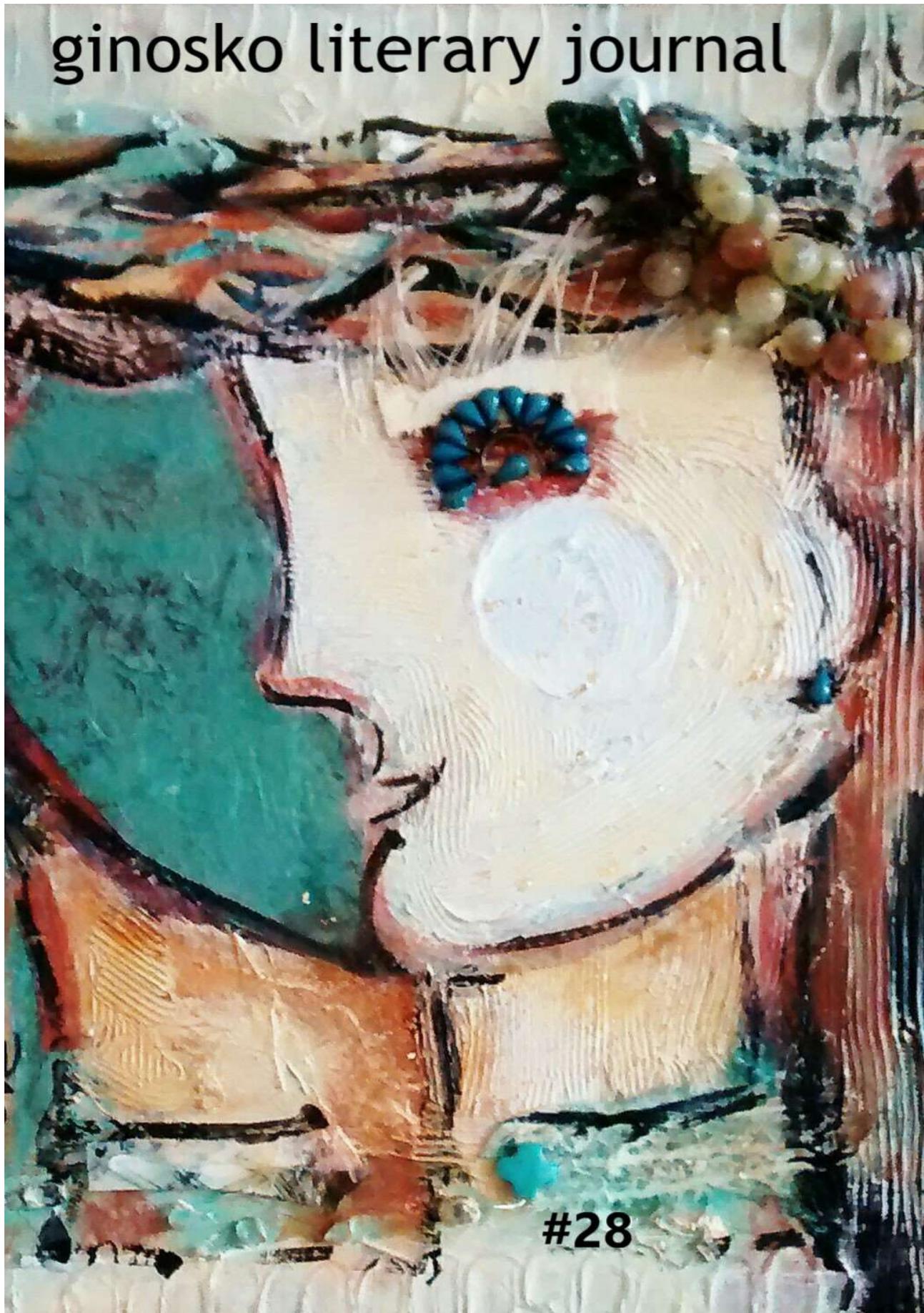


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ginosko

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 digging is never done because the shovel scrapes at life itself.

It is not possible to get it all, or even very much of it,

but I gather what I can of the rough, tumbling crowd,

the lone walkers and the voluble talkers,

the high lonesome singers,

the messages people write and leave for me to read.

– Annie Proulx

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Love Dwells Under All Words

Robert D Vivian

after Cemal Sureya

Speak to me of Christmas cards and UPS Love dwells under all words Speak to me of falling snow deep in the woods Love dwells under all words Tell me of the dreams you had last night and when you woke to the cooing of a bird Tell me of the moon, the stars, what you see inside clear rushing water Love dwells under all words Today is all feathers and no beak, my love Today is an eyelash and a sigh clean as mint Love dwells under all words Enter the moon calf Enter the solemn vow of ever after Love dwells under all words as if looking up at so many glass bottom boats I have admired the mole on the back of your spine for almost twenty years I have never stopped making love to you Love dwells under all words And you, my brother, your smoker's voice in Chicago on the line late last night Love dwells under all words Love is holding like a fish deep in the current before the first utterance Tell me, brother, if your daughters swim in your veins Tell me if they live in the creases of your forehead Love dwells under all words This page is a prayer wagon This page is full of my trembling fingertips Love dwells under all words How many moans will I cry out to you How many caresses, my love Love dwells under all words Please let me never count ever again Let numbers fall away one by one into the starry night Love dwells under all words Enter the full blown circle Enter the clear staring of ancestors Love dwells under all words What leave-taking is left for us, what wonder and courage What of the covers of a book not yet written Love dwells under all words I offer these words to you I offer this headlong plea to release the doves within in a starburst of wings Love dwells under all words and sews them together into a holy cloth Love is the space between all words and love is the ink that writes them Say good night, good morning Say always and forever Say that dawn is almost here and you are listening to your own sacred breathing Love dwells under all words Love is waiting

for you at the end of this sentence, my love Rafter and bird Window and ice When you were a child and picked up a stone When you read your life as something you could hold in your hand before letting go Before you bled for the first time Before you went down into water and could not breathe After beauty came for you in the gloaming of endless miles After speech found you and spoke you in the kingdom of the shining and everlasting verbs.

No, I Am Not a Coal Miner

Jeff Varljen

There are ghosts I have longed for; and I have pined for someone else's memories. Like the imprint of my predecessors weighs heavier in me than my own innards. I am the world's shiniest coal miner. I have the softest supple hands and the whitest black lungs. More a product of the hole than the soul, I like to say. This incredible conflict of identity fights a dirty war behind my non-yellowed eyes. Oh, mantled and darkened upper crust. I'll never hard-hat my way into your crags and crevices to shine a light on your black private rocks that burn for us surface-dwellers. See me here as you always have, in a cheap shirt and tie, like a monkey; throwing paper like feces out the window to eventually bury you in mountain snow, up to your face, in my filth. I peddle and produce nothing!

Great-Uncle John Stossel never once over-thought his life, did he? His parents stuffed him and nine more siblings into a three-bedroom house that smelled like potatoes and onions and Polish Catholic heaviness. He aged like tubers in a dank basement, quick and sprouted. He got up every morning and rode a wagon back into perpetual night. Threw his axe into the wall and inhaled the dust. He came home and drank like a fish until he died from the combination. Still. It meant something. What am I doing? I work in data analytics. What does that even mean? I've been there for fifteen years and I still don't know. I move numbers from here to there then send them to another person who smashes them with more numbers sent by another person sitting a few feet away from me in the office. Then I get a check deposited into my bank account. It's just numbers. That's all it ever is. Is this really what Appalachia was created for? I know we don't really need coal anymore, but at least when my great grandfather was digging it up he could put his hands on his work. I touch my lunch in the breakroom while my own words spill out like stupid rocks with the other cheap suits in the office. At least John knew that eventually the mine would eventually be emptied and hollowed, and then he'd get a new hole to explore. New perpetual underground

possibilities. My only hope for change is an office fire.

No, I am not a coal miner like my family used to be. But, I could work all night, drinking like a fish and ignoring my family too, come to think of it. Mining may have suited me, really. What I do is kind of like mining. I use tools to extract things that should probably be left where they are. My company runs data for some big corporation out of California. I guess the office space is cheaper here in Cedarville, with all of its formerly scenic views and an abundance of burnt out abandoned factories, coal still underfoot.

But no, I'm not cut out for much else. I am a weak sod, gaunt and skittish. My arms are like that of a store mannequin, seemingly normal, maybe even proportional, until you ask me to help move a couch up a flight of stairs to your new apartment. Then I will show you what I'm working with. I have a family that loves me fine. I want for nothing. The numbers seem to add up each month. Life hums by in a monotonous murmur. I startle like a goat when a bee flies too close. My hands are best left to poking at calculators and filing away mountains of papers that won't be seen again.

My family is a few generations removed from the coal at this point. I know enough to understand why that's good for most people. Still, that dark dust cloud follows me like an aura that I can only describe to you like this. It's like I have a third-generation smoker's cough. Born with dust in my lungs, my dad used to say. Sometimes I like to take a walk through the old coalfields like they're ancestral stomping grounds. I walk down the old mine-cart tracks and climb up on the tunnel's entrance. I hang my feet over the side and try to imagine what I would be like if I had been born in Uncle John Stossel's time. Usually that leads to me drinking like a fish and dying too young. Still, at least my hands would be calloused and I wouldn't have to wear gloves to weed the garden. I wouldn't feel the need to wear a mask to cut the grass. I'd most likely not feel the need to justify all of my actions by spinning some story about my intentions or feelings. I'd be a man that I could live with, even if no one else could.

CEREMONY

*-Through all of youth I was
looking for you without
knowing what I was looking for.
-from "Youth"
-W.S. Merwin*

1.

It was summer
when the ceremony of unraveling began

walking away from
the illusion of water shining on the road

and the quiet of the path
that could never be taken

I shall walk toward the swollen ocean
and its illusion of absence

2.

The days are long
and filled with lights
whose shadows are blue

days I wanted to be done with
days I must have back
the days I will always
want back

3.

I'm sitting on a bench
at the bus stop
unable to move
as buses come and go

Imagine children with balloons
Imagine their laughter

Imagine that they can neither see you nor hear you.

You have now been to one of the places

4.

It was the phone call
that interrupted me
the ringing too late

the weeping in the hall
the slogging around the table
the anvil ringing between my ears
that interrupted us

It was the black flowers
that bloomed in the rain

it was then that
I walked across the cemetery
as if through waist deep dirt
toward the crooked woman in the chair

I was too late

the wind
the cold
the ice
the ground
interrupted me.

5.

booze
country-western
pinball
the language of night

a change in time
that must go unexplained

things I must never
talk about

things I must reveal
eventually utterly
things I must never
talk about

6.

The tongues
the sabers
lay open the past

And still the parry and thrust

The door is closed
and beyond the door
shattered glass.

They are raising a flag
or is it a mirror
on a ship
that is sailing silently away
clouds closing in around it
erasing it.

7.

Two women on the riverbank,
one pointing to the other shore.

I look across-
the leaves are changing
I reach out
and touch the shadow
of the woman standing still
imagining her as a place
where radiance is a choice
among changing colors.

8.

This was all part of the unraveling,
the ceremony of painting
that which could never have existed
and hence did not.

**I WILL BUILD A GREAT WALL...
...AND NOBODY BUILDS WALLS BETTER THAN ME...**

*We`re going to build a wall, folks.
We`re going to build a wall.
That wall will go up so fast,
your head will spin.
--The Insurrection Inciter*

*my head was spinning when
it seeped from the grime of obsolescence
from the repulsiveness of its stink
its deceptions
its hands...tiny hands fumbling in the half-light
for some doo-dah to grab –*

*it worked its way slowly
toward reflections of itself
in the mirror of god-given
and historically inaccurate conclusions
where the scrutinizing paintings
never looked up
not even once
to perhaps nod
or sigh heavily
into the watershed*

*the mendacity
of its polished zenith
fallen and still weakly iridescent
pulsed there in the sewage
of its salacious doublespeak
vacuous and throbbing and decomposing*

as we *nearly* surrendered our spirits
the horizon rumbled and swelled
split down its center
the light colliding with a
fathomless dark
and we were left
staring into *its* repellent swagger
not cognizant enough yet
to be comforted
by the pageantry
of *its* encroaching annihilation
scattered and decayed
all over the manicured lawn

THREE ROOMS

first

Light glows through everything
even the sheer walls
the blossoms of white blooming
through the translucent curtains-
through everything

and it dances like stars in the eyes
stars that defy the dark
and we...
we need not say a word

second

There is light enough for one
light so subtle
everything seems to pale
and a semblance of clouds
is imagined

In this room
one of us will be empty
and one of us will carry
small embers of light

You will speak softly
as you always do
and I will shout
like I always do
until the light shatters
into pieces too small
to be seen in the dark
and I will think to myself
I am so sorry...

third

This room is the dark room

You sit motionless
I tried my best
to gather light
but it will not do

Your tears hiss the embers to darkness

This is the dark room

previously published in *Sepia*.

The Wind is Listening

Sharon Lopez Mooney

breathing out

your dying
was the exhale of my life
smooth and silent.
for months i held
my breath
afraid to
inhale
dreading more
pain passing through my
aching torn ribs.

rent in half
to a jagged scrape of me
by your single sigh,
my lungs burned
needing air
wondering if
i could breath
against your absence.
if i drew in
would it be the deadly abyss?

or would i inhale
then again
again
and again
lustily filling the vacuum
of memory
fighting with shame,
sucking new air
gulping pure life
with reluctant joy?

Still my chest burns
with remembering
your fatherhood,
our children, beds and meals
shared, memories
ripping open my guilt
sealed lips, convulsing
for air against the stigma
of filling my breast with
the silence of your death

Counting down the clock

In just 3 minutes I can almost unload my mind

In just 3 minutes the world could flip over and we'd fall off

In just 3 minutes my chairs are blown into a chorus line dancing across my veranda

Notice how life can morph into two of me watching each other

Notice how my body has tensed, stopped, loosened

Because in 3 snaps of a finger clouds might become angry for what we cannot imagine

Because in 3 snaps of a finger the hillside can bloom with our debris carried on wind

Because in 3 snaps of the finger night edges out sunlight and claims the sky

Not to mention how I aged ten lifetimes of a grandchild

Not to mention how you can lose a whole entire life

In barely 3 years my eyes have not eaten their fill of morning's landscape

In barely 3 days my garden has drunk its fill of nectar from clouds

In merely 3 minutes wind can explode from the *bahía* into mimicry of a hurricane

In 3 nanoseconds I might never savor the color of my kids' teasing
again

In 3 blinks of the eye I must be ready

Language of the sea

Two seals lace in and out of brisk *agua bahía*
the dancing glance of sun undulates around them,
they, as aware of nearby men fishing from a panga boat
as the men are of them getting caught in the net.
They do not speak to each other, but do not doubt
their hearts share a language of caution to the dangers for both.

Pelicans sit in rippling circles of patient vigil for fresh scraps
to be flung overboard, serving up delicious breakfast,
but nothing comes together, the barren net is diligently
pulled in, float clack by clack, beating a rhythm on the
boat side of exhausted emptiness. Seals dip with no regret
through churned up waves of nothing but wet and tide,
pelicans lift off in sequence for more interesting locales,

all ease away from a barren early morning hunt
but continue the search against hunger.

Alive

if i listen

if i listen

my eyes want to name

my eyes want to contain

if i listen stretch out

listening reaches beyond

listening

i breathe in *yah*

i breathe out *wey*

i listen to the resonance,

each breath is the first

we draw in life *yah*

we release into being *wey*

some call it God

Sleeping with the Priest in Winter
for Alan

In his house were many rooms
that weren't his, and where I woke
was one. By morning God was gone,
he was gone and I was where
the booze had taken our holy talk.

It was Sunday. It was winter. Warm
air rose from the furnace, rippled
through the drapes like fish in a net,
like a soul struggling in a stranger's
past. When I left, I knew I'd never

come back, but I'd have to. I could
hear his sermon from the door
as I stepped away, the one he'd been
rehearsing for years, the one I've been
trying to talk a god into ever since.

After Passing the Accident

As I move through the night,
failures reach out like the poor

from their eyes and the miles
begin to stretch like panthers

at dark. Even instinct was all
for pulling over, waving time

by. On the seat beside me my
small bag of success fit perfectly.

It was enough. Where I was going
I could be late and no one would

notice if I were early. Besides,
I was just outside of somewhere,

where they thought were going,
where they thought they arrived.

Knight's Strings

for Steve

If it were up to the puppets, they'd insist
on a different story, one from other strings.

After all the hours stuffed and locked in
a black box, they'd always appear without

forgetting a line they never knew. Backstage
of the story the puppeteer never wonders

what's behind his puppet's eyes, doesn't care,
isn't interested in who fits the part or why.

On another night, a puppet may die, something
from above letting go, the sound of him coming

together like a handful of kindling tossed in
a fire pit. It's why the puppeteer doubles as

a magician on occasion, working other strings,
knowing never to perform the same trick twice.

Planked By the Abyss

Meg Tuite

Harwood street is a long stretch of clapboard and stucco houses in beige, yellow, cream, light blue, Band-aid, and white with trim in gun-stained grays and revolver-black, backing into shadows of elm and oak trees, lilac bushes, honeysuckle and rows of ragged roses nestled up against wood to showcase how perfectly crew-cut emerald lawns buffer sounds of family in summer.

“The reason for venetian blinds,” Mom says. She stares at the slats. “Although, these blinds are made in Ecuador. Have you ever been to Venice?”

I’ve never been further than the smell of cornfields and Mom knows it. We live in Chicago, have cousins in Des Moines, a rheumy great-aunt in Kearney, Nebraska and four cousins that live somewhere in California that came to visit when Jabs, my younger brother, and I were kids and never returned. Stacks of books teeter in high-rises next to the stained living room couch. Mom reads Kierkegaard to obituaries, encyclopedias and dictionaries. She can spend a week without getting out of her nightgown. She used to be a stewardess, but isn’t a Mom who pulls out photo albums. She talks to her dead sister, Eliza, when she’s drunk.

Dad steps over ants to get to his car, collects Buddhist books and shelves them by country instead of reading them: Japan, Tibet, India, Chinese, and Western monks. Jabs and I spend weekends with Dad playing tennis or watching him play. When Dad shuts the door to his home office, after dinner and a few glasses of scotch, moans that start out as jazz instruments meld into shades of neon Dad to whimpering Dad.

I tell Mom he sometimes cries in his office.

Mom smirks. “Masturbation, kid. The man can’t keep his hands out of his pants, when he wears them. He sounds like a blubbering five-year-old when he orgasms. Really quite disturbing.”

I’m fifteen. Everything and nothing is a shock.

“Venice is dark gutters and moldy grays. In Ecuador, they are netted in by a coiled bulb of sky pulsing through every pore. Remember when you thought that wasp nest was a lampshade, Elva?” Mom asks.

Yes. Pain is a rotten hive.

“You’re absorbed by tragedy, my child. You devour the family practice of planking the abyss. It’s important to experience life in all its facets.”

Mom and her sister have been in and out of psych wards since they were in their twenties. Both of them got multiple sessions of electric shock therapy for hysteria. Mom never locks doors anymore.

I’ve been put on benzos, spent a night in jail and one jaunt in rehab so far.

“You are the thespian of mental arrhythmia,” Mom says. “Jabs has made one plunge, but he’s only thirteen. There’s still time.”

Jabs runs away every Monday. He walks across the street carrying his briefcase. Instead of going to school he hangs out at the Coopers in the attic with Dave Cooper. Dave is in his twenties but hangs out with high school kids at the park.

Mrs. Cooper calls. "He's here again. Should I send him to school?"

"Put him on the phone?" Mom says.

"I hate school. The nuns are brutes. They smack more than Dad."

"Why do you keep going to the Coopers? I'm going to have to pay her for babysitting."

"Oh no. I don't talk to his mom. I talk to Dave. You know he used to be an altar boy."

"The guy's twenty, the local butcher, and he never graduated from high school. You're only thirteen. Don't you think you should hang out with kids your own age?"

"I see them in school."

"You keep ditching school, kid. They're going to call the cops on you if you keep missing. And what do you do all day with that man/boy?"

"We dress up army men into priests and bishops and say the high mass in Latin."

"That sounds more disturbing than kids your age drinking beer at the park," Mom says.

"Dave was going to be a Jesuit. But there's more money and better hours in packing sausage," Jabs says.

"Amen to that," says Mom. "Just don't get all religious. I only put you in that Catholic school because it's cheap."

"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen."

"Your pushing your luck. Just get home for lunch. Mrs. Cooper has enough kids to feed."

Dave and Jabs are assembling a CB radio. Actually, Dave is putting it together. He's some sort of genius, especially on the days when he hasn't slept for over a week. Jabs packs his briefcase with transistor radios and old electric stuff he finds in the garage. Ancient toasters, radios, the backside of an old TV set, a camping lantern, a blow dryer, and an easy bake oven. He also brings cigarettes and a few of Mom's tiny vodka bottles.

Jabs was kidnapped when he was eight for three weeks. Wandering kids don't fare so well and he wandered much further than the Coopers that horrific day.

He sat with the cops when he got home and told them a story of some old guy who made him chocolate chip cookies. It was Dave who found him wandering the streets near the park the day he returned from where Jabs couldn't say. Jabs considers Dave a superhero. He doesn't wear tights, but he has the capacity to keep Jabs calm and occupied.

Jabs remembers the day he disappeared thinking, *people on the bus know where they're going. No one looks worried.* Jabs is never sure of anything and panics often. Banal faces slump against greasy windows or look into newspapers. Jabs studies the expressions as the bus pulls up. No one is nervous pulling cords when they

get to a destination. His life is not like that. His first day of school, the teacher has the kids line up for lunch.

“Those going to Clark Street, line up behind Patty O’Callahan. Those going to Sheridan Road, line up behind Thomas over here. The rest of you remain seated.”

