out in the open!

Belle: (quietly to herself): Looked the other way, they did, kept walkin by, they saw that baby... out walkin.

Nell: Had nothing to do with that.

Belle: No more drinkin, no more messes; when they come back, more hand holding, rose smelling, I love yous.

(lights down slowly)
Scene III - Denser

(one woman is seated the other stands away; the room is well lit.)

Belle: (standing, looking out window) don’t’cha love when the sun come out, covers your legs, stomach, face. (she lifts skirt, drops it abruptly, arms coming to side, head falls back in ecstasy)

Nell (seated): Like a man, right? shimmy shoulders slightly)

(Belle drops skirt and good mood)

Nell: (stands suddenly, starts walking around, clasped hands coming to her throat). You know, I been thinkin...

Belle: Careful now.

Nell: I think I’m ready. I think I could write a really good story now; you know the kind people sit up and take notice; I could tap into that part, my brain you know, big. Lift the lid. Onto the paper, shake things up, you know?

Belle: (far away) I like to dream. Dream about how things could be, ‘gently down the stream’; more fun than real. Real is painful. Bad things happen. Things get screwed up when you make ‘em real; people do things ordinarily don’t do, not proud of, keep ‘em in your head nice and safe, don’t go out, might see something upsetting.

Nell: Gotta take some risks sometime you know? Gettin all dusty up there in my head, my book. Gotta move forward, Let’s stop waitin, stop bein safe, do things again, rattle our cage, connect those little synapsis, forget! We won’t feel any better stayin home. Let’s go to that party. Get us some fresh meat!

Belle: (shocked) Party? Meat? What party? You said you wouldn’t bother me about those thing. Not gonna do it, you know that. Not gonna go, can’t make me.

(Nell walks cautiously over to Belle).

Nell: Here’s your chance to explore the yes word. It’ll be good for you, for us, nobody knows you’re here, never know you did it. I’ll make sure of that. Let’s do something
different, dress up. What you gonna wear?

Belle: Not gonna wear anything! Have to remind you, when I do get outside my natural habitat and meet up with those creatures in the wild, I say stupid things and embarrass myself. Disappointin. People don’t like me when I’m like that, tense, stupid; no Cinderella tonight.

Nell: You’ll be fine. I’ll be with you, don’t worry. Nothin bad will happen.

Belle: I’m afraid. Hadn’t better go.

Nell: You were trapped, before, didn’t mean to. Steer clear of utensils.

Belle: (shaking her head) Yeah, that’s why he left, built a good case of resentment, that’s it, me always sayin no, that’s why he left.

Nell: Let it go, c’mon, move on, you’ll never know why he left.

Belle: Can’t remember what it was like, can you? Sex, touch?

Nell: Anybody show you any tenderness you gotta beat ‘em to death.

(both women walk away from each other to opposite sides of the room).

Belle: Go yourself.
(head down talking to herself)

Nell: “Both go.”

Belle: Stop shoving.

(Belle quickly lifts shoulders up, then drops them with a thud)

(Nell wrapping skirt around self in mock fearful protective manner)

Belle: Gotta promise we’ll leave when I say so, promise. Hate these things. Just hate ‘em; me and Cinderella.

(lights down slowly)
Scene IV - Creamy

The room is dimly lit. Nell is standing talking flirtatiously to an imaginary person, smoking an imaginary cigarette. Belle is seated pretending to read a book, stiffly seated in a self-conscious manner; a man is standing watching Belle; he walks slowly over to her.

Man: Pretty engrossing book, looks like. My name is Bill. What’s yours? Want something to drink?

Belle: (nervously) No thanks. Name is Cinderella and I’m just fine; enjoying sitting here reading. Myself.

Man: You live round here, close by?

Belle: Yup.

Man: Oh, okay, haven’t seen you before but then I haven’t lived here too long myself; recently moved. Here.

(she resumes reading kicking leg)

Man: Not very friendly are you?

Belle: Nope.

Man: Don’t know many people here; just thought we could talk a little. (under his breath as he walks upstage). Bitch.

Belle jumps up runs after him, pressing him quickly from behind, quickly releases him, then runs back to her chair and sits rigidly hands at sides of chair, looking straight ahead, rigidly. He immediately follows her back to her chair putting his hands on her throat gathering her bending over her.

Nell, oblivious to Belle, has been talking to someone invisibly, flirtatiously twirling around, in an inviting playful manner, playing with skirt.

Lights out abruptly.
Scene V - Viscuous

Next day both women are tensely seated at table, backs arched in apprehension, their hands on table, fingers spread.

Nell: They're all talking, I know what happened. 
(Belle stands and walks urgently from one side of room to the other side, in zig-zag lines, looking at Nell)

Belle: You don’t know anything...

(Belle walks to back of room)

(Nell comes up behind Belle)

Nell: Saw him talking to you, did you go into the back room, did you hurt him, make him pay?

Belle: (rolling her forehead side to side on wall) They ruined me, you know.

Nell: They who, who they?

Belle: Them, back then, have to pay.

Nell: Oh, them. Ruined. Right. Out to get even, right? Get your pure back, right?