Mom has made Jabs lunch that day. Typical that he will be the only kid that has it all wrong. He will go home and tell her there is no lunch at school, but which line? He doesn’t notice the kids with bags on their desks who remain seated. Sheridan Road sounds familiar so he walks out with a stratum of students when a nun asks him if that is his lunch in the bag he is holding.

“Yes, Sister. Mom said kids eat lunch here.” Jabs sighs. “She doesn’t get out much,” he says rolling his eyes while visibly shaking. The nun slaps him on the face and drags him by a bony hand, while he cries, down a long hall and into a huge cafeteria. She sits him down at a table with a group of older boys who laugh when the nun swats his head before leaving. One boy grabs Jab’s bag and pulls out his peanut butter and bologna sandwich and chips. He hands him the sandwich, but keeps the chips. “Knock it off, kid,” he says. Jabs sniffles for the allotted half-hour and doesn’t care when the older boy takes his sandwich and eats all of it, as well. A boy his own age gives him half a sandwich. “My names Arthur,” he says. Jabs rubs his nose on his sleeve.

Jabs is uncertain how anything works and why no one else seems to be, but he believes this bus will take him there. Some people are sleeping. He remembers the green and white dirty bus and the steps up. Driver says, ‘Hey kid, where’s your fare.’ Jabs has no idea what the man wants. Driver stares at Jabs. Jabs stares at his shoes. Driver takes change out of his pocket and puts it in a box. Coins jangle down. ‘What street you getting off? I’ll call you when we’re there.’ He smiles at Jabs. Jabs thinks of places he’s been. His parents don’t take him or his sister anywhere, but once they took them to *The Field Museum*. Massive stairs led to a massive room with massive beasts surrounded by echoing voices of more people than he’d seen in his life. A wooly Mammoth, Mastodons, the skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus Rex, and mummies encased in glass with bits of nose or toes that pushed out from ragged bandages like brown leather patches.

“You lost or what kid?” driver says and then people are screaming and shouting. Jabs falls backwards into some guy’s arms as the bus plunges head on into a minivan. A whole busload of eyes shape the horror movie just as it begins.

Jabs doesn’t return home for three weeks. He is front-page news and their Mom and Dad are on TV holding each other and crying, asking for information on Jabs and cops are all over their house. Mom is drunk and babbling. Dad is preaching. Cops are at the grade school with guns, batons and radios asking kids about Jabs.

I’m conducting my own investigation. I wait for Jab’s classmates to leave school and give them candy bars to talk about Jabs.

“He was a good draw-er.”

“I like his shoes.”

“My mom said somebody took him away. Is he at camp?”

“Can I have another candy bar?”

Cop cars are there every day each week. No one sees Jabs that day.

The whites of those eyes on the bus are warning Jabs, but he isn't looking in the right direction.

“Watch where you're going, Jabs. If you don't interpret the signs around you, how will you know what to avoid?” I ask.

Belhaus Plysmeer dares me to jump across three-story roofs, pretend I'm blind, run into people on the street, shoplift, and once even steal a hubcap off of a cop car just to hear Belhaus's frantic high-pitched giggle. She can pretty much get me to do anything. Diagnose me with 'dependent personality disorder.'

“I have all of it. Let me lay out the specifics: excessive need to be taken care of and led, submissive, clingy, fear of separation, unable to disagree for fear of disapproval and getting dumped, will go to obscene lengths to obtain nurturing in a whiny '*please hold me, love me*' kind of way with Mom, Dad, and Pap-smear, my first lesbian fantasy. No question I'm a bottom.”

Some of the time Jabs wants to kick my ass. I never shut up at home and Jabs hears me yammering in his head when I'm not.

Mom is lying in bed talking about Tibetan salt mines.

“I'm leaving.” This is one of many days that Mom doesn't get dressed or get out of bed. She has three nylon nightgowns I wash when she actually puts on clothes and takes the grimy sheaths off. They are permanently stained under the armpits and greasy blots of unknown origin permeate them.

“The salt mine at Khewra in Pakistan wasn't discovered by Alexander the Great. It was his armies ailing horses who recovered after licking the rock salt stones for their nutrients.” Mom's lips are moving, but she doesn't look up from the book. Jabs puts a bowl of macaroni and cheese on her nightstand and a bottle of Seltzer that she dumps vodka into, then shuts the door.

Belhaus lives three blocks over. I buy her a green lava lamp because who doesn't want a lava lamp, but her real gift is two hits of blotter Jabs got from Dave. Once I tripped, but Belhaus hasn't, so it will impress her that I'm sophisticated enough to get my hands on some. Belhaus is fourteen. She calls me 'kid'. Belhaus is only ten months older. The bloated rapids and weird twists of my existence are a topographical landscape that no one can pushpin on a map, especially that pigtailed zitless mannikin of composure.

Plysmeer wears aloof tranquility like the rest of the neighborhood wears clothes. Hungry stares by strangers and known admirers is an absolute in her universe. Her unabashed pout assaults me with a buffet of violent images when she's in a shitty mood.

Belhaus's seamless pores spatter like those women in Egypt Mom tells me about who are so beautiful their boyfriends throw acid in their faces, scar them for life. Or a slow painful disease creeps up on Belhaus with a soft limp, a palsied hand and a stutter that manifests a nervous tic over her low-lidded eyes. Or she wakes up one day to a bedlam of acne canvassing textured humanity across her unmolested skin.

Sickening truth is that Belhaus peels off clothes each night that layer her room, sweet as snow, until a fucking maid gets there the next day.

I'm the maid in my house.

So, yes, Plysmeer might be almost a year older in numbers, but has no depth perception of the gravity of life on Harwood. Mom pukes into the trashcan some nights or misses if she is too tired to throw her head over the side of the bed. A peculiar unrest ripples my mission to ravage through as many disorders before I die, thwarted by incarceration.

"Blades of grass keep growing no matter how many times fat, heaving men mow them down." Jabs asks why. I answer, "whatever."

Jab's head is many weathers. Sometimes he can't go out because winds that live inside him detach his body from his neck and everything shakes and jangles like chimes. Mirrors create a searing desert of paralysis when he sees Mom's face glazing over his and voices chanting 'you look just like your mother'. His sweaty tiptoes beckon rooms not to hear them while the stench of his hightops infiltrate the musky decay of despair. When he sucks down another tiny vodka bottle lightning heats the blood until linoleum and wood floors reverberate under his rubber soles. He stamps through rooms, a reminder that he exists and can make as much noise as me.

But tonight's my night with Plysmeer doing blotter. She's invited a dark wave of high-pitched cheerleaders. One of the sodden bonds that Belhaus and I have connected over is getting kicked off the cheerleading squad for making prank phone calls to the coach's daughter when we were drunk. Plysmeer's mother made Bel apologize and invite every last one of them, including Dillen, the coach's daughter.

We asked for 'Dildo' instead of Dillen when we made the phone call. That night our parents are called. Plysmeer's Mom does the work for two sets of parents. She screams into Mom's answering machine that I'm crazy and should be locked up. She swats me out the door in my pajamas at 3AM. I hear her belting it out on Belhaus from the street.

When I get home the lights are off and nothing has changed. The phone machine is blinking from a corner in the living room. No one ever picks up that phone except for me. Dad has his own office line. After about six pm, Mom assumes every sound is just her dead sister's voice and if it rings she says, "Oh stop that racket, sister, I can hear you."

And yet, Plysmeer still invites me. I'm the first to arrive. The maid opens the door. Mrs. Plysmeer sneers at me and leaves the room.

“Finally,” Belhaus says. “I didn’t want to be stuck with Dildo and the babbling bobble heads without you.”

When cheerleaders mulch together they bubble and gurgle baby talk. Sentences compress into some sort of pigeon English and each syllable is dragged down a long corridor as the girls drop heads, pout, hug, cry, and whimper.

“Bobby soooo maddddd. Ohhhh, you shouddddd of seennnnnnn...his faceee, ohhhhhh, he took back ringggggg,” she stutters, sticks out her bottom lip and right hand to show the green circle of skin where the dime store band had lived for maybe a week.

“Sawwww me makkkk iiiing on Luke. Ohhhh, You know. In his carrrrrrrrr!”

One girl tilts her head as if considering what was said while the others put hands over their mouths. They nod. “Luke is like, I mean, Luke. Well, yeah.”

“Yeahhhhhh. Bobby going to killlllllll him,” she continues. “Lookkkkk. He sawwww my neckkkk. See?” They all move into a tight circle and bask in her lust, study a large brown hickey. Luke sucked her like a chicken wing.

The girls cry out. “Noooooo. You and Bobby were so... You’re not going steeeeeadddy?”

She shook her drooping head. They group hug and coo that soon Luke will, like, for sure, give her a ring. Bobby is scrap metal.

Mom would drag her ass out of bed and smack me if I talked like that.

These are the times when I love Plysmeer more than ever. She pulls out a cigarette, lights up and blows the smoke in to the cheerleading circle. The girls’ scream, back away holding their noses. “Belllllll, you some kind of nasty.” Giggling is a big part of this sham of camaraderie and pyramids.

I’m beyond thankful when they kick us off the squad. Plysmeer likes to run things and thinks she has a handle on that group of idiocy, but Dildo is competitive, the first in the group with serious cleavage, and lives with the coach, so there’s that.

The doorbell rings and the maid rushes to get it. Belhaus is unwrinkled and done up with robin’s egg blue eye shadow, pink lips, blush and her platinum hair coiled around her head like a pristine campfire. Anyone around her is a marshmallow on a stick.

Lolly Burns is standing at the door, shipwrecked, yet unaware that danger has closed her in. She holds an exquisitely wrapped present showcasing the skill of the curly-cue ribbon in rainbow colors in her arms. She is a mist of anonymity. Her face envelops any background it encounters, a face that swerves away from attention or devotion. She is the cheerleader who floats just outside any photo taken by parent or school newsletter. She is the bottom of the pyramid, a barnacled stationary body that holds strong and steady. She has no agenda. Lolly Burns is the only person I’ve met who is as non-lucid on an overcast day as she is under a swelling orchid blaze of blue sky. My love for her is huge.

A lace-clothed table is laden with hot dogs wrapped in Pillsbury dough that Mrs. Plysmeer calls cute little ‘hors d’oeuvres,’ instead of ‘pigs-in-a-blanket.’ A platter of carrots, celery, and raw broccoli sit with hands in their lap, a still-life that will never

animate. None of us are anorexic, yet. Potato chips, caramel corn, cupcakes with BP iced on each one gather around the massive sheet cake balancing the spread with 'Happy Birthday Sunshine' in yellow across chocolate icing layered with sprinkles, balloons and hearts. A crystal bowl bleeds with freshly squeezed mangos, oranges, strawberries and other live fruit floating buoys in coconut juice.

The three of us sit there waiting. The doorbell doesn't ring for quite a while. Mrs. Plysmeer keeps cascading in and out of the living room, the scent of freshly cut flowers cling to her silk silt-gray pants suit, her coiffed bare feet, icy silver toenails. She keeps rearranging the food on the table, glancing out the window.

Bel and I study each other. No one is ever late for a sleepover, especially cheerleaders. They live for this shit.

The phone rings. We hear Mrs. Plysmeer's sharp don't-fuck-with-me voice in the kitchen say, "yes, uh-huh, oh really, yeah, well your kid's bow-legged and that pathetic squad of yours are a pack of inarticulate inbreeds. Belhaus and her friends will have a blast. Enjoy your sitcoms." The phone slams into its cradle.

Lolly stares down at the carpet. I'm guessing the squad never called to tell Belhaus they were boycotting the party. Being forgotten is nothing new to me.

"We'll be right back, Lollypop. Get some food." Bel grabs my hand and pulls me into the bathroom. "Those bitches are fucked, you know."

"I could give a shit about them." I drag out a baggy from my pocket with two slips of paper the size of an inch square with tiny dragons on each.

Bel's eyes widen. Her mouth opens to say something. I drop the blotter on her tongue before her lips shut. This is all about synchronicity so I layer my tongue while Bel is still trying to figure out what happened.

This is one of the few times Plysmeer has been speechless. She shakes my shoulders and buries her head in my armpit. "I love you," she says.

I bite my lips as Bel pulls me toward her and kisses me. "I can't even believe.. I mean, where...how?" she asks. I shrug my shoulders and say, "Birthday rock out, baby. I got some mini-Vodkas for the punch, in my backpack."

"You are the absolute best person on the planet." Belhaus's face is layered like confetti. Fear, deranged, ecstatic: an edifice of many personality disorders on the dance floor together. I'm taking notes on Plysmeer's tics and zealous anticipation.

Bel drags me to the Hollywood-bulbed mirror and we stand hand in hand facing it. "No," she says. "Just no." She unzips a cosmetic bag and turns me away from the mirror. She rakes through every area of my face with small, medium, and large brushes over hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, cheeks, and lips. My eyes are shut. My scalp is tingling. Is it because of this attention or the blotter kicking in? I pray we end up in the same latitude with this stuff. I've heard a few stories of disconnected tripping. I use Mom's line: "Expect the unexpected and you will do just fine."

Mom says everyone come into this world with at least one weeping wound, if they're lucky, or hundreds that dredge themselves up and attach to each human. These infected, open sores won't scab up until the person acknowledges that these

are not self-imposed.

“Each wound is septic,” she says. “You know what that means? It terrorizes the entire body and nervous system.” Jabs rocks and holds his head in his hands to keep it from shaking. “This,” Mom says, “is the thickest and most enclosed tomb you’ll ever live in. Don’t think for a minute this isn’t a haunting that will try to grind you down to an abstract.” These are the kind of bedtime stories Mom tells them. “Jabs has decades to let his reveal itself.” She looks at me. “And stop monitoring the poor child. The police wrung him over again and again. He can’t remember, but he’ll find his way.” I smirk, but keep writing in my notebook. I carry one of those small flip-tops that stuffs easily in my back pocket.

When Jabs is thirteen-years-old he comes out of his room wearing a collage of women’s photos from magazines and books that he has cut and taped to his naked body. He tries to twirl a few times and laughs.

Mom’s mouth floats from her face. She makes gurgling sounds that stray around swollen air in the kitchen.

I clap my hands. “Jabs is an exhibitionist’s exhibit. Where’s my camera?”

Mom moves toward Jabs and swoops him up in her arms. Limp and sandwiched in Mom’s embrace, Jabs is jelly. Mom is crying. I’m still wondering about Dave Cooper. The kidnapper is never spoken of anymore.

“Don’t you like it?” he asks. She carries him back to his room and closes the door behind them. She does that a lot after his kidnapping.

“I’m going out. Can I have some cash?”

Mom lowers the atlas that is flush, open-mouthed on her belly. “Kazakhstan is as large as Central Europe and has less than fifteen people per square mile? Now that’s a country with some wit. We ought to sterilize the next five generations. What’s with this desire to see a mirror in every howling infant that shoots out of another croaking uterus?” Mom sighs and lifts the atlas. “My purse is on the kitchen counter. If you must debase yourself with tedious socializing, don’t blame me ten years from now when you’re in therapy. Look at your younger brother.”

Mom buys a new species from the Audubon Society every year for my birthday, each with its own squawk when a button is pushed. I point at a robin when I’m three and say ‘robin’.

“Did you hear that? Elva erupted into this infested hole of humanity with a purpose. She’s an ornithologist,” Mom says. I home a stash of Mom’s tiny vodka bottles inside the cut bowels of my stuffed bird collection. Vodka burns pleasant blisters on the inside. I am a logical liar, an alcoholic, and a giver-upper. No reason to hide bottles, except to convince myself that I will be punished. Mom wouldn’t bother to search my room, line up evidence, or reprimand me unless she ran out of her stash and that hasn’t happened yet. Dad only beats Jabs and me when he is feeling particularly touchy, feely, and needs to cry. Our bare asses over his knee appear to be his drug of choice and after he smacks us he moans and sobs.

Sometimes Dad wears his striped red, white and blue Speedo around the house. It is more tragic than the hair-encrusted flesh and jangling luggage that stare at me from between his legs.

“Do you have to stand in front of the picture window?” Three houses across the street are within cinematic range. “Why can’t you just wear clothes and drink beer like other dads on the block?”

“Please, Elva, there are infinite lives that one might consider, but inertia of the brain and stomach are not in my repertoire,” says Dad. He is a professor, a jock, and a pervert. A few days home from surgery, his knees look like a head injury, white-gauze bandaged and unbending for over a month. A fading antiseptic odor undercuts his Old Spice. “Doctor said no more tennis for these knees. What am I? One of those arthritic bastards notched like a tree trunk? Look at this body. Not a wrinkle. This architecture is an opiate.” He winces when he points his right toe to pose.

“If you’re not going to play tennis anymore, then why do you wear the sweatbands on your head and wrists?”

He has a thing for accessories. Socks, sandals, a moustache and perm he sprays lemon juice on before he goes out, and a gold chain with a blue Sapphire stone he wore home one day and never took off.

“Symbolic artifacts date back 50,000 years. Neanderthals were inventors and artists. Not the imbeciles pounding Pabst and mowing lawns.” Dad readjusts his headband. “Art sends electrical charge to the brain. The knees may have buckled, but the head is still in the game.” Dad vaults his crutches forward, dragging mummified legs with him to the recliner. Mom is the king on the chessboard and I’m the surround-sound pawn who protects her lack of movement.

Mom and Dad sleep in separate bedrooms.

“Your mother and I have a deep commitment to individuality,” Dad says.

“Your father has sex with his computer and I have never been competitive,” Mom says.

Some houses on Harwood Avenue are louder than others. Some houses house families with six to ten raucous kids who are kicked out until dinner. Offspring are stumbling obstacles wrestling around Edgewood Park. The same damn clouds bristle and puff all summer. Faces are blustery and overfed. Tangled teeth, twisted jaws, and panic hood themselves under manic, moronic curses between beer and cigarettes.

Our house is a mausoleum. No one in our neighborhood has just two kids. I pretend there’s another sibling besides Jabs. “Her name is Gertrude. We call her Gertie. She writes to me every week.”

“Where is she?” asks a kid I babysit, Madeline, who is nine and has six brothers.

“In Kazakhstan for pregnant girls. She’s having twins. They need more kids in Kazakhstan, so she’ll give them to charity.”

“Where’s Kaziktown?” asks Madeline.

“In Arkansas. She’ll be back sometime.”

“Show me her letters.”

“They’re in cursive. You wouldn’t be able to read them anyway.”

Madeline believes me. One of her brothers is almost sixteen and has three rolls on the back of his neck. He waits until I’m in their hallway, snaps my head against the wall and lathers his tongue around the back of my throat, gropes at a non-breast. I get why parents have separate rooms.

The mom pays ten bucks an hour to lock us in the kid’s room until they get home. I work other babysitting jobs, but those parents are cheap. They only pay five bucks, so I steal random items and eat Pop-Tarts, ice cream, Fritos, potato chips, and drink through the liquor cabinet. I have a blue floppy dildo the size of a unicorn’s horn, a concertina, three satin negligees, a porno DVD I found under one father’s mattress and stuck in Dad’s computer when I got home. I move stuff. A Bible under the Dad’s mattress in exchange for his porno. He belts the shit out of his five jumpy kids. Wears loafers that look like the hooves of a horse. I give chips and ice cream to the kids. Booze is so rampant I barely make a dent. I mix up keys in the hallway that parade along little brass hooks, take a few from one keychain, pop them on another. A pair of Mom’s stilettos, long forgotten, are placed in the back of their Dad’s closet. Somebody needs to keep families from believing in stability. Choices sorely grieve for themselves.

Sky Paint

Yashas Anil

Lisa's face glistens like the night sky. When she's not stocking shelves or manning the register, she climbs upon a scaffold, lays on her back, and like Michelangelo blankets the ceiling with paint. Her artwork is abstract but always blue, full of turquoise skies, cerulean seas, and Prussian clouds in an indigo cosmos. As she works, the paint drips back onto her, and at night, the bedside light glances off those spots of paint, illuminating her face with a glimmering array of stars. When I look into her eyes, I see a distant twinkle of hope, pulsating within her pupils. She laughs and pushes me and tells me to stop staring.

In sleep she craves an ambient humming of white noise, which drowns out the scraping winds beyond our walls. I've grown accustomed to it too. She folds into me, her unnaturally frigid limbs entangled with mine. I pretend to shiver; she responds with an eye roll and a gentle elbow in the ribs.

"In senior year of high school, you remember that winter at the lake house?"

"Missoula?" I pull our arms back together.

"One morning, we woke up to find a boat off its tether, drifting into the river. We all just watched, but then you-" she stifles a giggle. "You just jumped into the freezing water to grab it!"

I chuckle alongside her, but with a tinge of doubt. "I did that?"

"Crazy, right? You were a different person back then."

"Still, that just doesn't sound like... Are you sure that wasn't Steven? That sounds like him."

Her laughter falls away, and I realize my mistake seconds too late. She doesn't pull from me, but her arms tense up. Our silence gives way to the ambience, still battling the noise outdoors. She mumbles something, and pulls her arm from me to turn out the lights. Neither of us sleep for a while.

The station supposedly opens at ten in the morning, but neither of us gets up to unlock the door until one. The customers come just twice a week, but the business must remain in operation to be eligible for relief checks. The wind is louder in the front; the music struggles against the incessant scraping of sand on metal.

The TV upon the counter tells me the generosity of the East is wearing thin. "Congress is set to vote tomorrow on a budget that would cut relief to the seventy million still living within the Inferno. The vicious dust storm, an aberration six years ago, has since remained a prison for much of the Western USA."

Lisa walks up, motorcycle helmet under her arm, a backpack slung over her shoulder. She gestures to the TV, the men bickering in the Senate chamber. "In Salt Lake, they're protesting to stop this. We need to have a voice, at least for this."

I can't make eye contact with her. "How far is Salt Lake? An hour's drive west? Every minute out there our life is in our hands. They're not going to listen to us anyway."

I follow her past the first set of doors. The final doors part, and we're instantly hit by the turbulent waves of heat outside. As she slides the helmet over her head, she takes a final pleading look at me. "I know you've given up. But that doesn't mean the rest of us can." She disappears into the opaque, brick-colored clouds. Something in my chest feels tight, and sickening. Above us, the sky is nowhere to be seen.

Hours later, a lanky figure in a leather jacket emerges from the haze. Even with a dramatic slouch and a neck that ran near parallel to the floor, he's taller than me.

"That's a fine ceiling you have there. You're an artist?"

I chuckle. "I'm not very creative. That's my girlfriend's work. I'll give her your compliments."

"It's a sight for sore eyes, that blue sky." He's a bit older than most of the travelers.

"Just an oxygen tank, and a couple jugs of water will be fine, thanks."

As we drag the items to the counter, he has a slight grin. Most customers assume I'm curious about what business brings them through the storm. A few years ago, that assumption may have been correct. But I understand it must be lonely, when you have nobody to share your story with.

At the counter, he produces from his jacket an old peanut tin. "My brother, Randy, is in there. A temporary residence, so I'm sure he won't mind."

Placing the tin on the counter, he continues. "A great pilot Randy was; ten years in the Air Force, and he used to fly stunts at the big parade. Back when this all started, he thought his old Cessna could fly him *over* the storm, not through it." He gave a sardonic chuckle, the kind I knew too well.

"They found the wreckage just east of Phoenix. Lucky enough too; any further into the desert and he'd end up like the thousands who were never found." This time he doesn't laugh. Only a grim silence lies upon the fading music and raging winds.

"Where are you two headed?"

"Our old hometown, in Mississippi. We'll trek those old woods we would spend the greater part of a day surveying, taking notes in our journals, drawing pictures of the trees. And then, under that great blue sky, I'll release his ashes into that creek we would spend those hot summer afternoons in." His eyes water slightly, giving them a small twinkle. "I think he'd like that."

I give a short nod. "That sounds nice."

He coughs a little, and looks back at me. "You know, a young guy like you, why spend your life here? Why not try an escape?" He gestures around. "You have no lack of supplies, as far as I can tell."

Escape? Like your brother? I manage to suppress my initial response. "Would you mind listening to my own story?"

"By all means."

In the early years of the storm, with its continuous expansion over Western America, the government gradually abandoned its already disastrous evacuation efforts and instead just tried to coexist with the beast. With 95% of attempted escapes ending in death, the government banned travel in and out of the storm. Of course, there was no authority in the most dangerous wastelands, so this wouldn't stop people from trying.

As long as I had known Lisa, I had known her brother Steven as my best friend. Of the three of us he was the most impulsive, living every day with nothing to lose. I balanced him out with my realism, and Lisa was usually between us; a dreamer, but always reasonable. But that relationship couldn't withstand the chaos of the storm.

Two years into the storm we were celebrating Lisa's birthday. I thought myself a gambler simply for driving an hour to find the nearest bakery. But Steven defied our pleas, driving three hours in the merciless winds to reach the station. He presented to us his idea of a gift; a supposed ticket out of the storm.

The ban on travel made shuttling through the storm a lucrative industry. Steven had sold all his possessions for some dubious supposed expert to drive us in his "storm-proof" truck.

"'Storm-proof,' Steven? Seriously? If that was true, everyone would be evacuated already. Think logically about this. It's a scam!"

"No, no, *you* are the unreasonable one here. Obviously the government doesn't want it's beloved East to be flooded with Western refugees; they don't have the infrastructure for that kind of population boom. So, they put this ban, make up some ridiculous casualty rate, and keep all of us trapped here through fear alone. Think about that!"

I turned to Lisa. "Talk some sense into him, please!" She looked nervously back at me.

"Sis, we could see the sky again." He gestured to the painted ceilings, then in their infancy. "I know you miss it. If there's even a *chance*, shouldn't we take it?"

"And what if we fail?" I started again. "We don't end up back here, thinking better luck next time. We're dead. Forever. No more dreaming about the sky, a new future, nothing. It's over after that. And we can't take that risk."

Steven's anger morphed into disappointment. "I guess you can't. I expected more." He looked at Lisa. "This is it."

Lisa had always mediated our disagreements with casual ease in the past. Now she looked completely unsure of herself. "I want that freedom back too, Steven. I want to see the sky again. But...to die for that?"

Steven threw his hands up. "We're not going to—"

"Steven, please." Tears were coursing down her face. "Just stay here with us. Isn't it enough for us to be together?" She clenched his hand in hers.

He looked at me briefly, and back into her eyes. They embraced in silence, but he eventually broke from her grasp. "I can't keep living like this." And he disappeared into the red clouds.

We cried over each other that night, and the night after that, but it was the last time I ever cried. As if something inside me dried up beyond use.

Do you find that admirable? Do you think anyone ever forgave him for leaving? That in his slow death, miles from anyone who loved him, he was thankful for his pride?

There's another long silence. The stranger puts his hand on mine.
"When I get to Mississippi, I'll raise a glass in your friend's honor."

I fall asleep before Lisa gets back. I float in an endless blue expanse, tranquil and silent. The sky above me is her face, illuminated with a glimmering array of stars. When I look into her eyes, I see a distant twinkle of hope, pulsating within her pupils.

Still Life with Tornado in the Distance

The composition's focus is
on wilted flowers in a quart

canning jar, slumping over
the rim, soaking in discolored

water, bruised fruit in a chipped
ceramic bowl on a table next to

an open window covered by dusty,
sheer curtains hanging limp and

still as the heavy air outside;
barely visible outside, a funneling

cloud splitting the horizon in two

Photographs like Turner Landscapes Leached of Color after Sally Mann

Insubstantial as charcoal
rubbing done on sketch pads,

smeared, almost lost, the way
the land is when dark filters

are applied over lens so only
the memory of what grew here

can be seen: layers of trees,
sloping meadows, stones that

might once have been walls;
an echoing moon; all shadows removed.

Southern Gothic: A Romance after Sally Mann: Outland/inland

Fields of dead flowers
on stalks bent the way

fences are. Trees are stick
figures after a storm,

the corpses of their blooming
paper thin, transparent

as insect wings are.
Memories of the land,

of dreams, porous as
our homes after roofs have

been removed.

Roy Orbison Dreams of Blue Velvet Through My Tears

“Are you the one who found
the ear?” I heard, half expecting
Laura Dern to step out from out
from the shadows of a dream but
the blue lady was there instead,
naked, walking in a blue velvet haze,
and I felt Frank Booth’s hands
on my neck wrapping, squeezing
tight as the blankets in my Bobby
Vinton dream, and the face that
could have been mine in a fractured
mirror warped and stretched out
of shape, is infinite as human rubber
skin bursting into spirit flame and
I was out of breath, grasping for air
and all I can hear is a voice whispering,
“The candy-colored clown they call
the sandman tiptoes through my room
every night just to sprinkle
stardust...” And I think, if I go
to sleep everything will be alright.

Redemption

In this not really a dream
night, two bikers are
playing cut throat poker
for my soul

laying out hands on
the rumpled sheets
of a motel bed as they
drink black jack and jim beam

straight from snub neck
bottles, their leather
vests studded with
polished gem stones

bright as the yes
of by-the-side-of-
a-numbered road
victims

subjects of white cross
vigils with flower
garlands and wreathes
draped around the splintered

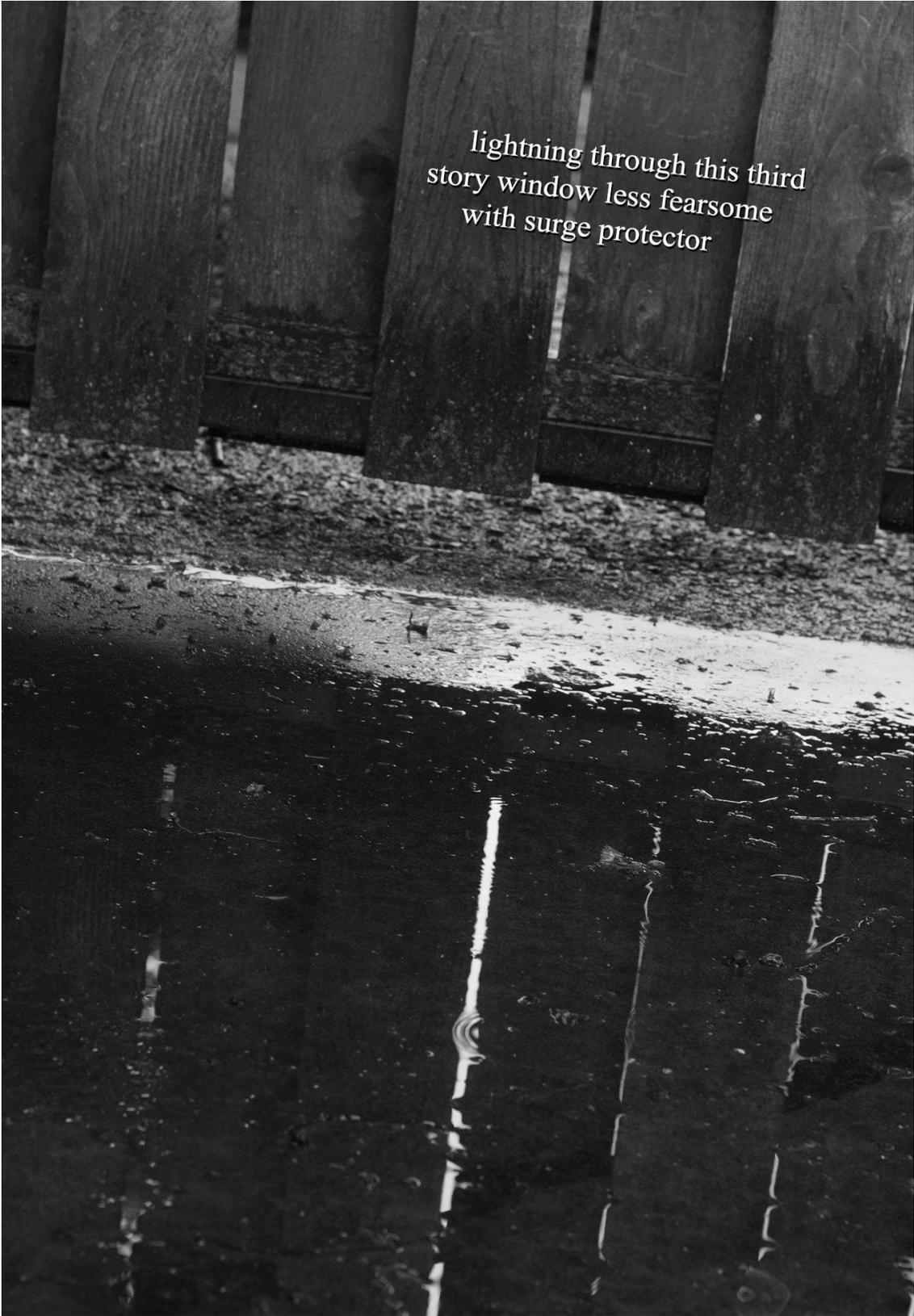
wood one prayer away
from redemption
their skid marks on
the pitted pavement

pointing the way down
diverging crossroads into
places no one returns from

by Jerome Berglund







A Threat to the Common Good

Z.Z. Boone

My mother, Junie, moved us from Dublin, Texas to Connecticut during the summer of 1997. This was shortly after the forklift my dad was operating flipped over, crushed his legs, and put him in a wheelchair. He'd been hired as a temp so there was no insurance, and only minimal workman's comp. The inactivity drove him crazy. He suffered from muscle spasms and chronic sleep disorder, and a doctor had prescribed diazepam. At Junie's insistence he kept the pills hidden away, but occasionally he'd slip up and leave them on the kitchen counter or the bathroom sink. I might cop a tablet, but I was cautious. The last thing I wanted was to end up like my 19-year-old brother. Scottie was in and out of the house, searching for money and drugs when nobody was there, addicted to crack cocaine and living with anyone dumb enough to have him.

When we moved, Scottie stayed behind. I was sixteen. I had no choice.

In Dublin I'd become what people referred to as "a goth." My high school was tiny, around 400 students, and I became known not for academic or athletic ability, but because I wore all black, cut my own hair with a pair of poultry shears, and listened to bands like Poison Idea and The Cocteau Twins. I was constantly in trouble, mostly for being late, for not paying attention, for constantly chewing gum. "Marcus is attempting," a school councilor told my parents, "to carve out his own niche."

The reason for our relocation was pretty simple. Bills and mortgage, no income. Junie had a sister in Danbury whose husband had been offered a one-year assignment with Union Carbide in Alberta, Canada, and she didn't want to go through the hassle of renting their house to strangers. Junie jumped at the offer, put our own house on the market (where it would remain for over a year), and talked up the beauty of the changing New England seasons and all that fresh-caught fish. She assured the old man that she'd keep him active, and she promised me that the education I'd receive up north would certainly be better than what I was receiving in Texas.

By August we were settled. Junie found work at one of the major motel chains just outside the city, not far from the Civic Center. She worked the lobby kiosk from noon until eight-thirty. Sold magazines and gum and candy along with tiny-sized toilet essentials that people always forget at home. Junie would get in late sometimes which meant I had to tend to the old man: get him onto his shower chair, sanitize his plastic piss-bottle, help him into bed, clean his castor wheels. I didn't love it, but I didn't mind all that much. I liked the old man and admired how he held up, the way he refused to be babied, the fact that he found things to do with other handicapped people like bowling and throwing darts and drinking shots of whiskey. I also liked cooking for him. He appreciated the meals I made in a way Junie never did. You could cut this steak with a fork, he might say. Or, those fried potatoes just showed me what I've been

missing all these years. Junie was more likely to say, don't fuss. Can to pan. Campbells' Chicken Noodle gets me by fine.

I'd see her some mornings after she'd was away all night and ask where she'd been. I mostly got the same answer. "I was too tired to make it through traffic. Had to crash in one of the rooms and hope no one rolled in looking for a vacancy."

She'd trot home all kinds of stuff. Mostly brand-new clothes, but other things, too. Books and craft kits and board games still wrapped in cellophane. When I asked, she said people left them behind at the motel and they were there for the taking.

* * * *

I'd been born with a clubfoot, my left wider and a size-and-a-half smaller than my right. I was forced, because one leg was slightly shorter, to wear these chunky-looking orthopedic shoes that may as well have had the words "human curiosity" emblazoned on the side. What I wanted were well-worn combat boots, like the pair I stared at in the window of the Danbury Army/Navy store on Main Street. They were patent leather with steel zippers up the sides, but mammoth, like size-12 or something.

Danbury High School had about ten times the number of students Dublin had, and I felt like a steer going from a small ranch to a large slaughterhouse. It was noisy and confusing and unruly, and even though I tried to keep my head down as I walked through the congested halls, there was something that made me look up this one morning, and my life was instantly changed.

She wasn't in any of my classes, but I'd pass her in the hall on my way to business math. She'd smile at me, and I pretty much put aside the fact that she smiled at everybody. I found out her name. Claudia Cross. She was as straight-looking as a church organist, but I could see myself stumbling through life with someone like that. I was realistic enough, even in eleventh grade, to envision life ten-years in the future and it didn't involve a woman with a sleeve of tats, pierced eyelids, or a shaved head.

There were really only two kids I got along with. I met the guy in the boy's room on the second floor. He was standing in front of the mirror, dressed pretty normal, untucked shirt and jeans. "Show you something?" he asked when I walked up to the sink next to him.

"I guess."

He unbuttoned the shirt, then turned to face me. Underneath he was wearing a tee that said, "Jesus Is a Cunt."

"You think the fucking anarchists who run the place would kick me out for this?"

"It *is* offensive on a number of levels," I said.

He smiled, then thanked me, then held up his clenched hand. "Sal Fashetti," he said. "Welcome to my nightmare."

Later, in front of the school, he introduced me to his girlfriend. Her name was Roselee and she wore a ton of mascara, black lipstick with hair dyed to match, and a dead flower pinned to her jeans jacket. I knew I'd found my people.

In December, they somehow talked me into going to this thing called “Snow Ball.” We decided only hours before, the decision being reached in Sal’s basement while we drank Jägermeister and listened to Patti Smith.

Danbury High School had dances, it seemed like, every ten minutes. For this one, the gymnasium was decorated with plastic icicles, and sleigh bells, and a big Styrofoam igloo that the chaperones had to stop couples from crawling into. We’d brushed our teeth and straightened up, but Roselee reminded us we weren’t there to socialize. We were there, in her words, “to goof on the posers.” Which we did, the three of us bent over in one corner, giggling like fools, rising up only to pick out someone who we’d compare to an animal.

“Bat,” Roselee would say pointing to some kid with stick-out ears, and we’d almost keel over laughing. “Here’s a fucking llama,” Sal would say just as a long-necked girl walked by, and we’d have to hold our sides.

Claudia Cross came in about that time, and Roselee noticed the immediate change in my attitude. Claudia smiled and nodded in my direction as she passed. I smiled and nodded back.

“Look at Marcus,” Roselee said to her boyfriend. “Making eyes with Nancy Numb-Lips.”

Music was played over the P.A., most of it “Top 40’s” with a few oldies pitched in. We knew better than to expect the stuff we listened to. No Green Day, no Ramones. Alice Cooper was pretty much an antique by that time, but “You and Me,” was playing and it was at least close to music we could stomach.

“C’mon, you two,” Roselee said stretching two lacy black-gloved hands in our direction.

“You go,” I told Sal, and I watched them clutch each other like two kids in a haunted house, and carelessly collide with the other couples on the floor. I envied them, I really did, and I decided screw it. Take a shot.

Claudia Cross was standing over by the water fountain, next to the door that led to the locker rooms, and she was talking to this tough girl everybody called Honeydew. Some long-snouted guy wandered over (we had already identified him as a badger) and led Honeydew to the dancefloor. I looked back over at Claudia, figured I’d probably be rejected, but imagined it’d be done kindly and without fanfare.

By the time I reached her the song was half-over, but she said, “Sure,” and even though I was no dancer, even though my clubfoot made it almost impossible for me to walk up an entire staircase without stumbling, I managed to remain upright.

Claudia’s hair was puffed up and ratted-out like Neneh Cherry from her days with The Slits. She was shorter than I was and as we danced, the top of it touched my chin. We didn’t talk much, but she did ask my name and I told her. I probably shouldn’t have, because I suspect that’s when it happened. The music ended and I thanked her, and as I crossed the gym floor, I became aware of a couple of things. Sal and Roselee had started dancing to some Billy Joel song, and the gum I’d been chewing was gone.

I pictured it nestled somewhere in Claudia's hair, being discovered by one of her friends or worse, Claudia herself finding it when she got home. One thing I did know. *I* wasn't going to bring it to her attention. Because maybe she wouldn't even make the connection. I mean it could be from any number of guys, right?

Yet, I didn't want to be around when whatever took place, took place. I waved to Sal who waved back, then I made my way out of the building and walked home, expecting a squad car to pull up at any second and lock me up, a threat to the common good.

When I got home, I decided if I ever needed a diazepam, this was probably the time. With Scottie down in Texas, the old man had apparently decided—initially, anyway—that hiding his prescription wasn't a concern anymore. Our first week in Danbury I'd located the pills in the medicine cabinet wedged between the glycerin suppositories and the Pepto Bismol. My mother still wasn't back from work and this was Friday, the night the old man bowled with his team of wheelchair buddies who called themselves The Rollers. It was all pretty perfect until I got to the bathroom and the pills weren't there.

A couple of days before we moved, I was helping Junie pack up and ran across the old man's hiding place. He'd stashed his diazepam in an upper dresser drawer and kept them rolled inside a pair of red Valentine socks he never wore. Who knows? Maybe he'd gotten wise to me filching one or two and decided I couldn't be trusted any more than my brother.

I searched. The red socks weren't among the others and every other pair was empty. I rummaged through the dresser, but they weren't there. I moved over to the bedroom closet. Nothing on the floor with the shoes, nothing hidden in the jacket or pants pockets. I pulled over a chair to stand on and searched the back of the top shelf where my mother kept the hats she no longer wore. Underneath a wide-brimmed straw number, I hit a manila envelope.

Inside were about twenty Polaroid photographs. Junie was naked in a few of them, and in others she was wearing a towel or panties or lying on her stomach across a motel bed with the sheet covering her butt. In one she was standing with her top totally exposed and holding a bible in front of her lower part. In the picture that bothered me most, she was smiling and sitting topless at a desk with pencils under her breasts like it was all one big chuckle.

I wondered how she could do that to her husband, this man confined to a wheelchair for the remainder of his life, and I hated her.

I heard some activity in the driveway and scrambled to return everything the way it was. When I looked outside, I saw the Care-A-Van that transported the old man back and forth, watched as the lift was lowered, started downstairs as soon as I saw the driver get out. I was in the kitchen pouring myself some milk when I heard him call from the living room.

"Junie?!"

"Not home yet!"

He wheeled in and said hi, and I asked him how bowling went.

“One twenty-one and a one-twelve. Not quite up to par with the good old days.”

I knew what he meant. Back before the accident, he and I hit Penny Lanes pretty much every Sunday afternoon. Those days it was nothing for the old man to roll 200, maybe 210.

“How was the dance?”

I leaned my butt against the table and told him about the gum. He listened like a chaplain in some old war movie, then said, “You probably swallowed it.”

The possibility had never occurred to me.

“You were nervous,” he told me. “When people are nervous, they do things they don’t remember doing. ‘I wonder if I turned off the stove. I’m not sure I locked the front door.’”

“That’s true.”

“If you didn’t swallow it, you probably spit it out before you asked the girl to dance.”

“I guess it’s possible.”

“I wouldn’t waste a lot of time worrying about it.”

This conversation broke my heart a little. A guy who can’t stand up and bowl a decent game sitting there comforting his son while his wife is out doing something crazy. I asked if he wanted something to eat.

“I had a cheeseburger at the bowling alley,” he said. “You up for a little TV?”

I told him sure, and it was at that exact time that the front door opened, and Junie walked in carrying a shopping bag with what looked like a folded pair of permanently creased chinos on top.