(Belle turns slowly around facing front, back pressed into wall facing Nell)

Belle: Want to control me, they do.

Nell: Where did you go? I looked for you. Shouldn’t have gone, I guess.

Belle: Had to set him straight, not get away with it, touching me.

Nell: (walking towards her then standing face to face) Did you do something bad to that man like before? Hurt him bad? Always blaming you are; mixed messages. That man didn’t do anything wrong, did he? Anyone show you any tenderness you gotta damn near kill em.
(Belle has started slow, rocking motion side to side then darts away from Nell to sit at table)

Belle- Have to pay, ruined me.

Nell: (pursuing her) That baby was ruined, nobody looking out, letting her go on, by herself, down there, not be bothered, they saw, that’s a crime, real one. Your run of the mill head bashin in crime is nothing, sittin watch tv, not thinkin, trying to forget, they saw; not do anything to help that sweetness, all was left above the water, star hand, sweet yellow curls!

Belle: Did you see her? I saw her, blouse open, throwing herself around, showin off, she wanted it; drinkin and all.

Nell- (walking slowly in a circle around Belle and table) No responsibility, no help, blamin all the while, everybody else’s fault, can’t be bothered, that’s a crime; did you enjoy hurting that guy? (her feet have started thudding on ground as she continues her walk around Belle)

( Belle starts grabbing swatting at her , Nell ducks)

Belle: You’re as guilty as me, didn’t do anything either to help baby, we saw; always gettin attention, being the center of it all. People know...they know, you did it, didn’t help her either...

(Nell breaks free runs away lifting skirts to sides and turns facing Belle who is standing now)

Nell: Afraid you’re nothing special too, right, Belle?

Belle: You’re the one who’s scared. Filled with hate, you are too, not doin anything to help, that sweetness ... I like my life, my books, my music; you can’t take those away, control me, try hard as you like. Nobody loves you, either.

(Nell’s voice raises, pounding the floor with feet, elbows out in ungainly manner holding skirt up)

Nell: You’re lyin, turning this thing around, blamin, pretending again it was only me saw! (she brings her skirt in tightly to herself, arms and elbows in)

Belle-(taunting back) No ideas, no fresh meat, no love neither, guilty as me!
Nell: “Never shoulda gone, just like before; turned our backs, disappointin again.”

(Nell slowly sinks down on chair, legs askew, quietly)

Belle: (far away) I have things to say all mine, a good girl. He’ll come back; won’t be scared neither. That other didn’t mean anything to me, they don’t; just stayin here is good.

(Nell droops over, arms, hands between legs)

Nell: (to herself) I’ll be more interesting, later, get a hold of myself.

(Belle slowly looks at Nell, starts walking towards her, stands close)

Belle: You and me Nell, here, together. Since we were kids... you’ll see. We’ll get us some life; make our dream come true, you’ll write a story, a good story, bout us, our adventures, you’ll see. I’ll go lotsa parties, people, adventures, stuff. We will, no doubt we will. Forget.

(Nell still seated grabbing skirt repeatedly, balling it up, releasing it)

Nell- Apply myself. I can, stop waiting. Sweet.

Belle: (quietly to herself arms coming around Nell) He’s not comin back... (she puts her hands over Nell’s hands quietening them)

Nell: (faraway) No doubt.

(stroking Nell’s hair)

Belle: We’ll get a new look, cut our hair, be different, we will.

Lights fade to dark.
I touched my mother's hands; they weren't swollen with the familiar plumpness from arthritis. With great effort, she was sitting having her hair done so I'd see her 'well'. Someone once said that hospital patients are ready for release when they care about their grooming or when a woman decides to reach for her lipstick. My mother was wearing lipstick.

She smiled a sincere expression of pleasure to see me. I giggled like a schoolgirl about the 3000 mile plane trip on a huge DC10, and the fancy Beverly Hills famous hospital she was in; we played out our deceptions assuming they were required. The nurse thought I was shallow and selfish...until I left the room about the same time she did and she saw my shaking body and heard sobs.

My buffer between this world and the unknown was terminal. I didn't like phrases such as 'feeling at peace', or 'joining her beloved husband after 32 years of widowhood', or 'going to a better life'. I wanted her to stay in this life longer; so did she. I wanted to be able to call Mommy when I needed it, yell at Ma, address her as Mother when I felt mature and indifferent.

How could she lie there pretending to be attractive when disease was end-stage and ugly! But how can those usually swollen joints have reverted to the slender sensation of girlhood digits? Death made no sense, and death from contaminated blood received during open-heart surgery made even less sense. Skinny digits but bloated body from the liver's inability to function because of contaminated blood destroying cells made no sense. Who do I ask the question: why? No one.

Wrapped in her Swirl dresses, her hair in a snood, my mother planted tomatoes that crept up the red brick under the kitchen window. When a breeze rustled her cotton garment, it parted and I'd wonder why she chose not to wear slacks, acceptable attire for women during the world war. Strong hands could yank weeds, yet gentle fingers could stroke my blond strands of limp hair.

She sat at my girlhood bedside when I had a fever, or when I lingered in the sun too long which scalded my porcelain skin. She moved my bedroom furniture into a more-adult position, and handmade drapes and spread as teen years entered. My whispered fears and dreams I thought only my private walls heard were somehow understood by her.


The fingers knit, sewed, shelled peas, played classical music on our Baby Grand piano (often decorated with a Spanish-fringed silk thing that resembled a cape). The fingers typed reports, wrote speeches, drew pictures, kneaded dough, skinned fowl, scrubbed, ironed, repaired plumbing, braided my older sister's hair.
Now there was no chipped pearlized polish, but when I feigned California sunlight shuttering my eyes, I sensed those digits of my girlhood. Be strong, she illustrated when widowhood altered her existence, but be it in your own way. Protect those you love and allow each to become independent without conditions, she instructed, but also take care of yourself. She showed me that 'things' have little value as her household goods were carted off by a charity except for the Baby Grand and a few lamps I took; the silence of each empty room echoed her goodbyes before she moved from east to west coast.

Be strong, my brain forced familiar into my conscious state, so I took my cues from the patient and pretended I was on a vacation. Be yourself needed suppression. Did I want to sit beside her and thank her for giving me life, stability, feelings of security, education, inherited skills, attention, unconditional love? Yes. No. She told me I must see Rodeo Drive, ride in a white Rolls limo, dine rooftop overlooking the hills and let her know how I enjoyed it. I wouldn't have done any of those things if she were well as I didn't really care about phony glitz and surface glamour.

The hairdresser finished. I could see her masking exhaustion at the process of just sitting up let alone having her hair curled, combed, sprayed. I pretended not to notice her whispered breaths, and revealing eyes. Sure I'll run to Rodeo Drive and stick my head in and out of expensive shops, then report back; the ordered limo was waiting for me outside the hospital's side entrance.

From a rooftop restaurant, I ordered lunch from a lavender telephone perched on a tall table. Sunlight filled the California sky and smog hadn't clouded the brightness. Health, warmth, beauty, fragrant flowers, artistically arranged luncheon plate confused me as it truly was lovely but was I to enjoy it? Was it a betrayal when my mother had run out of her allotted time? Why did I allow her to control my day rather than fight her as I often did when I wanted my own way? Did a part of me find it easier to escape corridors of disease, and discussions of impending death?

Life. She repeated it was precious; she said it so often during my childhood that it sounded like a boring lecture and I tuned out the sermon. Yeah. Yeah. Life is precious but I was young and it was going to go on forever for me. Others would get old and die, but I could skip several stairs in a row and ride a bike for miles and run track faster than anyone I knew, so old was silly and life is precious still sillier.

Bye, bye. You're getting better and I'll see you soon at my end of the country. Flippant. Easy. Lies we both carried out to protect one another. Maybe that's what role-playing is all about and each of us authors how we want to perform the scene and informs the actors to follow our directions.

Fourteen months later, I sat in the backless short hospital gown awaiting a cardiac catherization to indicate whether or not I needed open-heart surgery. I stared through the slightly sooty window that allowed a parking lot to be seen, ran my fingers along my skinny body then sat on them as if each was a safety pin on the hospital's mini garment. How would I handle my personal situation? Life is precious, life is precious,
life is precious ran through my mind with the staccato sequence of trains on a track.
My mother's enthusiastic 'see you soon' and 'have a safe trip home' rode on the same
track. Her wishes.
Not mine. I needed to say goodbye should goodbye be decreed by the same force
that controlled my inability to skip several steps at a time, run track fast, bicycle
several miles on a no-speed two wheeler. My slender fingers were plumping from
inherited arthritis, and I felt my once-healthy mother by fondling my own digits. I
summoned my family. "In case," I began.
Choices. Maybe that's what role-playing is all about and each of us authors how we
want to perform the scene and informs the actors to follow our directions. I didn't want
to 'act' to spare myself or loved ones; I wanted to be the 'me' I felt within and authored
my scene that way, but, as dyes infused my body and illuminated vessels inside my
heart, I whispered to the silence "Mama, Mama."

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In the Likeness of God: Created to Create

Dave Robinson

According to the Bible, humanity is created in the image and likeness of God. Each person is a product of God’s creative expression and possesses creative potential that flows from his or her likeness of God. This creativity has potential for powerful good or evil. The focus here is on good, healthy creativity, but to be thorough, the dark side of creative expression should be acknowledged. Biblical examples of dark creativity would include the tower of Babel, the golden calf at Mt. Sinai, other graven images set up for worship, and even the creation of godless cities and systems. These examples are man-made projects that could be considered creative, but did not contribute to the work of God or his purposes for people.

Dark forms of creative expression reveal a competitive attitude toward God, and ultimately result in division between people on some level. The Tower of Babel may be a unique exception. In that case, people were unified around a competitive vision against God, and God’s response was to divide them by confounding their ability to communicate through common language.