“How are my two men?” she said. She handed me the shopping bag and told me to go through it.

“See if anything fits,” she said.

Try as I might, I was unable to stop thinking about Claudia Cross. How green her eyes were, how smooth her hand felt in mine, how she smelled like those cloves you stick on the outside of a baked ham.

As the weekend went on, I was hounded by the thought of what might have happened during that dance, actually sitting up in bed late Sunday night and saying out loud, “It probably fell out on the floor!” I reached over and turned on my lamp, cleared my head, and decided to devise a plan.

I would totally change. Become not some gum-chomping, Texas weirdo, but one of them. A poser. I would join the ranks of square adolescents and I would win over Claudia Cross beginning that very next day.

I’d start by asking her out on a fairly innocent date. I had fifty dollars in birthday money I’d gotten from my Uncle Murray, and that kind of cash could buy us a pretty decent night out: bowling, gas for Junie’s car, an entire pizza at DeCarlo’s down from the school.

The following morning, I put aside my black jeans and sweatshirt. Hung up my leather belt with the skull-and-crossbones buckle. From the bag of clothes Junie had brought home, I pulled out a pink shirt with a button-down collar, the chinos with the permanent creases, and a brown V-neck sweater. I clipped my nails and polished my orthopedic shoes. I showered and slicked my hair with a dab of Vaseline, splashed on some of the old man's Brut.

This was the one day of the week when I didn't have to ride the bus. Roselee's sister, who worked at Sizzler, was off on Monday and Roselee got to drive to school in a big Impala with a front bench seat. Sal would ride shotgun with me sandwiched in the middle.

"Jesus," Sal said when they picked me up. "What happened to you?"

"It's only temporary," I said.

"I hope so," Roselee said as I slid over next to her. "You look like my grandfather's grandfather."

The three of us separated and headed for separate homerooms once we got to school. By 9:15, I was standing in the hallway outside Room 131—me and about twenty-five other students—waiting for the classroom to be unlocked. I was being gawked at as if I was in a full-body cast, and I heard one girl say to another, "Who's the dweeb?"

We were waiting for Señor de los Santos, our Spanish teacher who was always late. Usually he'd come dashing down the hall, at least five or ten minutes after class was scheduled to start, holding out his room key and saying something like, "*Lo siento. Mucho tr^á fico.*"

"Is that him?" I heard someone say.

I thought the comment was in response to our teacher's arrival, but it wasn't. It was intended for me as I soon learned when I was face-to-face with a very torqued-up Honeydew, Claudia by her side.

"I hope you're happy," Honeydew said. "I hope you and your little friends got a kick out of ruining a girl's life."

"Hi, Claudia," I said.

"Hi, my Aunt Fanny," Honeydew said, and then to Claudia, "Show him."

My classmates closed in, apparently anxious to witness some grotesque disfigurement, but when Claudia turned, the only thing out of place was a bald spot about the size of a quarter on the back of her head.

"Oh, God," I said. "I'm so sorry."

"Fucking tool thought he could get away by wearing a disguise," Honeydew said to the assembled. And to me: "You're going to pay for this, mister. I don't care if I have to hunt you down myself." She whisked what appeared to be a very embarrassed Claudia away into the sea of bodies slowly moving through the hall like lava.

"Why doesn't she comb it over?" I heard somebody say, and then the bell rang, and teenage bodies began shooting around as if they'd been electrified. I stood there totally humiliated, my new clothes pointing me out like a neon sign, silently cursing de

los Santos and his inability to—just this once—arrive on time.

The rest of the day didn't go any better. By third period, I'd dumped the sweater, untucked the shirt, and tried to wash my hair in the boys' room sink using that syrupy liquid soap. The end result wasn't good, and in fourth period English, Ms. Randazzo took one look and asked if I needed to see the nurse.

I rushed out of the building when the last bell rang, my coat pulled up over my head like some convicted mobster being duckwalked out of a courtroom. I waited for Sal and Roselee in the student parking lot, standing outside the locked Impala and impatiently shaking my leg, and that's when the day I swore couldn't get any worse, did. Claudia Cross was like three cars over, wearing a trench coat with its hood up, and leaning against this huge Buick Riviera owned by Bobby Haggerty.

I think probably every high school has its own Bobby Haggerty. He was like 20-years-old and still in 12th grade. Dumb as a stone wall, but good looking and confident, able to maneuver a cigarette and a toothpick without removing either. He had Claudia more or less hemmed in, surrounded by the Buick's fender and his leather-covered arms, but if she was finding the situation unpleasant, she gave no hint. Between kisses, she'd smile and nuzzle which seemed to cause Bobby's hips to involuntarily pump like a dog with a couch cushion.

"Ready?"

Sal and Roselee had caught me staring, and I was waiting for one of them to say something mean, like *what-do-you-expect?* but I guess they recognized the situation.

"Why do girls have to be such sluts?" I said when we were about halfway home.

"Hey!" Roselee said.

"I don't mean you, I mean..."

"Women in general," Sal said

I nodded and Roselee said, "Listen to yourselves. You sound like two pathetic guys with no place to stick it."

When I got to the house, the old man was sitting out on the porch with a bottle of gin and the plastic tumbler from the bathroom. It was red and decorated with mermaids, and there was a toothpaste stain from somebody's lips on the rim.

The temperature had dropped to maybe forty degrees, but he wasn't even wearing a jacket. He seldom drank in the afternoon, but from the looks of things he'd been at it awhile.

I knew why.

That morning, after Junie left for work and while he brushed his teeth, I balanced that manila envelope on the edge of the closet shelf. Set it up so that when the old man sorted through his pressed shirts, which he did every morning without fail, it'd practically fall in his lap.

"Why are you dressed like that?" he said.

"School thing," I told him. "We were all supposed to come in looking like assholes."

“Well if there was a prize you should’ve won it.” I started for my room, but stopped when he said, “What ever happened with the gum?”

“I didn’t swallow it.”

“Ouch.”

“Plus, the toughest girl in school says she’s going to make me pay.”

He shook his head, then said, “Any chance you might make us one of those egg-pie things?”

“Frittata. Yeah, sure. Let me get out of these clothes.”

It’s fair to say that our lives weren’t the same after that. By March, the old man and Junie had had it out, followed by a lot of uneasy silence, and ending with the old man moving in with a woman he’d met while playing canasta. Her name was Ethel and she had cerebral palsy. Around that same time, Junie was driving me to a concert in Poughkeepsie where a band called *Agitation* was playing. She been handed her two-week notice from the motel—they claimed she wasn’t working up to par—and for some reason she picked this time to tell me where all the stuff she brought home was coming from.

During trade shows, merchants would bring samples to display. When these shows closed, rather than pack the stuff up and send it back, they gave it to Junie. It seems she was more than happy to express her appreciation.

She also told me that the old man had accidentally seen some “snapshots” in which she posed “somewhat provocatively.” She didn’t come right out and blame me, but it seemed pretty evident she knew.

“Explains why he left,” I said.”

Junie shrugged. “Maybe it was the final nail that broke the camel’s back,” she said, and I didn’t bother unmixing the metaphor.

“Why would you do something like that?”

“I still have a good body,” she said. “Men appreciate that.”

“I don’t think I need to hear anymore.”

“If it sounds to you like I was a prostitute, I wasn’t. Never took a dime. But I was lonely, and your father was no longer functioning in certain areas I missed.”

We both stared at the road in front of us.

“I’ll tell you one other thing,” she said. “We’d have been the best dressed family in town if you two hadn’t been so damn choosy.”

I made him his frittata that afternoon, a nice one with bacon and mushrooms, but after I went out to bring him inside, the old man was just sitting there, his head slumped to the side. I was afraid at first that Honeydew had gotten to him, her first in a series of paybacks, except then I heard him snore and watched his body quiver. After I put the frittata in the refrigerator, I retrieved the fifty bucks from my room, put on my coat, and covered him with a blanket on my way out.

I walked to the Army/Navy store on Main Street. They still had that tatty pair of combat boots in the window, so I went inside and dropped twenty bucks on them.

“These babies have seen their share of shit,” the long-haired guy behind the counter said, and I wanted to tell him that was cool, because so had I. The boots were way too big, but I wore them out of there, moving a little unsteadily, my orthopedic shoes in a cardboard box under my arm.

A Guest House in the Far North

after the painting "Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre" by Peter Doig

No road has been paved
to this welcoming white gate
and stone bridge you assume
crosses over the night to a dark
island of untold tranquility.
The wind, passing through distant
conifers, warms a turquoise storm
hulking inland from the sea. An aurora
licks the stars, whipping their light
across the sky. Two guardsmen,
flanked by ghostly trees, wait patient
and amused. They angle the gate open,
its iron hinge creaking between the sound
of the breakers. They seem ready to forgive
the fare you don't possess, an amount
they haven't yet divulged. As you approach,
you sense the softness of the grass
beyond the gate and feel the closeness
of the storm. But now, you see
that the guardsmen's overcoats are rough
and they are smirking at you and the gate
has always been locked.

Hills on the Horizon

after the painting "Visions of Eternity" by Salvador Dalí

Eternity is scoured so flat
shadows erode into emptiness.

Sky razors land, a crease untouched
& unknowably distant, erased

by the gnawing eons into something
bleached & gore-less. Even the thought

of rain evaporates before a millimeter
falls onto the glasslike earth.

Awash in the crushed hues of timeless,
directionless light, I'm a skeletal

pauper on a salt flat of whispers.
I have the many names of traveler,

a stride that tumbles like firewood.
All that I own fills a net heavy

with the haze of daybreak. Even
the gardener, in his ragged ruin,

overlooks me. He's weightless,
black-&-blue in his thin smock.

Perched, he'd float away if he weren't
lifeless. I want to say the joke's on him,

but this is the six billionth time
I've come this way & I suspect

one day the sun will burn through—
& then I must ask him for a favor.

To pull my feet together & point them
toward the hint of hills on the horizon.

But by that time, we may be eaten away,
atomic tendrils wisped into an airless sky.

For now, the gardener remains hunched
over his seeds & I still seek mountains,

slowly learning perfection isn't our aims,
but the surprise of a well-lit archway.

Echoes

after the painting “Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray” by Piet Mondrian

The world at the end
of the tunnel
closing in your eyes

becomes jumbled.
Filling with the shine
of oxygen debt.

The diminished sun
detaches from the sky
and retreats to a corner.

The sky converts
to a slice of water.
Trees narrow

into perfectly vertical
posts. No wind disturbs
this landscape.

A blip of red,
the heat-of-life
kind of red,

digs just a little bit
into the tunnel walls
of your vision.

Maybe the red is
your hand or foot.
You cannot tell which

line is the horizon
and which is the flat field
you’re running through.

You know you'll have to stop
somewhere in that infinite
space of zero depth.

A space that echoes
with the echoes
of time.

With the echoes
of the world
breaking apart.

Much like the echoes,
you'll push yourself
to this moment, again

and again, to find a way
past the black door
somehow anchored

between the jumble
of sun, horizon, and field.
A closed door

leading to the place
where the echoes
finally recede,

and in that restful
quiet, you can give
them an answer.

Or maybe the door
is already open
and it leads to nothing.

Aubade

Sometimes the journey is arduous
but the effort is left out of the narration,
which is why in Buñuel's film
we are slammed with the vision
of three heat-stifled French couples
wiping their brows, staggering on the road
again and again, he wants us to understand
the actors, even the real people, don't always
arrive easily at their destination.

I remember large stones in the road
as a path wound up and around.
Intermittent signs said to keep going,
the car having let us out on the highway
so long ago it was now late afternoon,
shadows hiding the rocks we stumbled upon,
obscuring view of the plateau we were aiming for,
where we arrived in the dark, *auberge de jeunesse*,
the youth hostel of Cassis.

And now we are truly seeking youth
but not finding it, slight resurgences occur
and then fade, as if Buñuel is making a film
of our lives, leaving in all the bits we wished
we could leave behind, the embarrassments,
the slights, the prevarications, and we carry
them along with everything else, wondering
if youth was the only time we looked ahead
with curiosity, reassuring ourselves
the darkness would lift when morning came.

Getting Back to the Garden

By day I studied Music 101,
Stravinsky beguiling us
with his opening notes,
how the lazy worm of spring
traversed the mouth of the rose,
and at night we reenacted
stomping out the rite of spring,
shouting the lyrics of Seattle's
garage band, the Kingsmen's
A Louee Lou-Eye, and thought
we knew what all the words
meant, we heard them say
I felt the rose in her hair.

So when the professor asked us
last week, fast forward fifty years,
why Dante had chosen the rose
to symbolize the Virgin Mary,
the answers flew around the classroom,
the petals like the organization of the church,
the flower as a messenger of love.

I wanted to tell them what they had missed,
what Dante actually said
if we had only paid attention,
how Mary's womb was a tunnel of love
lit by a flame that opens the flower
and makes it bloom.

Sauntering Along the Via Piazzuola, 1967

Not one of the women smiled
at the creature they saw, but turned
and clucked at her long legs,
how she strutted toward the bus stop
dressed in scarlet wool slipped
over a collared blouse.

Where would she have found
materials like these, not in their
domain, not in their *negozi*,
and who was she, swinging
a plastic yellow purse over her
shoulder, where would she be
going, perhaps a loose woman
as her clothes suggested,
an assignation, a rendez-vous,
too much time on her hands.

Her own mother had picked out
the red jumper, odd that nobody
here wore anything like that,
all the older women donned
housecoat-like dresses, in
purply prints or more often black,
and the way they looked at her,
on her way to a refectory
where she hoped to find
the faint rendering of a last
supper by Perugino himself,
that's what she was smiling about,
she wished she could convey
this somehow, the way
she saw herself.

Siena, the Palio

At first it was rather thrilling,
disgorged by our bus into the piazza.
We didn't know which way to look,
where the flag-tossers would be coming from,
craning to see the prize displayed on the oxcart,
il palio, waves of bodies surrounding us,
hemming us in.

One of my fellow students laughed
but I couldn't hear what he said, the snake
that was our group had extended itself,
and I was now surrounded by Italians,
claimed by one of the *signori*,
his hand on my bum.

The exploration of *terra firma*, as my flesh
might once have been described,
up and down and circling,
it all seemed interminable,
the cage shut tight.

I think it was the horses saved me,
the gunshot released them and at the same time
the crowd loosened, some surging ahead to see,
some falling back, nowhere else to go.

At the end of the day I remember my professor
grilling me, hadn't it been spectacular,
was I able to see the race,
what did I think of it all.
My face must have frightened him,
how I couldn't speak again of any of it,
spare me the Palio, I told him,
your jokes about the *droit du seigneur*.

Watching the Names Appear

Like renewing a driver's license,
reporting to the court the most recent
enslaved person's child born in the
previous year, Sukey daughter of Doll,
Cato son of Bet, no one asks how
they are faring, only how strong,
whether ownership is proved by paper
contract, or by bombs raining on them
as they walk away from the only home
they have known, Aleppo, Mosul,
Mariupol. The right not to be owned
by someone else keeps you walking,
hoping for a railroad underground,
a stopping place, a theater where
each neighbor has found their
own corner, no, no, you're fine,
I'll just go outside for a minute,
get a breath of fresh air, only to hear
the sound of a drone overhead,
like the crack of a a whip,
your moments are numbered,
your family inside,
no performance today
unless it's bombs
hitting the stage,
but no one,
no one is clapping.

Mise en scenes

Ian C Smith

The trek out from the rural site leaves their skin lustrous striding away to a drumroll of crickets watched hard by locals who could pass as extras in a Wim Wenders movie. Paris, Texas, he says – although they are in New Hampshire – squirreling these days into memory's hoard. She often doesn't know where they will sleep, doesn't know exactly what a road movie is, senses, always, lurking tendrils of trouble realising she could be sharing a *Women's Weekly* package tour of Europe with her mother. He remembers forcing a cheery phone tone in his office high above wage-hound terrain bullshitting clients about overdue shipments at management's insistence, chafing, chafing, despite the massive pay hike and not wearing a tie. His small car held up for minor repairs, he borrowed the panel beater's truck, racetrack loud. Window down, radio louder, he sang along with *Creedence*, yearning for something. Distance, perhaps?

No dancing breeze, no sight nor sound of a car, of anything, his suggestion they should cross the road if they hear one approaching from the opposite direction ludicrous, she goes along with it but baulks at sticking out her thumb. *The Long Hot Summer*, he explains, plucking seeds from his socks. Got that right, she thinks, humouring him with a tight smile.

Hair longer, teenage marriage cluttering the cutting-room floor of his imagination's biopic, some bleak romances later, more sex than substance, his first passport now with several stamps, he does youth hostels, totes a tent to save running costs, and fruit juice laced with vodka, America a pulsing montage of all the movies he has absorbed from Altman to Zemeckis.

This should soon be a wrap, she hopes, not a big fan of long movies, especially epics. His flirtation with danger stupid, not glamorous, she wants the screenplay of his mind to fade to black. He might settle down again. Babies? Hmm. Then a growly Camaro, exhaust dragging a spark shower, slows, a looming close-up. Its driver announces a giant hangover. You drive, he demands, tossing keys her leading man deftly segues to her. Packs loaded, their seedy benefactor settling to sleep, she guns the engine, thinks, Whoever scripted this should be fired.

From the Volcano: An Acid Odyssey (parts 5, 6 and 8)

Five:

3 a.m. route 50 cross the bay bridge headed east, smell the ocean hours away, the thunderpig with the top rolled down, talking about all the bikinied blonde babes we'd find there -- on past the little brick burgs, the wainscotted cottages, farmhouses, barns, past the tobacco crops, tall yellow corn, and left at the barbecue stand where we never stopped for chicken or ribs but always wanted to, cause in those days and in those places it was like riding through the south -- stay in the car and keep on trucking until you get to the shore . . . on across delaware's two major highways until you get nowhere but have to turn right, past the old orchards of pick-your-own poison and down to the ramshackle tent site they'd rent us for five bucks a night -- then with the tent up and all the flaps zippered, out came the rolling papers and the magic loco smoke... into the town the magical colors the smells and the sounds and the sights, the boardwalk, the sand on your feet and the sun on your back, you could almost feel your hair go lighter as the images congealed and you pushed them away with the palm of your hand, chased them away with beer in an air-conditioned bar, ate them away with a grotto pizza, licked them away with a dip-top cone . . . "yes," we agreed, glad to have found it, "if the beach is a woman we just got laid" and miles away in the black-on-black of the sea and sky the tankers charted their courses north and south like spittle from the mouth of the delaware bay . . .

Six:

they were the kind of couple who didn't need to talk -- he always knew when she was hurt, when he had hurt her, caused the realization of her own mortality, the icy fingers of her stuck-like-a-truck-in-a-ditch on-route-9-north-of-anywhere-usa sense of incompleteness, the inexactitude with which she had pursued life like a dream highway with no map and picked him up, and at times like this when she was feeling the hopelessness of utter despair he felt like free shit in a barnyard, felt the cigarette ash of his soul burning down to his unfiltered but -- felt the swirling dizzy lack of direction his life seemed always to have taken -- he always knew when she was glad because she swam through the cloud of happiness in which she'd wrapped herself like a fish in a bowl of water only she picked up the bowl and carried it with her, insulating herself for the temporary time being of the now with her joy from the realities of their situation, the little defeats of their life together, like the sun on a cold cold day, when the temperature falls below zero and the wind cuts like a switchblade in the hand of a punk -- like the sun on a day like that wants you to believe it's summer, or nearly so, and makes you want to take off your clothes -- the wild mood pendulum swings he hated so much but did so little to cure -- that's what kind of couple they were and they were us and we were them . . .

Eight:

and somewhere along the way in the hustle and bustle and general kind of confusion that was d.c. in the days of rage, rage and anger at everybody's parents and the government of the dickless white house, deep in the filing cabinet where justice was hidden away in the secret dark as the faceless, nameless gestapo-minded motherfuckers who ran the country then had stashed it like illicit drugs in hopes we'd forget we ever once had such a thing as freedom, the paranoid five-martini lunch boys made decisions that sent a lot of poor young stupid bastards just like us, sons of moms and dads, across the great blue pearly ocean to the mean green land of ho... it was his but there were people who'd be damned if they'd let him have it back and more young freaks and potential enemies of the fascist republic of amerika got wasted there, more names than you'd care to remember except that somebody wrote them all down on a big black indelible slate, bookmark in the conscience of the country that says "once we were here," and "let's not go back again."

Another Zodiac

Suppose a moon girl
modifies the details

dissolves into vapor,
becomes jeopardy,

a lunar disaster.
Suppose

with each excursion
from earth she forgets

more and more
the tulips, the ravens,

gravity, her cats.
Suppose she tucks

the world inside her jacket,
keeps it cool

against her skin.

QUESTIONNAIRE OR APPLYING APPLYING FOR UNEMPLOYMENT WHILE LOOKING AT PAINT CHIPS

Does the nature of isolation frighten you?

When was your last actual day of work,
and have you received any pay since you began
writing all day in lieu of sickness,
or because of it?

Would you follow the underground community
of wild mushrooms, go where they lead you, leaving
field notes in your satchel, and that left hanging on back
of a chair?

Is it better to know you're not alone?

Have you applied for temporary work
as a maker of masks, a welder of shields, a baster
of gowns, a watcher of birds, of mason bees?

How do you feel in grass greener than its crayon
namesake, scribbled under a.) Friday's red shoes, or
b.) soles open to dandelions, ajuga, the blessings
of tardigrades?

How would you describe the Grand Canyon
devoid of visitors, the viewing platform glass
beneath your feet?

Are you frightened?

What do you know of the slow proliferation
of disinformation seeping into the sanctity
of your home base?

Or is the brush of sage you're smudging with
enough to live on?

Have you applied for retirement amongst the maple trees
or along the Hoh River valley, amidst the Hall of Moss?

Where do you turn when you find the one spice you need
is a long drive away from home?

EMPTY AS A POCKET

in that silence / I imagine that I can see spirits
– “*Before Winter*”, Kwame Dawes

I awake alone, having slept through your leaving.
Outside my window, so close I can grasp them,

maple leaves hang on, a November-stained glass
illuminated through this morning’s rain, sun

somewhere beyond where I cannot go. Last week
my dead came to celebrate a birthday in a field

of horses: my mother, still frail from her journey, father
diminished after leukemia ended him, perhaps

something like reproach in their eyes, I don’t know.
An aunt, a cousin, disembodied embrace. I

was there, and I wasn’t, as in life, when the blood
coursed green. These leaves like hands

wring from limbs shutting down for the winter –
there for a season until wind ushers them gone.

I MEAN, IT'S NOT ALL BAD

Out here we jackhammer, yell *Hey we're losing it* when our homes sink on the rocks. I mean, remember when

we dragged our lawn chairs to shore to watch the Titanic? We're losing our trust, sinking into mutiny, wrapped up

in danger tape. Everywhere someone preys, someone else is praying. Listen hard if you're listening. I'm not one

for repeating myself. Out here, we're mean with marvel, we vulture the canyon lands, blame badness on missed appointments,

on jambalaya leftovers in the crockpot on the porch out back. I won't ask if you remembered to unplug it, won't call

to tell you your house is on fire. I mean, out here we encounter trust like razors and headaches. I said *here*, we still laugh

like jackals, keep dipping our toes into rivers shivering with voodoo, hold matches to our skin when we're blue as twilight,

till we're chalk-lined, profiled, and damn-near dangerous.

I NEED HELP BECAUSE I STILL REMEMBER

when my brain didn't press so hard
against its bone house, when Princess

Diana and Mother Teresa died within days
of each other, how we refrained from sex
because the mood was gone. I need

help because what I remember is
only the red ooze where I opened a window
into bone with a box knife,

a little white staring back at me. I know
you're no palm reader, but you navigated
the new cavern into my thumb

with the deftness of an exhaust pipe. I
need a little Hanky Panky, a little novocaine
because I still bleed over John

Lennon's death, over Yoko's tweet
*A blue dot from the Tokyo sky is in the center
of the page.* I am still the desiccated

Varied Thrush, an ineffective
anti-venom, the aggressive eye of a Brazilian
wandering spider peeking from a banana

box, one prayer away from losing my faith,
one lullaby short of not knowing
where I am.

IF I WAS A BLACKBIRD,

You were the powder keg, a kettle
on hard boil, atremble in a disturbed

sleep of cotted bones. I was your torso
clattered together. Feathered and fathered.

I suffer so, you see, an array of disarray,
it's true. No longer content with devotion,

all a-shatter in mid-winter, a flimsy
flame. Skilled at discontent, what I cultivate

in darkness dismantles me. They've hidden
our sorrows in a sock drawer, discovered

the way to velvet our wings. If I was
a blackbird, you were my history

of obedience, a chalk-lined outline
no amount of acid can absolve.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

When I read *changing the river*
craving the paper came to mind.

The staked delphinium is mistaken by the wind.

Wind is misguided by the capsized
chair, dangling alder arm daring

the husband to walk beneath
on his way to the morning tribune.

No widows today, obits clear of names
that shiver like moths heartstuck

to the butter. Kiss me kiss me,

there are many ways to listen.
I'm not one of your afflictions,

Forget-Me-Not. Affection

isn't one of my strong suits.
A bird on the wind is the widow's dirge.

There are night-songs only crows can interpret,
clouds only a river can digest.

MOTHER AND I SEE A RAVEN AND SOME CROWS ON HURRICANE HILL

Shoo, go away you tell the crows.
I give them silent apology as we long
watch a raven light on a wind-

scrubbed fir. Today
you are a purse of want, slack of word
after eggs over medium, two weak

cups of coffee. *See, that bird's too big.*
It's bending the treetop, you tell me. I know
the subalpine fir grows slowly

at this elevation; one hundred fifty years
of hurricane force won't pitch this eclipse-
black bird from her perch. Tired

from wheeling you up and down
steep trails, drop-offs reaching deeper
than this blur of rock and trees, you fidget,

Are you ready? I want to go - beyond
crows and all that is older and wild wise -
to the gift shop. Raven purrs,

opens her throat, disgorges her own offering,
some ancient rattle of earth and stone
that holds me hostage.

UNDER A SCORPION SKY

These things have been handed to me: an aftermath
of conditions, the way my heart steals my breath,
and delivers it in the morning, a violence of bad blood

and poor burning techniques. Smoke floats ghostly close
and sometimes it's my sole task keeping the borders
of my small acre from shrinking inward. This morning

the clocks kept the old time. Mother didn't come to me
in dreams. Cows grazed in the figmentary garden beyond
her window, her mind a trapdoor, tapestry of time

out of sync, of money stashed in socks, stockpiled pills
beneath the bed. Instead I carried the moon on my back.
It felt like salve, like a chasm opening into a blue balloon.

Through a loophole I escape to a more sanguine sky,
pockets spilling hour-hands, armor and years falling away.

WHEN WE WERE WEIGHTLESS

We swim
beneath skin

Sister
naked

in a saline soup
we twin

after so much
wishing two

trunks twisting
together

bark against bark
we combine

Sister
angelica penny

royal blue &
black

cohosh
cohorts we

cannot go on
this way

forever
blood-beholden

One of us
must confess

B ATHING IN THE MOON

Shadowed pines & *robles*
against the royal sky
Venus stunning in the depths
of stars ... & beyond
the plutonian mystery

I await the full moon
to rise above
cragged snowy peaks,
tendrils of steam
drifting over the pools, over
boulders smoothed
by time,
my muscles
loosening in the hot
waters of this spring

In this austral spring
the eastern sky lightens
with that Taurus lune
nearing the horizon,
our bright star
reflected in the clear
mineral pool

listening to the crickets,
the unseen river rushing
through the forest,
that moon so slowly rising,
Venus quickly sliding
away ...
the steam tendriling
the water, tendriling
around me, into
my pores, to
my roots

Luna now
peeks between the boughs
of the silhouette
roble and pine,
the vapors penetrate
deeper, deeper,
callouses falling away

Her light
rippling now
across this warmth,
across this pool,
tendriling into my self
& Self

EMERGING FROM THE CHRYSALIS

On this late winter day
a dark ochre haze
lays over the horizon
to where I tread,

& finally arrive to
this South Atlantic shore,
dense mist rolling in
from an unseen sea.

*I hide away from the chill,
watching the wealth of
slim, diamonded fingers,
of thick fingers
weaving over fine
foods, fine wines*

*& turn away
from their hushed displays,
my Self emerging
from the chrysalis*

Yemayá now dances beneath
the sun, her clear lapis sea
trimmed with fine white waves.

Four summers ago I offered you
a simple bouquet of
white & indigo wildflowers
gathered from a forgotten garden

& on this day
I watch your mirth
as a *tonina* measuredly
leaps through your deep waters,

the horizon sprayed
by blow spouts of
Southern right whales,
their tailfins rising high,
then splashing, white droplets
rising to the coming spring.

**tonina—Commerson's dolphin*

TO A CALMER PLACE

I often wonder how I got here
where fierce winds batter
my life, memories mounding
like sands duning, burying
my bare feet, duning,
burying my ankles, my shins ...

imprisoning me
trapping me
immobilized
paralyzed

I must break free ...
first wiggle my toes,
flexing my muscles
to fracture those dunes,
those mounds, the sands
slowly cascading, falling away

until I am free –
walk away,
leave those memories,
escape the winds –

journey to a calmer place

The Summit

Lori M. Myers

My kids are looking out from high atop a brick building in the city, behind window guards and glass, I know this because I am seven floors below on an empty sidewalk, looking up, my hand shielding the sun from my eyes. Anton's pudgy little hand scrapes the window with a wave to me, and six-year-old Emma presses her nose against the glass, her breath fogging up the window. My heart swells, my knees shake as if my body might collapse onto the concrete. The only way is up.

The window right next door, same apartment, another room I suspect, tells another story. Shadows dancing. You and her. I can only imagine the moans and promises being made while your children, OUR children, look down and yearn for their mother.

The doorman, his dark eyes piercing fear above the facemask, wouldn't let me in. Only residents can enter this place, and all are sheltered inside their apartments except to go out for essentials or pick up deliveries at their mailboxes. Everyone looks like they are about to rob a bank.

Only a car or two drives by and, every so often, an ambulance siren breaks through the quiet. The concrete façade before me is a tangle of cracks and crumbles, and I sense the danger of this brick puzzle before me. No matter. I lift one foot, then another, toeing into each crevice to raise my body. Little by little. A story at a time.

First story: At the boisterous bar where we met (when you jostled me, shoulder against shoulder, and half my beer poured onto your shoes) I was taken in by your sense of adventure. Your love of risk and being on the edge drew me in. I was so different from you. Small town girl, graduated from a nearby community college, little ambition, little sense. Clearly, I was not you. You had taken a year off and traveled the world, only a backpack and a map for companionship. I imagined your journeys and imagined me experiencing those journeys with you. You made me realize that being cloistered had value, and that even I could venture out when I was ready. You didn't ask for my number that night and that made me want to see you even more.

I returned to the bar the next night and the next. It took a month of nights, of nursing warm drinks, of rejecting the flirtatious, the desperate, the marrieds. Finally, you showed up, leaning against a far wall, a sly smile on your face. Instead of showing rage, which I had every right to feel, my heart beat a million times in that moment. You didn't move from your spot, so I slipped off the stool and in what felt like slow motion and a swallow of pride, walked right up to you.

"Miss me?" you asked.

"Not for one second," I said.

My upward climb is hampered by the buzz and mumblings of several passersby below. "What's she doing?" I could hear them ask inside their masks.

Then another. "Is she crazy?"

Do they really want me to answer that?

Third story: We fell hard. We were so much in love.

"I want to wander," I pleaded. "With you."

"And I want to experience the newness of things through your eyes."

So we did, traveling across the country, picking up hikers and listening to their harrowing tales of survival, philosophizing with an Indian chief on a reservation about indigenous people and how they got screwed hundreds of years ago. We sweat in the Encinitas sun, made sandcastles near Santa Monica Pier, and sipped margaritas in Cabo. We sustained ourselves on scraps of lust and a make believe future hidden behind smoke and mirrors.

I drank very little water today. My thigh muscles start to cramp up as I search for any fingerholds in the brick. Any mountain climber knows that hydration is essential; you'll soon find yourself in trouble and in extreme pain if you're in the middle of a climb and unable to find relief. I grit my teeth and surge forward. I attempt to pump my right leg out and over while using my left leg for support, then I switch. What keeps me going are the powdered smells of those babies, their little faces squished against glass, watching their mommy making their way to them. I can't allow them to see me fail.

Fifth story: In North Dakota, we ascended White Butte Mountain, my first climbing experience. I agreed to do this with only half my wits and the fear that you'd find someone else.

"The only way is up," you said.

We slipped on our snowshoes, pulled the gaiters over our nose and mouth, and made our way up the icy slope. I had insisted we bring along ropes and carabiners just in case, but we never removed them from our packs. I clawed my way, held onto scrubby bushes to push forward as you scrambled up with ease. It was blustery once we reached the summit. You were silent at the top and stood straight and tall looking at the gray skies above, a deserted farmhouse and winding trail below, perhaps planning where you would venture next. I was too busy catching my breath and in disbelief I had accomplished something I thought so impossible. I wanted to cut through your contemplation, to share this success, but you were so in your element, your usually tense shoulders relaxed. I left you to your thoughts and I left me to mine.

Finally, after you've taken in the sights and smells of the summit, you turned toward me and take my hand. "Well, what goes up, must come down."

I'm many yards up in the air, my belly pressed against the cold outside wall. My foot slips a little and a staccato scream sounds from my lips. I inhale once I regain my footing, hold it then reach my hand up to try to find something to hold onto. An ice ax would have been the perfect piece of equipment to cut into bricks, a pulley with rope to hook around the archway right above me? Perfect. Mountaineers know that preparation is the difference between life and death. Obviously, I didn't learn enough. This isn't a hobby. It's not fun like some board game. Climbing any sort of Everest can be a Zen experience. It's exhilarating. You end up not only conquering a mountain, but you conquer your old self. You can never go back.

Seventh story: Neither of us came from healthy people, and so we had no clue how to do it. None at all. We were empty shells waiting for that ocean wave to storm onto shore. Listening for the roar that never came.

I never stopped climbing after you took me that first time. The wanderlust never left, but you loved the kids, had enough of the journeys, wanted more time with them. I wanted to keep climbing mountains because it is on the summit where I find the best of myself. That became our division, our end, and the courts weren't comfortable to place children with someone who was constantly putting her life in danger even if she was the mother.

I am almost there, seventh story. I grasp the ledge, my knuckles torn up and bloody. Anton and Emma bang on the window half crying, half laughing. The noise echoes through the empty city. I hoist myself up, the cramps in my thighs so severe that all I can do is dangle my legs in the hope the pain will ease. I gaze through the bars and glass. Two sets of blue eyes look into mine now, but then they disappear. Their faces have been replaced with yours, a face piercing disapproval.

"Open the window," someone says below. The masked crowd grows, but they don't cluster. They seem to feel sorry for me. They cheer me on; want me to reach the summit.

"Somebody call the fire department."

I stare down then up. I don't plead. I just want to hold my children. So what if I climb mountains. And buildings. I climb anything. I climb to feel me.

If only I had the proper gear to rest here for an hour or two, I could perhaps reason with you. Maybe you'd open up the window and help me over the iron grate. We could share a drink like we used to. Maybe I'd like your new friend. Maybe not. It doesn't matter. There's always something for me to climb, and that's enough. But you can't stand on the summit and admire the view forever.

You don't open it, you don't save me, and I'm slipping. My fingers can't hold on. My body feels like it's drifting down an elevator shaft, down and down and down. And the last thing I hear are the gasps of the masked people who clear the way for me and the alarm from two blocks away.

A Few Sprinkled Words

How far is between the stars, how much farther is what's right here.
—Rilke

Late August evening,
light pollution a pastel scum
fringing the pre-Alps around Lugano.

I watch stars spell themselves.
The Big Dipper points its paw to Polaris.
Under Cassiopeia, the tail end

of the Perseid meteor show,
the dusty trail of the Swift-Tuttle comet
on its 34 year love loop of the sun.

I see only the last sparks,
as small as grains of sand, spluttering
kisses of the final flares.

I'm not putting words in a god's
gaping mouth; no sprung
mechanisms in mysterious workings.

I only have, as Einstein said, a
vague idea about that highest truth,
the radiant beauty of the unsearchable

and a sudden awareness
at how fantastically miniscule
my part is.

A few sprinkled words.

Flowers in Interlaken

*How delicious it is to wake up in a place where no one,
no one in the world, guesses where you are. –Rilke*

He takes time mounting the stairs.
The years are heavy in his lungs.
Peeking out of his small backpack,
a bunch of three yellow roses, a gift
for the woman he's summiting.

Over the last week, many middle aged
and old men have rung our bell,
asked for 'Jason', looked lost, mis-
reading our confusion as confession.
Then sigh with relief and head up.

We joked about it being a brothel,
not the home of an 'American family',
as our holiday rental landlord told us.
No American voices, just shuffling at night.
Today unmistakably squeaky percussion.

No joke anymore. Disgust mingled
with awe that you could be so old
and still desire minutes of conquest.
Perhaps he goes there for the company,
gives roses, talk lovingly of a dead wife.

Hurry On

Drifting the promenade of Desenzano Del Garda,
admiring freshly fallen snow on the mountains
that crown the pointed head of the Alpine lake.
A building north wind promises in waves.
Here is October tightening its chilling dress.

We look down at the orange rock under our feet.
Spun in the dark matter web of irregular lines
a curling ammonite galaxy with ghostly white
shell, a reminder of time flattened in plain sight.
The shell spins and I hear the clocks ticking

trillions of divisions, turning rock into sand,
caterpillars into butterflies, the first hydrogen
atoms into atomic bombs, my young parents
into elderly people remembering their own
parents this age, and me a once immortal boy

now a middle-aged facsimile, puzzled at how
quickly the sand runs. Now back on the promenade,
marvelling at the fossil, pointing it out to friends
who want to hurry on - *aperitivo* calling, snow
falling, wine to be drunk, the absolute-zero of it all.

Not Forgotten

Find perfect tiny blue alpine flowers
forget-me-nots, *Wald-Vergissmeinnicht*

I am reminded of being a little boy
when flowers were
everything beautiful and right about the world.

We collected them, made chains,
pressed and painted them.
Plato would be smiling. But not

the German knight who, wanting to pick
the blue winks for his lady, falls
into a river, drowned by the weight of affection,

'Vergiss mein nicht!' Forget me not!
Remember, yes, but no loss
can be recovered in flowers, however wished.

Between Being and Not Being

We find Rilke facing south on the silent side of the St Romanus castle church, away from the tended family graves of those who lived decades longer than him. His has a rose, yes, but also a dead stick, weeds rife. Perhaps that suits the poet wondering about his place in the world, sculpting words from clouds and whispers, the dynamics of near death.

I think of those wild weeks in February, 1922, Orpheus singing in wildly strung winds, the ghost of Wera dancing in snowy whirls Eurydice's frozen cliff face beside the Rhone, that constant glacial urging of his angels and the mountains above, parting seas of clouds, then sinking back into your questions. Where better to demand a definition of life.

In the castle museum, the curator is keen to assure me that five francs is worth the visit, even with one room to you, all in German. I'm glad to visit, to see your face, those sad searching eyes that looked out of towers, seeing this valley as the art of light incarnate, finding spaces between being and not being, the angel and beast, the visible and invisible.

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The Trout

I see you sliding
over the muddy gold
bed of the shallow river
as it slips into Lake Lugano.

You follow a flittering
shoal of hope, gliding
the thin layers between
the different forms of air.

I'm surprised by your size
as you snuggle into the sheets
of river and light. Lord
of the muddier moments,

King-sized in a peasant course,
you draw me down the line
of the green-grey water
until merging with the unseen.

Time Traveller in Sion

*For the creative artist, there is no impoverishment
and no worthless place.*

–Rilke

Outside the Grand Cafe in Sion he rests,
a Victorian artist from a Vallais art school,
just up - afternoon coffee and custard pastry
crumbs in his jaundiced beard, scattering
down into his pyjamas, greying slippers.
Dressed in questions, he has pan-pipes strung
around his neck, and a Peruvian woven bag
from which he fishes a notebook and pen
to write or sketch in a shaking veined hand.
He debates with himself, waves his hands
at invisible members of his retinue, mumbles.
Suddenly summoned by Rilke's angels, he gets
up and leaves, stumbling back into the artwork
he was trying to create out of his shadows.

Writer's Block at Murren

*Most experiences are unsayable;
they come to fullness in a realm that words do not inhabit. –Rilke.*

Words fail me.
No, I fail words.

Empty dictionary.
All synonyms are cliches.

Every time I pick an adjective
to describe the mountains
as they rise thousands of metres
above the unparalleled U-shape valley of Lauterbrunnen
my dumb pen is left sterile.

I am not the poet,
the mountains are.
Monch, Eiger, Jungfrau -
your names are words enough.

No stanza here
can capture this vista
of monumental stone and glaciers, pristine
alpine meadows, tiny towns perched at drunken angles.

I keep following the line of the cliffs,
plunging down with the waterfalls, and all I can do is fall
and accept the inadequacy of flesh
and ink.

The Execution of Winter

You,
young warrior:
a number of ghosts
will pass through you,
cut the strings
as fine as hairs
that fasten him to you.

Their thousand voices
will swarm your tinderbox
heart, which will give in
like the shivering ice
of a thawing pond,

releasing its own ghost
into the night.

Scheherazade

I knew a thousand
and one different ways to find
another sort of home.
I pushed markers into your skin,
traced secondary roads,
flagged unmapped territories.
You never wanted me to leave.

You did not threaten my life
if I failed; I never came
close. I tasted youth,
sweat, and fear in places
never before explored.

We spent that future traveling,
heads on the same, warm pillow.

A Spider

She creeps home
lopsided, dazed
like a dusty, fair-haired spider,
shaken from below the dark
shelter of the bed's skirt,
or from the aftermath
of a sudden, stereotypical torrent:
damaged, but determined.

She visualizes her destination:
perhaps a forced-back
a corner of rotted lattice,
or a forgotten keyhole,
or that sawdust dead space
where I beat the lock away
from a chipped, deep sill.

Maybe home is a forest
spread with broken rocks, white
like bones in the night; maybe
home is a sour broom closet.
Maybe, home is an arbitrary concept
she carries with her,
deep within her spider heart.

Winchester Bay

We walked quiet sand
the day my marriage ended.
We passed a few families,
and a lone beached seal,
dead, openings drawing flies.
I looked away, but you joked—
you saw it moving, still alive,
that it just needed a little help.

I spread a patchwork blanket
high on the beach, where grass began
with tangled, bleached driftwood—the seal
just a slick spot in the distance.

You listened; I chattered
about everything but separation,
or holding grudges, or sharing
a queen-sized bed with a man
I'm supposed to love, but don't.

I finally fell quiet, self-conscious,
and we smoked your cigarettes,
drank warm sodas in silence. You
held me close, unbuttoned
my jeans, put your hand deep
into my clothes. You whispered,
"Don't move," and I didn't.
You said, "No one will notice
what I'm doing," and they didn't.

We stayed there for hours, maybe,
stirring sand into my pant cuffs,
the quilt, and our loose shoes.
When we left, I picked up our
cigarette butts; you shook out
my blanket, carried my bag.
We walked past the seal again;
it tried to mouth something,
its heavy tail flicked at the air.

Sometimes

Sometimes life poses
as a person. Occasionally

I suffocate
when you close a door
behind you.

Marriage shouldn't pull
the air out of a room
like curtains on fire.

I used to pretend you
were a shadow.
I never saw you in daylight.