Healthy forms of creativity tend to express collaboration with God and ultimately result in bringing people together. Whatever the results of human creative endeavor, it must be acknowledged that God has gifted people with the power and ability to create, in the sense that they can make conscious changes to the created world around them in a way that brings about something new. Regarding creativity, and the visual arts in particular, William Dyrness writes:

I want to emphasize how powerful and pervasive are the visual dimensions of contemporary popular culture. In fact, a typical criticism of contemporary culture is that images have come to count for more than words. One need only consider the power of TV advertisements (even with the sound off!) or the dazzling visual effects seen on giant movie screens or in billboard graphics. The power and pervasiveness of these images is a complex issue that Christians clearly need to address, and one that should not be oversimplified. But fears about such things can easily be overstated. Christians, after all, believe humans are created in the image and likeness of God and that creation was lovingly and artfully shaped by the hand of God. Humans, therefore, even in their fallen condition, are capable of making worthy art. God as creator and sustainer still holds the world in his hands. Christ, moreover, rules culture as the risen and ascended Lord. These facts alone should stimulate Christians to be concerned with the visual dimension of life and the power of images that surround them. And of all the images that matter, those that serve as the personal expression of artists, whether Christian or not, should concern us most deeply.
Human creativity is not merely something that a few gifted people possess. Part of the nature of being human is being creative. This creativity manifests in two directions: Each person is an unfinished created work themselves, and each person has a unique gifting that can be expressed creatively. Therefore, each person is simultaneously a created work and a creator of work. These characteristics are unique among the creatures of the earth. It makes people more than mere animals—it reveals the image of God. C. S. Lewis said of humans, “We are, not metaphorically, but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making.”

The fact that people are unfinished created works themselves reveals a story of creativity on God’s part that manifests through people. As God continues the creative work of making a person, that person’s life will manifest new qualities that show God’s recent work. An example of this is a small child, developing new qualities year by year. The child does not make herself—she is being made. Neither did God make her all at once, for her development is observable over a period of many years.

People, unlike inanimate objects, are conscious during their own developmental process and as such, they are frequently given credit for their own development. A proud grandparent might say to a child, “My, how big you’ve grown,” fully intending the child to feel as if he has accomplished something great—and so he should, even though it is God who caused every inch of the growth. The creative work of God is integrated into the fabric of the conscious person.

As the child grows into an adult, evidencing further creation on God’s part, an observable pattern emerges: The more the person cooperates with God, the more the Spirit of God flows through the person. In Galatians, chapter five, Paul wrote about the fruit of the Spirit in a person who allows God’s Spirit to flow through them. Moreover, there is a connection between the presence of God’s Spirit in a person and the creativity of the person. Referencing the artists who crafted the sacred articles in the tabernacle, William Dyrness writes:

This first mention of people we would call artists or craftsmen (they would have been indistinguishable in Israel) is found, then, in the context of wisdom. But interestingly, such skill is also said to result from a particular gifting of God’s Spirit (“I have filled [Bezalel] with divine spirit” [Exod. 31:2 NRSV]). This is significant in light of the discussion of the Trinity in the next chapter, for it will become clear that the special work of the Spirit is to work within creation to shape the creature in a way that will glorify God. Here, then, is an early glimmer of the full work of God in redeeming creation.
Dyrness points out that the creative works of art produced by Bezalel and others were commanded and expected by God—vital symbols of redemption. Those artists were modeling the fact that God created them to create within both the limits and the freedom that God provided (This passage from Genesis will be explored further in the third theological rationale).

Although not everyone is an artist in the conventional sense, everyone has the ability to approach his or her life circumstances creatively. Engaging the routine of life with purpose and vision could itself be called an art. John Dillenberger suggests that creativity is a defining characteristic of human beings:

Humanity is defined in terms of creativity, of being an artist, of the use of imagination in creating new worlds and new forms, ranging from the artistic mode appropriate to the self as such to what the word “artist” usually conveys. But being creative is a relative matter, involving special gifts and talents, and since, in its special form as art, it is not universally shared, only a tamed creativity is prized by the rank and file, including that of the American church.

Dillenberger further argues that human beings may not even be complete unless they participate in some way with the arts:

There is a widespread assumption that spirit and bread, so elemental to life, are denied by all that the visual represents. However, let it be said that the visual arts, like music or literature, in some sense represent a necessity of the human spirit as elemental as spirit and hunger and something so central that not to know it deprives one of part of one’s humanity.

The biblical account in Genesis reveals that God can create whatever he chooses, using his own thoughts as the raw material. Similarly, human creativity begins in the thoughts of a person. The actual process of human creation resembles that of the creator. What is different, of course, is that once a creative idea is formed, human beings are entirely dependent upon God to provide the raw materials—materials that he created. To paint a painting, the artist must acquire the raw materials—paint, brush, and canvas. He or she cannot simply speak them into being. While there is a vast difference between what God creates and what human beings create, there are similarities to the process that reveal the image of God in humanity when a person acts creatively. The thoughts and feelings that drive the art into existence are not physical material—they are spiritual in nature.
Artists and Christianity

If the creative process is spiritual in nature, then creativity is important to the spiritual growth of individuals who choose to be both artists and followers of Christ. Such people need to be supported in their faith by supporting the creative gifting God gave them. Further, their creative gifting from God is not for them alone, but for everyone they influence. Art by its nature influences the thoughts of those who observe it.