Now, your absence thickens
my heart rate; the bent
cage rattles.

The cat curls to our warmth,
sleeps between us.
He loses interest & you wake.

I am left with nothing
but wrinkled bedding.

You and Bookstores

Something about books makes me want you
to spend afternoons in distant towns with me,

driving to the next shop we've never visited,
odd stacks of novels in the margins of the aisles.

I smell lightly foxed pages and deodorant soap
as you finger a shelf of spines, then my bare neck.

I compare three copies of the same book,
each with a different price and condition to weigh.

I know we'll end up back at my book-filled house, stand
in front of each other like unlocked cases of rare editions.

We'll skim every line, each other's bodies held
with reverence, each of us careful of delicate bindings.

Bondage

Her story opens
as all great stories open:
between her dress
and the slopes
of her breasts.

She wears her body
like a starched habit,
her delicate heart,
a richly-embroidered pocket.

She keeps her words
in that dark space,
beneath the weight
of tomorrow's corpses,
under cover
of her private sea.

Every woman before her
went down
with their ships,
settling beneath the waves.
They knew
she thought
she carried
her death in her own hand.
Their recklessness
and beauty offered this advice:

Your hands are bound,
daughter.
Early husbands, cruel
fathers, large brothers
know your name.
They have your story
already written,
beginning to end, locked
in their snow-capped hearts.

At low tide,
their prayers reach out,
swallow up,
and annihilate everything.

BLIND BEHIND WINDOWS

We sit blind behind windows, looking out anyway.
Deaf, we speak into telephones without the ability to listen.
Feeling famished with our bellies overfull,
We move on to beds so soft that hurt our even softer backs -
Wondering why life is so difficult, when, in truth,
It's us that's so easy.

DREAMS OF SILK

Dreams of silk,
Backyard mud and fingers smudged with newsprint.

To be a child again –
With child-thoughts and child-wants

And also be a man who is satisfied:
Living with the woman he loves

In a house where the doors are iron,
The walls are soft yet impenetrable from outside

And the dreams are dreams of oceans,
Dreams of skies, dreams of silk.

HARLEQUINS AND CLOWNS

Harlequins and clowns
with desperate painted faces
shake the bells on their shoes
just to get your attention.

One night I came to where you are
And the locks were changed
But you never even gave them your real address
So I guess that makes me best -

Just not good enough.
Perhaps if I learned to juggle
And turn my back
Instead of merely the other cheek.

Probably not.
So watch the jesters in their faux finery
Twirl batons and somersault,
Showing the silly drawings on their bodies

That cause you to salivate.
I will imagine your body before they arrived.
I refuse to compete.
I refuse to merely serve.

Harlequins and clowns
Shaking tassels and cloying clacking bells
Will amuse you
As you break down your own resolve in the queendom of your skull.

I will wait outside the castle.
I will continue to write my poems along the flowing water only to see them dissolve.
I will suffer along your walls
Until the pervert clowns are dismissed

And I am asked by you,
Ashamed and newly born
To ask that I be the knight and not another harlequin
And be recognized.

PUT AWAY MY PAINTBRUSH

I put away my paintbrush
And picked up a lariat

And that is when I learned how to paint.

I put away my palette
And went into the forest

And that is when I learned what to paint.

I put away my easel
And sat at The Master's feet

And that is when I learned why I paint.

Now I take out my paintbrush,
My palette, my easel

And the world emerges from my canvas.

THE LONELINESS OF ONE MAN

The loneliness of one man
standing in line,
shifting his pieces of paper
from hand to hand

and the loneliness of the potted plant
sitting dryly in the corner,
a coat of dust on its leaves

and the loneliness of the woman
who calls the man
to come to her window
now that it's his turn.

He then sits before her,
spreading his papers on her desk.
He tells her why he's there

and they are two people speaking
yet still inexorably alone
as the plant cries silently for water
and the next lonely man

is standing in line,
his papers in his pocket,
patiently waiting his turn.

ONE WAY

There is one way.

It goes like this:

“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...” – Jesus Christ.

“Hurt not others that which pains yourself” – Buddha.

“What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do unto others.” – Confucius.

“Whatever is disagreeable to yourself, do not do unto others.” – From the Shast-nashayast 13:29, Zoroastrianism.

“One should always treat others as they themselves wish to be treated.” – From the Hindu Hitopadesa.

“O Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’”

Go

And do likewise.

SWIRLED

You were the darkness swirling
In the coffee cup
Without the cool dollop of milk or cream –
How you spun and danced in your confinement of the cup.

You were the crevices in the wall,
The crooks in the corner between the cornices,
In the crotches at the base
That held the dust and the matter and the secrets and the unknown.

You were the figure that lurked
Behind my eyeline in the mirror,
Resting in a malformed pile of clean clothes on the bed behind me
Or just beneath my shoulder where my skin would erupt and itch as I stared into my
nothingness.

You were the darkness swirling
In the coffee cup –
Bitter/sweetened coexistence and scalding, black as eyes closed in the untimed
darkness.
You were all of that and I drank you down when you allowed it –

Your liquid going into me as you swirled and spun and danced,
Your lovely lovely darkness getting inside of me –
As unknown to me now
As I am unwanted.

THE WARRIOR'S HORSE

The warrior was shot
right off of his horse,
just before he was to
take his own shot

and the warrior's horse
has wandered from
the battle, through the
forest of nettles and

dark magic. Now he
canters about my yard,
nervous and nibbling
the grass at my window.

I see his black mane
that shines red in the
sun from his master's
blood and I hate the

horse because it lives
and the warrior does
not. I will not poison
or shoot the warrior's

horse, nor will I water
or feed him. He looks
into my window and
he sees all of me with

not anger or ardor but
only the pity a beast can
feel looking at a mere
man after knowing what

it was like to be beneath
a man who was a warrior
and died before he was
able to take his shot.

WORDS THAT WOULD HURT

I write them down.
I write them quick
In my fevered hand:
The words that would hurt
You.

Then, after scribbling
With my hand dragging
Across the lined pages
And the letters drifting
Over and under the blue
Lines

I fold the papers into threes.
I fold the papers a little bit
Crookedly and stuff them
Into legal sized envelopes
That

I then lick closed.
Sealed and stamped,
I mail them to myself
And only to myself
So that my words can hurt only
Me.

YELLOW RAYS OF LIGHT

Yellow rays of light
Penetrating the gray
Repose of the foyer
Through the slats of
The dusty blinds as

We emerge from the
Cocoon of our night
And stare out into
The nakedness of a
New day and we see

Egrets still wet from
The morning dew and
Taking flight looking so
White against the hazy
Blue of the springtime

Sky as they fly up and
Up toward the burning
And indolent sun their
Wings beating their long
Lovely bodies drying as they

Fly

WHERE THE BISON RUMMAGE

Cy Hill

My first day of work as a busboy at The Bison Club, the Maitre'D said, "The charity hire. Your father died and I get you. I will fire you within the week." His name was Andre, and his skin glistened as if oiled. He had a moustache like my mother's mascara brush, and thinning slicked back hair. Dismissing me with a wave, he said, "Have someone show you what a busboy does, farmer Brown," and walked away.

I was sixteen and abandoned in the center of the Bison Club's ovular hardwood dance floor with two dozen tables around it, set for dinner. We would open in thirty minutes. In this low-ceilinged rectangular space with wild animals' heads mounted on the walls, a stage, and a bar in the corner, I wondered what I had said or done to offend this man I so needed to please. We needed this job, my mother and I. Out of her Safeway cashier earnings she bought the black shoes, black slacks, and white long-sleeve shirt I wore.

The Bison Club was the hub of our rural community. Although my father never joined, he would have liked to, but there were dues, and what went on in and around the Club was beyond our means even when the farm had been profitable. I gaped at the crisp white linen napkins, numerous glasses, and staggering amount of silverware required to eat a meal here.

To my right were swinging doors with portholes in them. As I entered, a red-faced man with a Chef's hat brought down a cleaver on a plucked chicken and cried, "What are you doing in here?" His face was a field of pits and lumps. A large vein pulsed in his neck, its twin on his forehead.

"I'm Henry Brown, the new busboy? Andre said I should ask someone to show me what to do."

"Stay out of my kitchen, that's what you do!"

The kitchen's many metal surfaces sparkled. There were stoves and deep sinks and walk-in refrigerators tightly packed together — it was like something I had only seen on film. The other food preparers paused in their work to look at me. Odors battled with one another in the close, warm space, chicken, beef, onions, butter, and — hot soapy water? To my right a bubbling dishwashing machine gargled steam. At its far end was a tall skinny man with thin, bare arms. He leaned against a dowel-metaleed lip, smoking a cigarette, appraising me.

"If I can't come in here, where do I take the dirty dishes?"

Using his cleaver as a wand, the Chef said, "you take the dirty dishes to the dishwashing machine and then you get out. Those swinging doors are the line. Out there, that son of a bitch Andre does whatever the hell it is he does — "

I heard the doors swing open behind me and a voice say, “Hi. I’m the new waiter,” before he stepped up beside me. “My name is Dick.” He was in his twenties and a thin six foot-two.

The cook waved his cleaver at him. “Good, so I only have to say this once. No lounging around in here, you come in here, do your business and get out. Do you understand me?”

Dick smiled. “Are you always like this?”

“Oh, a smartass waiter. “

“Can you cook?” Dick walked past the Chef. The other cooks, in shock, froze while their pans sputtered. He stopped before one. “Coq au vin.”

“Tonight’s special,” I said because I had read the menu. “My mother makes it.”

“Then you are the perfect taste tester. What do you say?” he asked the Chef. “A little competition, unless ... your mother is a good cook?” he asked me.

“She is French Canadian.”

“Do you speak French?” he asked me in French, and we continued to speak in that language.” It was apparent none of the kitchen staff did.

“Yes.”

“Better than high school French?”

“Yes.”

The Chef nodded and his assistant served me a sampling.

“No matter what it tastes like,” Dick said, “you love it.”

It was different from my mother’s Coq au vin, but it was good. I nodded and said in English, “I like it.”

“I will be proud to recommend it,” Dick said.

The Chef looked us over, up and down. “Don’t speak that language in here, it reminds me of Andre. You two are new, I will give you a chance don’t make me regret it. You better show this one what to do,” he pointed at me. “Andre is throwing him to the wolves.”

When we were the other side of the swinging doors, I begged. “Please help me.”

“You didn’t set these tables?”

“No — here he comes.”

Andre now wore a black jacket with piping, and a pink shirt with a maroon bowtie. Ruffled cuffs poked out around his wrists. “Who are you?”

“Dick,” he offered his hand.

Andre ignored it. “I didn’t hire you.”

“And yet, here I am.”

“Don’t get used to working as a waiter here.”

“Are you leaving?” Dick winked at me with the eye Andre could not see. “When I become Maitre’D, do I have to wear that?”

“Ignoramus,” Andre said in French. “Pig.”

Dick replied in French, “You dress like a Montmartre éclair. What crawled out of your nose and died upon your upper lip?”

Sweat burst out of Andre's forehead.

A pair of loudly laughing men strolled in, arms swinging. Because they were out of context, it took me a moment to recognize them. Mr. Van Hoff owned the drug store, and Mr. Lynden the service station. Mr. Van Hoff slapped him on the back, then yelled over at the bar. A woman in a short skirt and fishnet stockings came to their table.

She was out of context, too, so it took me a few seconds. "That's my Algebra teacher, Miss Amber."

"Look busy," Dick said.

"Doing what?"

"Anything. Inspect a table. Memorize the glass and silverware arrangement. Pick up a fork and put it back down."

I did and observed him doing the same — except Dick picked up several glasses and forks and took them to the kitchen. I discovered a fork with something hard and black stuck between the tines.

Mrs. Van Hoff and Mrs. Lynden arrived at the same time Miss Amber brought their husbands their drinks. They gulped them down, then pushed their chairs that had castors on the legs out onto the dance floor. Mr. Van Hoff put his hand on the back of Miss Amber's fish netted knee and said, "Count us down."

"Three — two — one."

Riding their rolling chairs, the men raced forward across the hardwood dance floor, kicked the wall beside the kitchen's swinging doors, and then raced backwards to their table. Miss Amber arrived at the same time with refills for them and drinks for the wives. Each man insisted he won.

"That is something you do not see every day," Dick said, "or perhaps here, you do." He carried miscellaneous silverware and glasses to replace the ones he had taken to the kitchen.

I held up my dirty fork.

"We need to check all of the tables. This is Andre's job."

While we rushed to replace dirty glasses and silverware, the other two waiters arrived. I knew Ewa Olson. She used to watch me when my parents went out on dates, and her husband Buster had helped out on our farm. The other waiter was named Conrad and he attended the state University in town. He looked like a male model with perfect bronze hair and a neatly clipped moustache. They both joined in checking the tables, but without much urgency.

Ewa said. "We usually don't replace anything unless they complain, and Andre keeps the lights low."

Conrad, working beside her added, "They are more worried about their drinks. But Dick is right. Andre should inspect the tables."

"What can you expect," Ewa asked, "when the kitchen is required to do the setup? They don't have time for this — nor do we —" She stopped and smiled at me. Ewa's blond hair was parted in the middle. She had a small cleft in her chin and large blue eyes in hooded orbs. She was six years older than me and the prettiest woman in

the county. It was hard to believe she had a two-year old son. She said, "Welcome to the Bison Club." There was more than sincerity in the way she said it.

Ewa and Conrad were helpful and patient with me, but it was Dick who taught me — things like, "I serve from the right. You clear from the left," and, "Never let them see you sweat." The Maitre'D Andre mocked me with a few of the members, his head down between theirs. I heard "Oaf" more than once.

At 8:30, the disc jockey started playing music, but there was not much dancing.

Miss Amber and the second cocktail waitress were even busier than we were, serving drinks over and over again, and they had to bus the empty glasses themselves. For us — after soup, salad, a main course, dessert, and coffee — we were finished. We had to have ourselves and most of the dinnerware off the tables by 10:30. For the bar staff, the drinks kept flowing until midnight, and on Friday and Saturday nights, the bar was open until 2:00 and beyond.

Opposite the stage, set back at the dance floor's halfway point, was an L-shaped storeroom behind a swinging door. After he helped me cart the last big load of dirty dishes into the kitchen, Dick and I had to hurry to get to it before 10:30. Conrad and Ewa were already in there, with the lights within off and the door open.

"We have to be very quiet," Ewa said.

"Usually, we stay inside and shut the door," Conrad said, "but you have to see this at least once. Watch Andre." The largely smiling Maitre'D leaned over the Head Table abutting the left side of the stage. He all but had his arms around the diners — all of whom I knew. Conrad continued, "The heavy one with the combover" — that was Mr. Fossbeck — "is the Head Bison. The one laughing at Andre's joke" — Mr. Holland — "is the mayor. And the sober one is —"

"Is Mr. Ott," I said. "Buster works for him, at the *Feed and Grain*." I nodded at Buster's wife, Ewa.

Andre straightened his jacket, snapped to attention, and solemnly strode around the Head Table and across the dance floor. Conrad and Ewa shrunk back, like kids hiding, so I did the same. Dick lit up a cigarette, cupping the glowing ember in his palm. On the wall to the right of the stage was a master light dimming switch, and Andre brought all of the restaurant's lights to darkness. Opposite us, above the stage, phosphorescent numbers and a Bison head lit up within a large clock. There was a "click" and a golden light struck down from above, illuminating Mr. Fossbeck standing center stage.

My father was a member of the Volunteer Fire Department. They let him join when he was about my age, and he died at thirty-six, freeing the horses at Mr. Fossbeck's place. Harvested wet hay exploded and set many of the outbuildings ablaze. My mother was told he could not bear to hear the horses' screams and knocked others down when they tried to keep him from going in. And that was after he had already taken the lead freeing all the Fossbeck dairy cows. Mr. Fossbeck made a lot of noise in the community about presenting my mother with a check. When she opened the envelope, it was for fifty dollars. She never cashed it. Although Mr.

Fossbeck offered us more for our farm, she sold it to Mr. Van Dyke.

While Ewa and Conrad silently laughed and mocked Mr. Fossbeck's drunken recitation of the Benevolent Protective Order of Bison Credo and Dick smoked another cupped cigarette, I thought about my father. I knew that he had not died for Mr. Fossbeck who had not even lifted a pail of water to save his own place. He died because he could not live with the sound of shrieking horses echoing through the rest of his life, knowing he might have been able to stop it. Sometimes, when I saw my mother worn out after work, heard her crying in her bedroom when she thought I could not hear, I wondered if my father had not been selfish; wondered if the horses screams were worse than my mother's whimpers.

After reciting the credo, Mr. Fossbeck gave an impromptu speech about how great it was to be a Bison, and that got him applause and whistles. Andre turned the house lights up a bit and pointed to the disc jockey.

"Jeremiah was a bullfrog

Was a good friend of mine –! "

The opening notes of Hoyt Axton's song brought a stampede of Bison and their women onto the dance floor. After a couple of minutes of watching that, I knew that I would never be embarrassed by my dancing again.

"It is good to see them enjoying themselves, yes?" Dick asked me in French.

I shrugged. "I have never seen them like this."

"Do you know some of them?"

"More than half."

He handed me a five-dollar bill. "Your share of my tips. Are you as strong as you look?"

I answered with a shrug. Growing up on a farm conditioned me, and our high school wrestling coach had me lifting weights.

"Do you play American football?"

"They want me to, but I don't have time for it."

"Are you from France?" He spoke it differently from my mother — his accent, a few word choices.

"My father is a diplomat. I grew up in Europe. I have been waiting table since I was your age."

"Pardon me for asking, but why are you here?"

"Curiosity. I am completing my Masters in Mathematics at the University. Conrad told me about this place, how American it is. I want to know my countrymen."

"You don't need the money?"

He placed an index finger to his lips. "Our secret?" I nodded and he laughed again. "This is the worst job you will ever have, but it is transitory. This is the best job Andre will ever have. And it is transitory."

I barely heard the last because I looked into the darkened room behind us, wondering what had happened to Ewa and Conrad. In a corner, in the shadows of the shadows, they were locked in an embrace. His hands were all over her.

“She has a child,” I whispered.

Dick shrugged. “What can her husband expect? It will be one of these Bison next.”

I did not like hearing that. “You already knew.”

“Conrad told me, but it is no business of mine.”

“Are you two friends?”

“I am a teaching assistant, and he needs tutoring. I am going to serve coffee. Would you care to join me?”

In the kitchen he arranged a cart with two coffee pots, cream, sugar, and cups and saucers. I followed him from table to table. Andre watched and then intercepted us as we approached the Head Table.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“Serving the guests,” Dick said in French.

“We do not serve coffee this way,” Andre answered in English.

“I have heard no complaints,” Dick continued in French, “quite the contrary. Are you going to continue to stand in my way?”

Andre’s entire face broke out in sweat, as if it was crying. It was just beginning to dawn upon me when Dick said, “This perfumed posing dandy does not speak French. Maybe high school French?” he asked Andre.

Rather than respond, Andre stepped aside. We served that table and moved on.

Mrs. Lynden was passed out at the Van Hoff and Lynden table. She fit into her curved chair with wheels on the bottom like a little bird, her head back, mouth open. As I set the coffee cups and centered a silver pot of cream, Mrs. Van Hoff brushed her hand against my thigh.

“You’re new here,” Mr. Van Hoff said to Dick. He lounged in his rolling chair, one of his shirt buttons open at the navel. “Andre says he did not hire you.”

“The Club’s Manager Mr. Paulson hired me, as he did Henry.”

“We know Henry Brown. Where are you from?”

“I am a United States citizen, but I have spent much of my life in Europe.” Dick filled the women’s coffee cups from a silver coffee pot with a fluted spout.

“Well, I don’t know if Paulson told you this or not, but your tip is included in our monthly dues to the Club.”

In other words, the Van Hoff and Lyndens were not tipping Dick.

“Sir,” Dick said, “I think that you need the money more than I.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Mr. Van Hoff struggled to straighten in his chair.

From six feet away, with a quick tip of the coffee pot spout, Dick shot a short stream of coffee into Mr. Van Hoff’s empty coffee cup. It was the perfect amount and not a drop spilled or splashed. He repeated the trick in Mr. Lynden’s cup. From the look on the men’s faces, they were thinking the same thing I was — that Dick could just as easily have put that coffee on any part of them that he chose to hit, and with the same precision. Mr. Van Hoff warily rolled his chair back from the table.

“Have you gentlemen ever had flaming coffees?” Dick asked.

“What do you do?” Mr. Lynden asked. He was just short of angry. “Set the table on fire?”

“I have seen that happen. But no, that is not the intent. Will I see you here often?”

“Damn near every night.”

“You will be my first customers,” Dick winked.

“Could I have another cup of coffee?” Mrs. Van Hoff asked.

“Of course, Madam.” He did the trick again and her eyes lit up. She smiled at Dick, opened her purse, and laid a ten-dollar bill on the table. Her husband reached for it, but she slapped his hand. That interaction disturbed the slumbering Mrs. Lynden, and she slowly slid down and out of her chair, like a foal dropping from its mother at birth. I caught her before her head hit the floor.

“Time for us to go,” Mr. Lynden said, accepting his wife from me like a piece of luggage. Following her husband out of the Club, an amused Mrs. Van Hoff glanced back at us and waved.

Dick shoved the ten-dollar tip in his pocket. “I don’t trust Andre. Grab any money that you see left on my tables.”

An hour later, as I was leaving the Club, Andre intercepted me. “You survived your first night here, Farmer Brown, but this was only a Thursday. You have not shown me enough to please me.” He handed me a notecard with an address on it. “On Saturday afternoon you will wash my car.”

“I have a wrestling match at noon at the high school. Should I quit the wrestling team?”

“Come before. And you will do a good job.”

The next day at high school, there was a big rally for the football game that night, and I sat with the other members of our wrestling team. I would not be going to the football game because I would be working. It all seemed a little childish, with the girls cheering and boys growling. I had bigger concerns than whether my high school won or lost a football game.

Socially, our school consisted of three broadly hostile groups: the farmers, the townies, and children of the University. The brainy offspring of the University looked down on both the Farmers and Townies. I identified with the farmers when we had our place, though viewed with suspicion because my mother was a foreigner. Now we lived in town, but we were not of the town.

A fellow wrestler stuck an elbow in my side. “Miss Amber keeps looking at you.” She was the cocktail waitress at the Bison Club who was also my Algebra teacher.

I looked at her, across the aisle and one row back. She glanced away. “No, she’s looking at you.”

He ran his fingers through his hair and arched his neck. “I’d give her a ride in that Firebird she’d never forget.” It was a red convertible. None of the other teachers drove anything close to it in value.

On the way out of the auditorium, I allowed Miss Amber to cut me out of the departing herd and into an empty hallway. “What do you think of the Bison Club?” she

asked. I knew what was on her mind. I had seen her in fishnet stockings.

“What strikes me most is how much they drink.”

“They work hard and are letting their hair down. They feel safe within their Club. Whatever you see, there is no reason to broadcast it.”

“I need that job, Miss Amber. I am not going to say anything.”

“I am sorry about your father. I didn’t know him, but everyone says he was a good man.” I did not know what that had to do with anything. “Are you comfortable with my being your teacher?” I was barely pulling a “C” in her class. “After seeing me at my second job?”

“If you feel comfortable after seeing me at my job.”

She laughed and gave me a look. Like I was a co-conspirator.

Friday night at the Bison Club was crazy. It was the hardest I worked since the busiest days on our farm. We only had Dick, Ewa, and Conrad for waiters, and I was the lone busboy. I was new at this, but it seemed to me the Club skimmed on serving staff. A few times, with the orders backing up in the kitchen, I served the tables before the food got cold, trying to be as cool about it as Dick was. When it came time for the 10:30 break — when all of the serving staff except Andre had to be off the floor — the time when Mr. Fossbeck delivered the Benevolent Protective Order of Bison Credo and subsequent musings — the Chef asked Dick and I to remain in the kitchen.

“You have trained this one well,” he told Dick, nodding at me. He and his staff were stripped down like wet horses after a race, shirts loose or off, seated on the counters, drinking wine.

Dick was offered one of the bottles along with a wine glass. He examined the label. “On the way out, if you can save some of this for me.”

“None of the Bison would notice your breath,” I said.

“I do not drink on the job. It is a professional thing.”

One of the cooks placed two large glass pie plates before the Chef.

“Cherry Clafoutis,” Dick said.

“Tell me what you think,” the Chef served me the first helping.

He had no way of knowing it, but this was my father’s favorite dessert as prepared by my mother. The cherries were baked into a custard-like batter for about forty minutes. I took a bite and said, “Tres magnifique.”

The Chef and his staff laughed. He put a hand my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Dick, who could surreptitiously wink with either eye, winked at me with the eye they could not see. I ate my piece quickly because I did not want them to see me cry. When Dick launched into a story about one of the Paris restaurants he had worked in, I slipped through a side door and into the alley. Then, I let loose. My broken frozen breath changed to crystalized wreaths of memory and they were all of my Dad. Having my tears freeze upon my face was the blessing I needed.

Beside the door were a few white-lined parking spots, and across from it, three heavily dented green dumpsters. A scarred cinderblock wall arose behind them, separating the alley from bare limbed trees dusted with just falling snow. The loading

dock was to the right, and to the left, at the far end of the building, was the Club Member's parking lot and main entrance. Headlights slowly approached from there, winking through the snow. I stood back to allow the car to pass, but it stopped beside me and the front passenger window lowered.

"Hi, Henry." It was Buster, Ewa's husband. In the backseat was their sleeping two-year old son. "You seen my wife?"

She was no doubt in that darkened storeroom having sex with Conrad. They were trapped — or safe — in there until Hoyt Axton's *Joy to the World* allowed the serving staff back onto the Club's floor. I explained to Buster how we were frozen in place until the DJ played that song.

"I thought she just made that up. How come you aren't playing football? They need you, got their asses kicked again tonight."

Buster was the star running back in his day, but the story about him was that he was just an average runner unless he was mad. The coach would tell him the opposing team's Safety said something nasty about his mother, and Buster would run over his own blockers to get at him. Sometimes he tackled himself, plowing his helmet into the boy who had supposedly besmirched his honor. The story always ended up with Buster the butt end of the joke because he never caught on that he was being manipulated.

I said, "I need to work. I just hope I can keep wrestling."

Buster shot a stream of tobacco juice out the driver's window. He used to work part-time out on our place, but he was now working fulltime at Mr. Ott's *Feed and Seed*. "I liked your father, Henry."

"He liked you. He said you were a hard worker."

"Have to be. I got a family."

"Jeremiah was a bullfrog

Was a good friend of mine

I never understood a single word he said

But I helped him drink his wine"

The music within was so loud it vibrated to us through the walls.

"Would you mind getting Ewa to come out here?"

"Sure will. Good to see you, Buster."

She was straightening her dress in semi-darkness when I walked in. I flipped on the overhead light. Her lipstick was all over her face. And Conrad's.

"Buster is in the alley behind the kitchen asking for you."

"Then where is the baby?"

"In the back seat."

She grabbed my forearm. "Cover for me?"

"I'm trying to. Your lipstick, Ewa?"

While the Bison danced, I cleared more of the evening's remains off the tables and met Dick in the kitchen with his coffee cart. We made the rounds.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing." He handed me ten dollars, a share of his tips.

I caught Conrad in a corner, away from where anyone could hear us. He had manicured bronze hair and a pristine moustache and I needed to explain things to him. “Her baby is in the car with her husband.”

“Stay out of this, kid.”

“You are from the University. You don’t know us. You are just passing through and you do not understand. I grew up with Buster and Ewa – “

“Then talk to her. Do you think this is just me? She’s missed out. She was too young to marry and she was too young to have a baby. You don’t have the life experience to understand this and you are in way over your head, Henry.”

“One of us is.”

He brushed past me.

Saturday morning was gray and windless, and the thin snow quickly melted. Andre’s two-door lime green Datsun was parked in front of the house in which he rented a room. I washed it. He came out when I finished and inspected my work, wearing pajamas and a robe.

“What do you know about Dick?”

“He goes to the University.”

“Where has he worked?”

“I don’t know.”

“Find out. How long has he been a waiter?”

“I don’t know.”

“Find out. What do you two talk about?”

“He teaches me how to be a busboy.”

“He is a troublemaker. Find out everything you can about him. Did you know that,” he named one of the Chef’s assistants, “is a homosexual? He likes boys. And that is your tip.”

An hour later, I won my wrestling match. Mr. and Mrs. Ott sat next to my mother throughout the matches. Their son was a senior and he lost his. Afterwards, I found them all together in the high school parking lot, talking about the freezing earth and impending snow fall, their breath forming above them like comic cartoon dialogue.

“What do you think of the Bison Club?” Mr. Ott asked. The last two nights he and his wife had sat at the Head Table with Mr. Fossbeck and the Mayor. Mr. Ott owned the *Feed and Seed* and was Chief of the Volunteer Fire Department.

“We keep busy.”

“The football team could use you.” His son, smiling beside him, played in the backfield on defense.

“I need to work, sir.”

We rented a small house. While my mother cooked us a late lunch, I battled my Algebra homework at the kitchen table. It was the warmest room in the house, but we were both layered in sweaters. The rent was cheap and I knew why. During the rainy Fall, we had mushrooms and moss growing in closets until we rooted them out. Now, it was icy and draughty, and I was apprehensive of what would happen when it became

really cold. When it snowed in earnest.

“Why don’t you ask Dick to help you with that?” When we were alone, we always spoke French. “You say he knows math.”

“He already does too much for me.”

“How is that Maitre’D, Andre? Mrs. Ott says he is a big gossip.”

“I avoid him.” I had not told her I had to wash his car.

“Mrs. Ott did not say it in so many words, but he oversteps his position.” I did not understand. “He concerns himself with things that are none of his business.” I nodded. “Mr. Ott says that you are doing well.” I gave up on my homework. If she wanted to talk, we would talk. I would not deny her anything that was within my power to give. “You are not supposed to know this, but it is Mr. Ott who got you on at the Bison Club.” Sixteen-year-olds required a special work permit requested by their place of employment.

“He did it because of Dad.”

She turned from me, stirring the vegetables in the pan. “Perhaps.”

Or he did it for her. It was the least this town could do. About all the life insurance did was get us out of debt – that, and selling the farm that had been in my father’s family for three generations.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, her back still to me, shoulders crumpled.

I was thinking of the affair between Ewa and Conrad, the behavior of our town’s leaders within their Club, Miss Amber and her red Firebird, and our Maitre’D pretending he knew French. “When there is an opening, I want to work with you, at Safeway.”

She presented her profile. “Anyone can work at Safeway. You are making valuable contacts at The Bison Club. Everyone sees how hard you work and these are important people. This will lead to better things. Don’t give up.”

“I am not giving up.”

“You are making a good impression, Henry. Keep at it. These people are your future.”

Our future.

Saturday night at the Bison Club was every bit as hectic as Friday, but I knew my job and there was confidence in that. Even with my body moving at top speed, I was able to separate my observational self out a little and watch the flow of energy whipping like static electricity among the Bison, and within the Club staff. Dick and Andre locked in on one another like a couple of game cocks, each always aware of where the other was and what he was doing. Along with the heated glances between Ewa and Conrad and the Bison all but propositioning the cocktail waitresses, there were more covert male-female games. When I was clearing their table of dessert dishes with Mrs. Lynden again passed out in her chair, I saw Mrs. Von Hoff’s hand comfortable on Mr. Lynden’s leg while her husband told Andre a loud off-color joke. But it was the business talk that I tuned in on, and it went on at every table. Mr. Fossbeck pressed the Mayor about re-zoning. Twice a member told me to fetch a pen so that he could have another member sign a contract. Government subsidies were a very popular topic.

Dining was the cheapest portion of a Bison evening. The real money was spent at the bar. Miss Amber handled wads of cash, threaded through her fingers as she served, cleared the drinks, and flirted with the county's power brokers. I could have paid our monthly rent with what she had wrapped around one of her fingers. The bartender was very busy, but he put up with Andre, unlike the kitchen staff. He poured the Maitre'D coffee and served him right at the bar. The one time I saw Andre walk into the Kitchen, he came back out seconds later wiping mashed potatoes off his jacket.

During the 10:30 break, the Kitchen staff shared apple pie with Dick and me, and I was told to throw ice cream on top. When I finished, I took the plate over to the dishwashing machine.

The Chef was waiting for me when I returned. "We would like you to eat with us, any time you want." I saw Dick behind him and knew he had something to do with this. "You may eat before you start work, after, or anywhere in between. Come by even if you are not on the clock. Alright?"

"Thank you, but I think I should pay."

"We don't. You should know what you serve. And you do serve. You are faster than those other two." He meant Ewa and Conrad.

Dick said, "This is the way things are done at good restaurants."

"You see?" the Chef said.

I took him up on it then and there, loading up a plate with pork ribs and rice. I wolfed it down in minutes.

"Jeremiah was a bullfrog

Was a good friend of mine

I never understood a single word he said – "broke everything up, and I pushed the coffee cart out through the swinging doors, following Dick to the Head Table.

The moment I finished setting the table for coffee, Andre grabbed my forearm. "I need to speak with him," he informed the table. "I presume you can carry on from here?" he asked Dick.

In French, Dick said, "If he tries to kiss you, break his face."

"You speak French?" Andre asked me in English.

Mr. Ott said, "He has spoken it all his life." He made eye contact with me as if to communicate something – but I had no idea what.

Andre hurried us away, through a door beside the stage that led out into the alley. The chill air held our breath. He placed a finger to his lips and slid along the wall to the left, indicating I should follow.

Outside the door that led into the Bar, cocktail waitress and my Algebra teacher, Miss Amber, shivered in a short skirt and brief top, smoking by herself. What she was smoking was hand rolled, and there was a pop from within the paper. She saw us. Andre grinned and nodded.

"What are you doing here?"

"Enjoying the night air." Andre sniffed loudly. "What is that we smell?"

"Your mendacity?" She snuffed her cigarette out on the wall, ate what remained,

and entered the Club. Whatever it was that she had been smoking smelled funny — then, I knew. It was marijuana.

“And there is your ‘A’ in Algebra,” Andre said. “You may thank me later.” He followed her through the door she had just closed.

I figured that was his tit-for-tat payment for what I had informed him about Dick — which was only what Dick wanted me to tell him.

Sunday morning was Church and eight A.M. held a bright cold sun and crisp crystalized snow. As I drove, the sunlight reflecting up into my eyes, I asked my mother if she would not rather go to the Catholic cathedral a town over. Since father’s death, something about our Church had begun to bother me, although I had not yet determined what it was.

“Why would I want to do that?”

“You were raised Catholic.”

“And I will die Catholic. God understands these things, even if people do not.” She lit up a cigarette. She rarely smoked this early in the day.

At 36, my mother was very attractive, far more attractive than the women of her age I served at the Bison Club. “You must have felt alone here.”

She snuffed out her cigarette. “I had your father, and then I had you.” After she had me, she contracted an infection in the hospital and nearly died. She was never able to bear another child.

“Do you ever think of your family in Canada?”

“I try not to.”

“You don’t miss them?”

“Have I ever mentioned them?” She turned on the radio and found a Bach partita for flute solo. “You know who I miss.” My parents shared a passion for classical music. “You are old enough now to hear this. The marriageable girls around here, they were very jealous when your father brought me home to his farm.” Words ran within her that she did not speak, until she said, “He was a good man, and I say that not just because I loved him. Every man who is a man, every woman who understands such things, they knew. And they know.”

We were losing the farm even before he died. He worked all day, every day, from before sunrise until after sunset. My mother sewed her own clothes from patterns, and she earned extra money by sewing for others. She canned and sold preserves.

I said, “But even before — the fire,” when he died, saving Mr. Fossbeck’s horses, “we were losing the farm. “

“That was not his fault. Is that what is bothering you, that you think your father was — foolish —? To be who he was?”

“Of course not,” I said — although I had my doubts.

“You control what you can in this life, Henry, but all that you can control, in the end, is who you are.”

Mother always chose a place among the pews as close to the center of the Church as possible. She told father and I it was so people saw we were there. He did

not care one way or the other but was always happy to please her in the small things – maybe because in the big things so much went wrong. At this service, as we took our seats on the hard wood, I had an epiphany of what else besides our immediate physical discomfort now distressed me about our Church. Had it had always been there, but I was only now seeing it? Too many of our congregation looked at my mother askance. Because she was pretty? Because she was a widow? Because she was not of this land? When father was here to shield her, to protect her, she always looked at him, or me, and she smiled. Now there was only me and she looked straight ahead and she did not smile. I took her hand.

We were surrounded by Bison. I was impressed by how those who were still drinking and dancing when I left the Club were sitting here only a few hours later in their Sunday best. There was singing from the choir, and we all stood up and sat down again several times, singing and reciting Psalms. A moment after the last time we sat, right at the start of the sermon, someone ripped off a thundering fart. Father used to assign a grade to those, holding up from one to five fingers. When I held up all five, mother slapped my hand, fighting back a smile. Our minister was to suffer further. Mrs. Lynden, who spent most of her time at the Club passed out in a chair, snored periodically in the front pew. And when he spoke of Jesus washing the feet of others, I saw a few noses wrinkle. At least those parishioners were paying attention. Maybe the minister saw that, too, because he broke off his lesson and urged everyone to – please – just be a good to one another.

After the service, the congregation met outside and talked after shaking hands with the minister, the choir master, and Mr. Fossbeck, who was deacon besides being the Head Bison. Although Mr. Fossbeck smiled and joked with most who flowed past, he could not get mother and I by him fast enough, and that seemed to please her. I wondered if he even rode those horses of his that my father died saving. We joined the Otts whose warm welcome of my mother I much appreciated, although we were like poor relations, she in her homemade clothes, and me in my suit that no longer fit. If I made any kind of muscle, I knew that it would split the material. They made small talk and I tried to say the right things when spoken to.

“There’s the boy,” Mrs. Ott said when Ewa, wearing a light blue dress and cloche hat, approached carrying her son.

The women all cooed over the two-year-old, dressed in lederhosen with a matching hat. My opinion that his mother was the most beautiful woman on display before our Church was confirmed by the men who could not keep their eyes off of her.

“Hi, Buster,” I extended my hand to her husband. He was a couple of inches taller than me and had a large rectangular face. His suit was as old as mine and fit about as well, but with him it was his muscled body going to fat.

Our three families spoke for a good half hour, Mr. Ott and his son and Buster talking football, while the women talked about the baby and food preparation. No one mentioned The Bison Club. I tried not to think about Conrad nailing Ewa every night in the storeroom, while Mr. Fossbeck recited the Bison Credo and Andre manipulated the

lights.

As soon as I drove clear of the Church parking lot, mother asked, "Is Ewa having an affair?"

"How did you know?"

"I saw it in too many faces. Please tell me it is not that Fossbeck."

I told her everything, including Buster's coming around every night to check up on his wife.

"So he already suspects. Poor fool. And she is a fool, giving herself to this pretty boy waiter in a storeroom. The Bison hired her for themselves."

"You don't know that."

"I know them and it will be one of them next."

"That's what Dick says."

"Buster has a bad temper. Perhaps you should warn Conrad again." She rolled her window down a few inches and lit a cigarette. Several minutes passed in silence and I thought we were finished with the subject. She said, "If Buster kills him, it will be a very bad thing."

Coming in to work that afternoon, I was intercepted by Mr. Paulson, the Club's Manager. He had me follow him into his shag-carpeted office, close the door, and sit across from him at this desk. He had a large bay window that looked out onto the Club's lawn and Parking lot. The snow was already three inches deep and falling steadily, scattering the illumination from the street lights. I guessed Mr. Paulson to be in his fifties, but it was difficult to tell with him because his skin, hair, and eyes were all shades of lead. He wore black rimmed glasses, and what I assessed as an expensive suit. His hair was perfectly combed.

"How do you like the job, Henry?"

"Fine, Sir. I'm catching on."

"Really?" He slumped back in his swivel chair. It creaked. "I am receiving mixed reviews about you."

"Sir?"

"I polled the waiters. One likes you; one says you have no talent for the work, and the third 'prefers not to offer an opinion'. For Andre, the jury is still out. You are here on a special work permit as a sixteen-year-old, and I know, with your background, that a restaurant, any restaurant, is an unfamiliar place. This is a fine restaurant. I hired you and Dick because Andre was out of town and we were short-handed. One of the Bison members championed you – "

"If I am not meeting expectations, I do not ask for charity."

He leaned across his desk. "Pride is not attractive in a sixteen-year-old boy. We will continue this conversation in one week. Leave the door open on the way out and find Dick and have him come in here."

I did, and then ate in the Kitchen like it was my last supper. I was just finishing my second overloaded plate when Dick came in through the swinging Kitchen doors. He cheerily greeted everyone and – unlike me – took small samplings of the different

dishes.

“What is with this one?” the Chef nodded towards me. “He is glummer than usual.”

“We just had our ‘New Employee Reviews’ with Mr. Paulson.”

Dick put his arm around the Chef’s shoulders, and the Chef walked with him towards the dishwashing machine. I could not hear a word. They kept their backs to me so that I could not even try to read their lips. They appeared to reach some sort of agreement. Dick took a seat across from me at the small table located by the door that led into the alley.

“What did Mr. Paulson say to you?”

I told him. All of it. “He spoke to me as if I was some farm animal.”

“I will be fired in three, maybe four nights.”

“He can’t do that. Everyone says that you are the best waiter this Club has ever had.”

“Andre has the power. And isn’t that a bit strange?”

I told him about Andre’s taking me out into the alley to catch my Algebra teacher smoking marijuana. “How did he know that that she is my Algebra teacher? How did he know that I am having problems with Algebra?”

“Andre knows everything about everyone because he is an entrepreneur, not a Maitre’D. I can help you with Algebra. Tonight should be slow. You realize that he was encouraging you to blackmail your teacher?”

The evening crowd was sparse, my algebra homework was in my car, and Dick worked with me on it in the Kitchen.

When my pencil snapped as I was working a problem, he said, “You are very tense, Henry.”

“How can you stand it?”

He leaned back and gazed at me without really looking at me. “What is it that you feel?”

“Anger.”

“You must control your anger or it will control you. Use it to get what you need. Focus that anger towards something that matters, like your education. This job? It is nothing. Andre? He is nothing.”

“You say he has the power. How does the Chef still have his job?”

“He has a contract that provides him complete control of the Kitchen, but it is up in two months.” He held back saying more until I nodded for him to proceed. “I am a foreigner here, even though this is my country. Everywhere I have been in my life, I have been the different one – “he stopped. “They say that your father was a man of honor.” Again, my father. “Honor is something few understand and even fewer practice. That, I suspect, is the root of your anger. I hope that I have not said too much?”

I shook my head. It was the first time I had heard the word “honor” since my father died.

On Sunday night the Van Hoff and Lyndens sat at the Head Table because Mr. Fossbeck was not coming and Mr. Van Hoff was the Bison Vice President. Since Andre

was off, Conrad assumed the duty of operating the restaurant's lights when it was time for the Benevolent Protective Order of Bison Credo, followed by Mr. Van Hoff's extemporaneous comments about what was wrong with the country in general, and our locality in particular.

*"Jeremiah was a bullfrog
Was a good friend of mine –"*

I was thinking how I used to like that song, when Dick reminded me that it was time to serve coffee. The cart was arranged differently, and had the additions of a candle and jar full of long matches and a dozen glasses. I pushed that one in, and Dick followed with another containing bottles of liquor.

"We must keep a distance between these two carts," he cautioned me.

The Head Table was unlike any of the other tables in that it was bolted into the floor, as if the Head Bison had his place and could not be moved.