Dyrness writes:

To see art and the experience of beauty (or ugliness) as incidental to life is to ignore the power that the arts exert on people (even on Christian people). When the Genesis account at the very beginning notes that “the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant [hamad, “desired”] to the sight and good for food” (Gen. 2:9), there is a tacit acknowledgment of the power of visual goodness, either for good or evil.

Christian artists should be honored for their important contributions, both to the world in general and to the body of Christ. Dyrness writes:

Recently, a Christian artist told me about an experience with his mainline Protestant church. He has been an active member of his church for some time. Not long ago in an effort to express his appreciation for his community of faith, he gave what for him was the best gift he could give: He donated one of his paintings. He told me how the nonplused church leadership expressed their appreciation as best they could, but it soon became clear that they did not know how to make use of the gift or, indeed, of the talent it represented. For a time the painting hung in the church hall, and then it disappeared altogether. The experience left my artist friend surprised and disappointed. This episode, which unfortunately is not an isolated incident, is telling not only of the missed opportunity it expresses but also of the habit of mind it illustrates.

Christian artists need to be supported in their calling. They need to be taught to engage their creative expressions while also engaging a life of faith—allowing God’s Spirit to flow through them, energizing their creative process spiritually, and also guiding them through the physical outworking. Artists have an important role in the life of their communities—not only to express themselves, but also to inspire others. This inspiration is part of a life of faith, and part of being human. Robert E. Webber writes:
Irenaeus and Tertullian, the two most influential theologians of the second century, argued [against the Gnostics] in keeping with the Old Testament tradition that God was the creator and that God’s creation was good. This affirmation of the goodness of creation provides a basis for the arts in and of itself. Because God created a material world—a world of sight, sense, touch, movement, and matter—all of creation is a worthy vehicle through which the truth about the creator can be communicated. While this argument provides a solid theological basis for the arts, another theological doctrine goes even deeper—the incarnation.

The early church interpreted John 1:14, “The Word became flesh,” not as a mythological idea or an allegorical image but as an actual, physical embodiment of God in creation. God did not merely step into history, God became his own creation. Irenaeus described it this way: “Born by his own created order which he himself bore.” God didn’t just wear the creation as a cloak but became the creation and participated in the reality of time, space, and history just as we do. In God’s enfleshment, the divine and immaterial God was united to the human and material reality of human existence. Tertullian said it well: “Therefore [materiality] is a worthy vehicle for grace.” We can translate his insight into these words: Just as God was embodied in human flesh, so also divine reality can be communicated through material reality. In other words, the arts are not mere enhancers or illustrations of the Gospels but actual expressions of redeemed creation. In art, the creation is fashioned into the praise of God.

Created to Create Together: Collaboration in the Creative Process

Genesis, chapter one, states that God created human beings in a collaborative way. God is quoted as saying, “Let us create…” In the text, God speaks in first person plural. Evidently, the act of creating humans and the world in which they live was done collaboratively—Father, Son, and Spirit in creative unison. Paul says of Christ, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:15-17). In this passage, Paul is equating Christ with Creator God—creating as one. It follows then, that if we are created to create, we may also be created to create together in unity as God does.

The idea that God wants people to live and work together in unity is present in many New Testament passages, perhaps most particularly in John 17. In this passage, Jesus passionately prays for his future disciples to be unified—indeed to be one. He uses strong language to emphasize this, referring to human unity in the same way that he refers to his own unity with the Father:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them
may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23, NIV)

Jesus prayed this prayer just before his arrest and crucifixion. Yet the bulk of his prayer focused, not on his impending torture and death, but on the oneness of his future disciples. Given the context in which Jesus was praying—facing his death—the idea that Christ wants his followers to live in unity cannot be overstated. In this passage, Jesus described the kind of unity he was praying about as the same kind that he shared with the Father, “Just as you are in me and I am in you—may they also be in us,” and again, “That they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me.”

Creating collaboratively requires a degree of unity and many artists are seeking guidance in how to connect with each other in non-competitive ways. There is a hunger among them for deeper, more connected relationships that transcend the culture of competition. Dyrness writes:

The leading popular arts today are inherently collaborative. Films, TV, even to a certain extent video necessitates artists working with technicians and engineers, or with musicians and writers of various kinds, to say nothing of actors and actresses. The fact that Academy (and Emmy) Awards are still given to individual directors, writers, and actors indicates that artistry can still be recognized and celebrated even when it is exercised in collaboration with others. Artists are often thought of as solitary geniuses who are difficult to work (and live) with, and indeed many no doubt are. But today there seems to be an openness, one might almost say a longing, to work together in making experiences and objects that move and delight audiences.

Dyrness speaks to the point that many artists are looking for greater connection with others with whom to collaborate, but there is also something deeper, which he refers to as a longing. This longing creates a spiritual climate that presents opportunities for Christian artists to model collaboration in a way that demonstrates new possibilities—collaborating with God and experiencing his inspiration. Dyrness writes:

Bewildering though this period of history is in so many ways, it offers some unique opportunities for Christian witness and spirituality—not only to renew themselves, but in doing so, to impact the larger culture.... Beneath the glitter of popular visual culture, and clearly driving developments in the visual arts, is an unprecedented spiritual quest for reconciliation with each other and with the earth. Moreover, in the arts, people seek a kind of summative experience in which they can discover
meaning and purpose for their lives.

In Jesus’ prayer, he said, “all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21 NIV, italics added) If Christian artists are to effectively model the kind of collaboration that will draw people toward God, then they need to demonstrate visible unity. This project took a significant step in empowering Christian artists in their calling to be unified members of the Body of Christ while also expressing their individual uniqueness.

The Creative Collaboration of Jesus

Jesus modeled collaboration in the midst of creative behavior. One highly creative act of Jesus was when he fed over five thousand people with five pieces of bread and two fish. He did not do this alone. He specifically said to his disciples, “You give them something to eat.” (Matt. 14:16) When that meal was over, the entire crowd had eaten their fill and there was food left over. The power of God manifested through not only Jesus, but also through his disciples as they cooperated with him.

The scripture reveals significant collaboration in the work of Jesus, both in specific circumstances as mentioned above, and in his overall mission. As he taught, he referred to himself several times as “the light of the world” (John 8:12 and 9:5). Further, he said:

When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say. (John 12:44-50)

The words of Jesus in this scripture reveal two things: (1) The use of the term “light of the world” clearly refers to himself and his messianic mission, and (2) his life’s work is done in complete collaboration with the Father, even to the point of saying, “Whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

Jesus also used the same term, “the light of the world,” in another scriptural account. Teaching the sermon on the mount, he said, “You are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). In this case, he referred, not to himself, but to his followers. However, the
meaning of the term seems to be the same. He goes on to say, “A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:14-16).

The same idea resurfaces in the book of Acts when Paul and Barnabas were speaking with the Jewish leaders. They said, “This is what the Lord commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’” (Acts 13:47). In this passage, all questions disappear as to the nature of the light. The light illuminates salvation, sent into the world from the Father through Jesus and his followers collaboratively. Sharing the gospel is therefore collaborative, including all the creative and artistic means of sharing it.

**God Leads through Artistic Expression**

The Bible presents significant precedent for artists taking a leadership role in the life of God’s people. It is a unique kind of leadership, and could easily go unremembered when looking at history, but some of the artists mentioned in scripture have demonstrated leadership in important ways through their unique gifting. Jesus demonstrated a high level of creativity and art in the way he communicated through the poetic drama found in his story-telling and parables. Klyne Snodgrass states, “That the parables are artistic and poetic must never be denied.”

In the scriptural narrative, artists were sometimes called upon to take a leadership role through symbolic art. This form of leadership does not necessarily give directives, make speeches, or write books. The artists lead by demonstrating a way of responding to God—by creatively expressing what the Spirit of God put in their hearts. Within their artistic expressions, there may be messages from God—put there to influence others in some way.

A powerful example of this is written in the book of Exodus. In the days of Moses, when the tabernacle was created, God chose artists and gave them the task of creating the sacred objects that would be housed in the tabernacle. Their work was not merely prescribed by human leaders. God put in their hearts the creative thoughts and expressions that established the aesthetic atmosphere in which the priests would carry out their work.

Then Moses said to the Israelites, "See, the LORD has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for
work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them master craftsmen and designers (Exod. 35:30-35).

Sculptors, visual artists, designers, and jewelers led the way in creating the tabernacle. The artists who made the sacred articles were participating in a work of God that symbolically represented much more than what they were consciously aware of. The author of Hebrews explains that the tabernacle is a shadow of what exists in heaven (Heb. 8:5). The artists making the tabernacle received instructions through Moses as to the specific size and materials of the projects, but the aesthetics—the glory—flowed from the Spirit of God within them—it came through revelation from God. This prophetic, revelatory aspect to creative expression is found in many scriptures. David Fetcho writes:

All artists make use of, as it were, the raw materials of revelation. When a piece of art succeeds, it does so because it intimates its own revelatory function. The art of the prophets succeeded as revelation precisely because it was able to incite the truth in its audience. And part of our doctrine of inspiration must include the observation that it was able to do that only because it first functioned as art.

Another scriptural example of artists leading is in Joshua chapter six, when the Lord instructed the priests to sound horns while carrying the Ark of the Covenant around Jericho. This battle strategy was not based on the technology of weapons, but in creative, artistic expression in the sounding of the horns and the bold display of the Ark of the Covenant.

Yet another scene emerges in which the ark is accompanied by instrumental music, dancing, singing, clothing design, and more—all coming together in the worship of God when King David brought the ark of the Lord back to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15-16). This scene would be almost nonexistent without creative art at the forefront.

Jesus himself modeled amazing creativity. His miracles did not represent a conventional response to a situation, but a creative one. For example, when he attended a wedding in Cana, he created wine from water instantaneously—creative and miraculous. What could be more creative than miraculously bringing into being (creating) something that wasn’t there the moment before? Indeed, this act epitomizes creativity and reflects the creation itself in Genesis.
Throughout history, the arts have played an important role in communicating biblical themes. This role can continue into the future and should be encouraged to do so by the Christian community. In order for Christian artists to fully engage their God-given abilities in a way that builds community, they must be supported in their imaginative work. The inner vision of an artist’s imagination can offer spiritual leadership to those who do the work of understanding the art. Jane Dillenberger writes:

The more that is known about art in general, and about the particular painting confronted, the more accessible it becomes to understanding. The informed mind and attentive eye provide the “Open Sesame” for the vivifying moment when the barriers between our world and the artist’s vision disappear. Momentarily, then, we see with the artist’s eyes and feel with his pulsebeat.

God may give prophetic messages through an artist who allows God into his or her imagination, and then allows time for that imagination to bear its artistic fruit. In the words of Walter Brueggemann:

We need to ask not whether it is realistic or practical or viable but whether it is imaginable. We need to ask if our consciousness and imagination have been so assaulted and co-opted by the [worldly] consciousness that we have been robbed of the courage or power to think an alternative thought. When we move from the primal paradigms to the concreteness of the prophets, we may pause to consider what a prophet is and what a prophet does. I suspect that our own self concept as would-be prophets is most too often serious, realistic, and even grim. But as David Noel Freedman has observed, the characteristic way of a prophet in Israel is that of poetry and lyric. The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same [worldly] consciousness that makes it possible to implement almost anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the [worldly] king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.
We cannot rest content in ourselves. In the elements and experiences of our life, to which we give meaning, we do not find satisfying light and protective security. We only find these things in the intangible mystery that overshadows our heart from the first day of our lives, awakening questions and wonderment and luring us beyond ourselves. We surrender ourselves to this mystery, as a person in love surrenders to the mystery of the beloved and there finds rest. We are creatures whose being is sheltered and protected only insofar as we open ourselves up to intangible, greater realities.

— Johannes Baptist Metz
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Peter Barlow In addition to being a previous contributor to Ginosko Literary Journal, Peter Barlow is the author of Little Black Dots (Chatter House Press, 2017). His work has also appeared in Rosebud, The MacGuffin, The Homestead Review, Red Rock Review, Underground Voices, and Per Contra. He is an adjunct professor of English at University of Detroit-Mercy.


Richard Risemberg I have published now and then over the years, in journals including Snowy Egret, Juxta, Eclectica, Terrain, Empty Mirror, and Switchblade. The story I am submitting to you grew out of the years I spent photographing and interviewing railroad tramps, and is a fictional distillation of what I learned there.

Jonathan Jones is a freelance writer and academic currently living and working in Rome. He qualified in 1999 with his M.A. in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University College and in 2004 with an MRes in Humanities from Keele University. He now teaches writing composition at John Cabot University in Rome and is studying for his PhD in literature at Sapienza University.


Susan Terris’ recent books: Take Two: Film Studies (Omnidawn); Memos (Omnidawn); And Ghost of Yesterday (Marsh Hawk Press). She’s published 6 books of poetry, 16 chapbooks, 3 artist’s books, and one play. Journals include The Southern

Alan Catlin has two recent related by theme chapbooks, Blue Velvet winner of 2017 Slipstream Chapbook Award and Hollyweird from Night Ballet Press. Another chapbook from Presa Press, Three Farmers on the Way to a Dance will be published in 2018.

Fred Dale I am a husband to my wife, Valerie and a father to my occasionally good dog, Earl. I received my master’s in English from the University of North Florida, where I serve as a Senior Instructor in the Department of English. I am also pursuing an MFA at the University of Tampa, but mostly, I just grade papers. My work has appeared or is forthcoming in Sugar House Review, The Summerset Review, Chiron Review, Crack the Spine, The Evansville Review, and others.


Dean Liscum lives in Houston, Texas and writes fiction in an effort to comprehend the
non-fiction world in which we live


**Prisha Mehta** is a student at Millburn High School in New Jersey, and she is very passionate about her writing. She aspires to be a successful author one day, and she has won many writing awards, including a Scholastic National Gold Medal. Her work has been published in “Spaceports and Spidersilk” and is forthcoming in “Riggwelter” and “Body Without Organs”. When she isn’t writing, she can often be found scrolling through psychology articles, sketching in her notebook, or, of course, reading. You can find out more about her at [prishamehta.com](http://prishamehta.com)


**Jeremy Jacob Peretz** is a Doctoral Candidate in Culture and Performance in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA.

**Laura Valeri** is the author of three story collections. Her books won the Iowa John Simmons Award, the SFA Press literary prize and the Binghampton University John Gardner Award. Her short stories appear and are forthcoming in numerous journals, most recently in *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, The Forge*, and *McSweeney’s*. Her new story collection, *The Dead Still Here*, is forthcoming from SFA Press in fall of 2018.

**Gerard Sarnat** is the author of four critically acclaimed collections. *HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014) and *Melting The Ice King* (2016) are available at select bookstores and on Amazon. In 2015 work from Ice King was accepted by over seventy magazines, including Gargoyle
and Lowestoft Chronicle and The American Journal of Poetry, and featured in Songs of Eretz Poetry Review, Avocet: A Journal of Nature Poems, LEVELER, NY, StepAway, Bywords and Floor Plan. Since then new sets of work have been featured in a range of periodicals including Dark Run, Scarlet Leaf, Good Men Project and Anti-Heroin Chic. Mount Analogue selected Sarnat’s sequence, KADDISH FOR THE COUNTRY, for distribution as a pamphlet in Seattle on Inauguration Day 2017 as well as the next morning as part of the Washington DC and nationwide Women’s Marches. Gerry has read at universities including Stanford. For Huffington Post reviews, reading dates, publications, interviews and more, click other tabs on Gerard Sarnat.com. Sarnat is currently working on a possible new sequence tentatively titled, Prisoner Poetry. Gerard has been nominated for a 2016 Pushcart Prize.

A virginal poet at the tender age of sixty-four, Sarnat first wrote about caring for the homeless and happenings in the lands of Abraham and Burning Man from the Judean Desert of his heritage to the Black Rock Desert’s annual pagan arts festival. Gerry has built and staffed clinics for the marginalized and been a CEO of healthcare organizations and a Stanford Medical School professor. Married since 1969, he and his wife have three kids and four grandsons, the last born shortly after they returned home from Desert Trip.

Natalie Safir Author of 5 published books of poetry, the latest being Eyewitness in 6/16 by DosMadres Press. Poems in magazines and ezines such as Rhino, Mid-America Review, Slant, Same, Connecticut River Review, Natural Bridge, Ginosko Literary Journal, Centrifugal Eye and more. Anthologies include Art & Artists, Penguin; A Slant of Light, Codhill Press; My Line, Token. Short fiction in Persimmon Tree, Child of My Child, The Fairy Godmentor’s Advice, and Jungian Fairytale: The Woman with Midnight Hair. She has been a lecturer on contemporary poetry, editor and workshop leader in local institutions.

Elijah Armstrong studies philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis, though he was born and bred in Fairfax, California. (Barring the first four years of his life, which were spent in San Francisco.) His mother, Mia Laurence, contributed to the first issue of ginosko.

Kim Cope Tait’s work has appeared in literary journals and magazines in the U.S. and abroad. Her chapbook of poems called Element was published in 2005 with Leaping Dog Press. Her full-length book, Shadow Tongue, is forthcoming with Finishing Line Press.

Allan Lake Originally from Saskatchewan, Lake has lived in Vancouver, Cape Breton Island, Ibiza, Tasmania, Melbourne & often retreated to Sicily. He has published two collections; Tasmanian Tiger Breaks Silence(1988); Sand in the Sole(2014). Lake won Elwood Poetry Prize 2015 & 2016, Lost Tower Publications(UK)
Poetry Comp 2017.
He has been widely published in Australia.

Brandy McKenzie holds an MFA in writing, has published poems in more than three dozen literary magazines, won various awards, been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and worked on the editorial boards of three different nationally distributed literary magazines. These days, though, she mostly works as a paralegal, teaches critical thinking and writing to community college students, and tries to provoke conversation about strangeness of our shared waking dream.

Eric Dreyer Smith lives in San Antonio, Texas. Currently doing studies for a PhD in research psychology. He works as a counselor at a hospital and in private setting. There are over twenty publications of short stories to his credit.

Robert Hoffman I live in southern California with my wife of 40 years. I graduated from the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts with a dual MFA. I am the creator of the 15 Poem series and have four volumes in print. More than anything I respect what poetry has to offer to the mind and how it allows me to see the both sides of everything.

James B. Nicola's poems have appeared in the Antioch, Southwest and Atlanta Reviews, Rattle, Tar River, and Poetry East. His nonfiction book Playing the Audience won a Choice award. His first full-length poetry collection is Manhattan Plaza (2014); his second, Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater (2016); his third, Wind in the Cave (2017). A Yale graduate, James has been giving both theater and poetry workshops at libraries, literary festivals, schools, and community centers all over the country.

L. Ward Abel, poet, composer and performer of music, teacher, retired lawyer, lives in rural Georgia, has been published hundreds of times in print and online, including The Reader, Istanbul Review, Versal, Yale Angler’s Journal, Pudding, Indian Review and others, and is the author of one full collection and ten chapbooks of poetry, including Jonesing For Byzantium (UK Authors Press, 2006), The Heat of Blooming (Pudding House Press, 2008), American Bruise (Parallel Press, 2012), Little Town gods (Folded Word Press, 2016), A Jerusalem of Ponds (erbacce-Press, 2016), Digby Roundabout (Kelsay Books, 2017), and the forthcoming The Rainflock Sings (Again) (Unsolicited Press, 2019).

Neila Mezynski currently writes one act plays and is a found object/ installation sculptor as well.

Lois Greene Stone, writer and poet, has been syndicated worldwide. Poetry and personal essays have been included in hard & softcover book anthologies. Collections of her personal items/ photos/ memorabilia are in major museums including twelve
different divisions of *The Smithsonian*. *The Smithsonian* selected her photo to represent all teens from a specific decade.

**Dr. Dave Robinson**, MDiv, DMin – Executive Director [https://creativeinterfaces.org](https://creativeinterfaces.org)--Creative Interfaces Inc. is a non-profit organization in San Rafael California. We facilitate personal, spiritual, and creative development through arts-related forums, presentations, workshops, retreats, and conferences. Dave is also a visual artist, speed-painter, sculptor, and writer.