"That was an inspired rendition of the Bison Code, sir," Dick said to Mr. Van Hoff. "I do not know if you recall," he included the Lyndens, "but last week I promised that you would be the first Bison to be served flaming coffees." The table's occupants looked among themselves, wondering if this was a good thing. "Mr. Van Hoff. What is your liquor of choice?"

"Whiskey."

Dick selected a glass, misted its rim with water from a spray bottle, and dipped the top of it in sugar. "You are not a diabetic, Sir?"

"No."

Dick poured in a jigger and a half of whiskey, swished it about, and then lit it. He tilted the glass so that the flame licked its upper circumference. "We are melting the sugar." He set it before Mr. Van Hoff and then poured in coffee, extinguishing the flame.

Mr. Van Hoff tentatively tasted it. Surprised, he said, "This is good."

"Me next," Mrs. Van Hoff said. "Rum?"

"But of course, Madame."

Dick performed his flaming coffee trick over and over again, with me making many runs to the kitchen for coffee and glasses. When requested, he added whipped cream and maraschino cherries on top. He told jokes and stories while he worked, greatly entertaining the Bison.

Mrs. Van Hoff called him, "Charming."

It was a wonderful evening.

I was elated — even before he gave me thirty dollars from his tips. After this success, this coup, there was no way they could fire Dick. And Dick would vouch for me and I would keep my job. And Dick would keep giving me tips — neither Ewa nor Conrad ever gave me anything — and I could continue giving them to my mother.

Miss Amber did not work at the Club on Sunday, but I saw her in Algebra class on Monday. It was my last class of the day. We turned in our homework at the beginning of class, and when she worked the assigned problems out on the blackboard, I knew that for the first time all of my answers were correct. Dick was a good teacher. We were

all filing out at the end of class when she asked me to stay. She remained seated behind her desk. She wore a long-sleeved white blouse, and her long brown hair was back in a tight bun, encircled in a comb of the same color. Her black rimmed glasses were serious. To our left was a bank of windows that looked out onto the snow covered and quickly emptying student parking lot.

“Do you have something to say to me, Henry?” I could not imagine what that would be. “About what you saw on Saturday night?”

This was about my observing her smoking marijuana at the Bison Club. She was confronting me, and Miss Amber judged this her place of power. She was far more commanding as my teacher here in her classroom than as the drink server at the Club, wearing a short skirt and displaying her breasts every time she leaned over a table of drunken Bison.

I was having none of this, moved around the desk to stand next to her, and said, “Andre.”

“What about him?” She wavered. I saw her fear. “He brought you into the alley to see me, Henry, because he wants something from you.”

“What does he want from you?”

The skirmish played across her face. Should she tell me or not? Then — what did it matter? Our former student/teacher relationship was gone. “A larger percentage of my tips.” He had to have something on her already, to get any of her tips. “Be careful of him, Henry.”

“I doubt you are you the only one he takes from, Miss Amber.” Her silence said it all. “Why don’t you all go to The Club Manager about this? Mr. Paulson should know.”

She put a hand upon my forearm. I had never seen such a look in an adult’s eyes as I saw in hers. Mr. Paulson did know. She calmed. Took a deep breath. “Please, believe me when I say this, Henry.” She shook my arm. “For your own good. Find another job.” She leaned upon her desk and covered her face with her hands, and mumbled, “even without Andre you are set to fail.”

I swallowed; my throat dry. “Why?”

“You make Mr. Fossbeck uncomfortable.”

I went to the classroom doorway, looked up and down the hall, saw no one, shut the door, grabbed a chair, and pulled it up next to her. “What did I do to Mr. Fossbeck?”

“It is what your father did. He sees him in you. Every time he looks at you. He says that he cannot relax in his own club with you there — reminding him of — what happened.”

I was filled with pride. Of all the emotions I might have felt — I was proud. And I wondered at myself, observing this in myself.

The clock over the door said I was late for weightlifting. “Are you working tonight?”

“No. Tomorrow night. The next four after that.”

“I’m going to do better in your class.”

The look on her face. She misunderstood me.

“Dick is helping me with my Algebra.”

Her face softened, cleared all lines, and she touched her tongue to her lips. “I am your teacher, Henry.”

After wrestling practice, I found mother in the kitchen, making cassoulet, a slow-cooked bean dish that also included whatever else was available. This afternoon that was leftover duck, potatoes, and onions. The house was as cold as it had ever been. Satie was on the radio.

“When did you get off work?” I asked, because I knew this dish took hours to produce the flavor she desired.

“I have a surprise for you.” She left the kitchen and returned with a pinstripe suit that could be worn by a banker. “Try it on,” she urged.

“You made this?” But of course, she had. She made the suit I had outgrown, too. Once I had it on, she floated around me like a butterfly, inserting the pins held in her lips into the fabric for her final sewing.

“You are still growing, Henry. And those muscles, how do you keep the girls at school away from you?”

“They are children.”

She paused, almost said something, but then continued her work. Mahler’s Second Symphony came on.

I carefully removed the suit and she left with it. I knew that something was wrong; that she was stalling. When she returned, she just said it. “I quit today.”

“You quit the Safeway?”

“I will find another job. I have been considering this for some time.” It was the first I heard of it. Safeway trained her as a cashier. She had no other job experience.

“Did you have problems with the cash register?”

“No, I can do that with my eyes closed. I could do the job, Henry.”

“Then what was it?”

“I did not like the job,” she looked at the floor. “I will find another.”

My mother was an attractive woman, a widow, and I had my suspicions. I named the store manager.

“I scratched his face, alright? Let him explain that to his wife.”

I heard the top wooden cross of my kitchen chair snap in my hands. Mother cried out and then threw herself at my chest. “You cannot do anything. Without you I have nothing, I am nothing. Please, Henry, I cannot lose you, too.” And then she was crying and I let her push me down into the chair, and standing, she held my head against her breast. She said, “This is the world. And what happened? It is no importance.”

My father should have been here, to protect her. That fell to me because he died freeing the Head Bison’s horses who wanted me out of his Club because I reminded him of my father.

I ate what mother served me, but no more. I would eat at the Club. On the drive there I thought about Andre. He had things figured out — this world. It was the Bison who had the power and he was a grinning parasite. Take what you can, when you can.

I could learn from him. That night at work, I kept my eyes and ears open. The Bison and their women were loose in their talk, as if I was invisible. Of no consequence. I did not know what all of their business talk was about, but I could remember what I heard and that would be of value to someone. When Miss Amber said Andre wanted something from me, maybe it was this.

Dick continued to be a big hit with his flaming coffees. After work, he gave me another thirty dollars. "We are doing alright, Henry."

I shoved it in my pocket. "Thank you." I needed this now more than ever.

"Come outside with me for a moment."

Via the Kitchen, we went into the alley. I recognized Buster's car as it slowly drove past us in light snow fall. I knew that he saw me, but this time he did not stop.

Apparently, Dick knew the car, too. "Every night I see his lonely car. How many times a night does it drive by when I am not out here?" He lit a cigarette. "What a place. They hire a superior kitchen to make wonderful different dishes every night, and every night half of them eat steak and potatoes. Perhaps it is more the prestige, the 'conspicuous consumption' of being able to afford a fine kitchen, than of truly enjoying the food. Still, I have become fond of many of these Bison. My countrymen."

He looked me in the eyes, through the accelerating snowfall. His eyes were periwinkle blue and alive, unlike mine that I knew were heavy, measured in their movement, and brown. "I have been accepted into Stanford's doctoral program. I will be giving my notice soon."

"You're leaving?" I felt hollowed out. "What am I going to do?"

"I'm sorry. I will miss you, Henry. We could write? Promise me you will tell no one."

I nodded. Sure. He was going to get his doctorate and I was going to be left behind. Here. Me, Farmer Brown. This pile of mud, my home.

- I would farm this place
- I would be better at it than Andre and Fossbeck. Combined. Someday I would sit at the Head Table. I would give the Bison speech at 10:30 and say anything I wanted to afterwards and the Bison would have to applaud and I would have Ewa and Miss Amber and any woman I wanted. I would outdrink them all.

The next evening Andre returned from his two nights off. It was funny, watching him wriggle like a worm on the end of a hook as Dick received all of the attention making his flaming coffees. I knew Dick was no threat to him, to his power, because he was leaving. But every time a glass lit up in flame, melting the sugar around its rim, Andre grew a little darker and in the core of my camouflaged self I howled.

When I walked to my car in the parking lot at the end of the night, Andre was waiting beside it.

"You will come in an hour early tomorrow."

"That would put me on overtime. Time and a half." I received minimum wage working seven nights a week because my total weekly hours came in at exactly forty.

“I authorize it. You will teach me how to make flaming coffees.”

I did not point out that I was underage. “Yes, sir.”

The next day, before the rest of the serving staff arrived, I made two with him watching, and then he made three on his own. It was so easy I don’t know why he needed me to show him how to do it.

Dick laughed when I told him.

“I hope you are not angry.”

“Of course not, Henry. He is your boss. And the day after tomorrow I will give them my notice.”

When it was time to bring the coffee and liquor carts out, Andre blocked Dick. “I am doing this.” He took the handle of the liquor cart.

“As you wish.”

“I do wish.” He nodded to me, and I followed him to the Head Table with the coffee cart just as Mr. Fossbeck finished his recitation of the Bison Credo. Along with the Fossbecks, the Lyndens were at the Head Table with a man I did not know, but I knew he must be important by the way they deferred to him. Rather than cue “*Jeremiah was a bullfrog*”, Andre gave a speech to the assembled Bison about introducing his Flaming Coffee specialty to the Club, and that he was sorry it had been released a little earlier than he wanted by a member of his staff when he was not present. Then, he waved me away.

Dick, Ewa, and Conrad all stood in the storeroom doorway, and I joined them there as Andre lowered the house lights even further.

“What an ass,” Dick whispered.

With a flourish, Andre lit a flame atop the coffee cart. He made a big deal out of every move he made, unlike Dick who had performed the same operations with quiet grace. He took a drink order from everyone at the table and set liquor bottles on the Head Table in advance of making those drinks. Mr. Fossbeck’s order would be the first prepared, and when Andre poured high proof liquor into a large glass tapered at the top — not the type of glass Dick used — he smilingly filled it close to the top. “We will go easy on the coffee.”

Laughter rocked the Club.

“That is a Molotov cocktail! Henry,” Dick whispered. “Do you know how to use a fire extinguisher?”

Before I could say “Yes”, Andre lit the glass. There was a “whoosh” and then a “pop” as the glass exploded in his hand. The fire caught his shirt at chest level and bounced to his arms. It jumped to the coffee cart and set it on fire. Madly striking himself to extinguish the flames, Andre slammed into the Head Table and knocked over one of the liquor bottles.

I had taken the fire extinguisher from the wall and was about to run out onto the floor when Dick held my shoulders. “Not yet.”

As Andre swirled around screaming, flame jumped from him to the alcohol spilled on the Head Table and danced across the tablecloth. As the blaze spread left, Andre

ran right — right out the door and into the alley. There were snow banks out there.

Dick patted my arm. “Now.” While I extinguished the coffee cart and then blotted out the fire at the Head Table, Dick moved the liquor cart to a safe distance. As he was returning to the shadows, someone turned up the lights. I was directly opposite Mr. Fossbeck and he stared at me from his chair. Ashen. Everyone else had fled the Head Table and left him there. He looked at me like I was a ghost. My father’s ghost. It was only as the screams and cries surrounding me subsided that I became aware they had existed.

The next evening, before the Club opened, Dick announced to the Kitchen staff that he would be giving his notice, but that he did not want anyone else to know.

“Are you going to make flaming coffees?” I asked.

The Kitchen roared with laughter. I went along with it being a joke although I was serious. If Dick made the coffees, he received bigger tips, and that would mean more money for me.

Andre was out in the dining room inspecting the tables. It was the first time I had seen him do that. After last night, I wondered how he could face the Bison — especially now, with a layer of his face burned off. His moustache and eyebrows were crinkled, and both of his hands were bandaged. He did not say anything to us, and I was afraid to speak to him. Every word that came to mind was wrong. When we made eye contact, I nodded, and that appeared to make him happy.

An hour after the Club opened, Mr. Ott joined Mr. Fossbeck and Mr. Lynden at the Head Table, all accompanied by their wives. Andre leaned in like nothing had happened, and to my surprise, Mr. Fossbeck played right along. They both looked at Dick. It dawned upon me how they were going to play this. What happened last night was Dick’s fault.

Mr. Fossbeck waved me over. “Henry Brown, just like his father. Bruce,” he said to Mr. Ott, “this young man belongs in your Volunteer Fire Department. Very quick with a fire extinguisher.”

Mr. Ott’s skin paled. He had given the eulogy at my father’s funeral.

I did not know what to say, so I half bowed and moved on. They were fine with me, both Andre and Mr. Fossbeck. I could play on their team. Without turning around to allow anyone at the Head Table see my face, I went into the Kitchen. I saw Dick step out into the alley and followed. It was a clear frosty evening, with no moon, and the stars sharp sparkling pinpoints. I told him what had just happened.

“You are now ‘in’ with the ‘in crowd’. That is good, Henry, however it had to happen, but what a world. This is why I like mathematics.” I could tell that there were many things he wanted to say. Finally, he just stuck out his hand and I shook it. “Write me, Henry. I wish — “

Buster’s car sped towards us, skidding in the snow. He stopped and got out.

“Are you Dick?”

“Yes.”

Buster walked towards him. When he was two feet away, he swung something up

from his leg and it exploded. Dick flew back into the wall and slid down it leaving a smear, until he was seated in the snow, eyes still open. Buster spun the small sawed-off shotgun in his hand, like a gunslinger.

Although my ears were ringing, I understood him to say, “Nobody messes with my wife.” He looked to me for justification.

“Buster. This isn’t Conrad.”

“Who is Conrad?”

“Oh my God, Buster, what have you done? Ewa’s having an affair with Conrad, not Dick. You’ve murdered a good man.”

“But – Andre said it was Dick --”

“He used you.”

The Kitchen door cracked open. Whoever it was screamed and pulled the door closed. Wheels spun behind Buster’s eyes, and then they slowed, and then they stopped. He levered in two rounds, looked at me, and I figured I was next. Instead, he spun the weapon around, stuck the barrels in his mouth, and pulled the triggers with his thumbs. I came to on my side, in the snow. My face and arms stung. I picked a fragment from my cheek and recognized it as bone, shrapnel from what had been Buster’s skull.

Mr. Ott helped me up. I could not hear a thing.

– Dick was dead, nothing would change that

Mr. Ott brought me in out of the alley and had me sit on the edge of the stage.

– my mother was unemployed and I would no longer receive tips and I needed this job and Mr. Fossbeck finally liked me

I looked over and saw Andre behind the Head table.

– I could blackmail him with what I knew

Mr. Fossbeck shook his head sadly as Andre spoke into his ear.

– all that I had to do was keep my mouth shut.

I did not recall standing, but I was at the Head Table, my hands cupping its edge.

– Henry. You are going to ruin everything

“You told Buster that Dick was having an affair with his wife when you knew that was not true. J’Accuse! And now they are both dead because of you.” I saw lips moving among those seated, and I saw Andre deny it all. I heard nothing through the ringing in my ears, but I saw everything. Unbidden, my hands began to lift. I was pushing up on the Head Table, as if to overturn it, dishes, glassware, and all. Andre’s eyes laughed. The table was bolted to the floor.

As I lifted, I felt something leave me, a nauseous bile just past its embryo stage, and it was expelled by a deeper wakening part of me. A giant that had always been there. It would not be denied and it claimed its place, spitting out the unpalatable usurper.

The wives were already fleeing from the table. Mr. Fossbeck and Mr. Lynden looked at me like I was possessed. The first bolt snapped, and then the second, and Andre ran. Mr. Lynden helped Mr. Fossbeck up, away from the table.

Now it was Mr. Ott looking at me, as if he was seeing a ghost. And I knew who he saw.

“I am — my father’s son!”
The last bolt snapped.

Janáček

His name like a kite's whistle. His face like an old hat. His voice like rain on a tin roof. Forever in and out of love, he traded wives for sunny days. He built dovecotes for stray clouds. He disliked his neighbors - the rumors they spread about his sad socks. He had a secret method of taming neckties. He used to carry a blue umbrella at all times and wore leather gloves whenever he handled money. He wrote a novel about two lakes that fall in love with the same mountain. Before immigrating to America he gave the manuscript to my grandfather. I discovered it among my late grandfather's belongings, in the attic. I read his novel and found it fascinating. I sent his manuscript to several editors, but I could not find anyone willing to publish it. Some editors wrote back complaining about his illegible hand. Others said that they could not decipher its language. There were some who argued that in fact, it was nothing but blank pages. But I am not like them, after reading the manuscript I often dream fragments from Janáček's novel.

The history of bone combs

Believe it or not, the first bone combs were created to brush out moonbeams from the crow pheasant's shimmering feathers. Naked women, their bodies smeared with a potion brewed from moonbeams and the menstrual blood of a virgins, would dance until they spread their wings and took off from the ground. It is said that the Wright brothers, credited with inventing, building and flying the world's first successful motor operated airplane, are the descendants of one of those winged women. It is also said that if you brush your hair with such a magic comb you will stop having dreams of falling.

Little brother

At thirty eight, little brother is a person our society might consider lost. Mother gives him love, instructions and bread crumbs but once he is alone in the forest he strays from the track and is lost. Each footprint attracts nothing but the echo of his footsteps and rain. Day after day he walks in circles suckling on his thumb. Sometimes he is angry and desperate; he screams and cries, but mostly he talks to his favorite show's host. Cut to another story: he is not lost...he is trapped. From the very beginning, mother firmly ties the boy to her apron strings. He is forbidden to go to the forest, even with his father or the menfolk of the village.

Hakomi Walk

He is at fault, of course,
but he does not become fault -
a skinless, rootless mass.

He walks and warms the bones
of other, luckier souls.

The heart hardens, constricts,
and stumbles to insist he is nothing
but a mistake.

Lost.

I remember the face of the one he doomed.
The patient eyes and the wet, horrible noise.

The piercing fire in my gut and knees.
The dawning I was not the one who died.

Alone.

In bed I tried to rid him of his life,
remove his weight and clear him
from our soil,

but his steps are burdened
and his bones are cold.

Open.

He is mine and I am his and we share roots
in drought and flood.

we know eyes and long to rid
ourselves of noises in our skin.

We walk and warm the bones
of those without.

Unclosed.

A Quiet Moment

-For Jeannine Chappell

There is no necessary clean and wooden gloss room floor,
cross-legged and quiet, incense carving upward,
tumble blue and thickly fading,
pouring faintly undulating grace
among the hushed and easy swell of simulated strings.
No white linen chakras, beckoned
open by ragged guru mats required
to pay honor to the graceful pains of ancients.
Neither tapestries nor cotton flags
nor comely Eastern trinkets prime the soul
for closer compliments to sweetly severe ascetics
or casually needy Buddhas.

Just a spot to sit, straight-backed and supple,
open mind and courage flexed to meet
what then may enter.

But let alone that itch.
Leave it perch and nibbling.
Feel the crackle spread and ebb,
knowing fear is all that holds us stunted.

What I Mean When I Say the Words: An Introvert Attempts Explanation

I love you like

I love sunsets, suddenly spreading
out across life's tedium to radiate
the magnificent fact that the sun sets every day.

I love you like I love

the rhythm deathless in my bones,
waking my hips to slide subconscious
through the honey air
before I think to ask.

I love you like I love words

typed black with purpose and set
against blank and brilliant white
to mix the world and all its horrors.

I love you like I love the stupid gift of life.

I don't want to share a mortgage,
I want to dance with you like refugees
to the anthem of our invented homeland,
ecstatic to finally find another.

I want to spin and shuffle and beam until the sky
reminds us music must sometimes return
to dwell beneath our skin and hum,
bubbling inside until we are given again
the space to release.

I want you and your soul
to sit across from me and stare, to grin,
to glisten eyes and breathe the same rich air.

I want to create new life and breathe into it
all we know and hope. I want to carry
our creations to the shore, to scatter
them to the wind, to set them loose
in the forest and wait and watch until
it is absolutely certain they require
a friendly beacon.

I want to love you like a sponge accepts
water and we to be the hand that dips
the sponge and the glass that offers the liquid.
I want us to be the ripples and the lake and the rock
sinking swiftly to the mud

and there, nestled beside the worms and fish scales
and fowl droppings, shine in the filtered light
an invitation to discovery for any who dare to swim
with eyes open, for those who know escaping air
and still choose to weigh new knowledge against time.

I love you like the fish we both eat and marvel at;
like the brick we stack like walls;
like the alarmingly smooth skin of a child, warm
like heaven; like the reassuringly worn touch
of your partner, like electric into yours in the blue
exploration of evening abandon.

I love you like I love.

Love like breathing roses and cheese.

Love like 2 am and burning for 3.

Yes, bills and time and terror and the insane, flailing remainder.

Yes, tomorrow and the next day.

Yes, our stupid, fading, miracle bodies
and our gorgeous, ambivalent planet.

When we can we will dance
beneath our ever-changing flag, ecstatic,
loving each other and wanting
to love.

Pushing our hips, whatever they may be,
into the pink and honey air.

A Brief Horror

From the backseat suddenly he pleads
for you to remove his thoughts.

He cannot yet fathom death but understands
it inevitable and here this partly cloudy
afternoon it seeps unbidden, an image
of nothingness half formed and freshly
unearthed in his experience.

You travel forward with him, offering
sailboats to carry unwelcome darkness
and horizons of holiday family,
a rainbow assurance that yes it is
but it will not be for him for years and years
and you know this is a kind of lie,
a reluctance to delve into statistics
and possibilities, desperate to buoy
him above the whole, abysmal truth.

Your mind flashes pale moons glinting
razor steel clutched by madmen
ready in jumpsuits relentless in corner
shadows, the unseen, the almost certainly
never, but, but..but the blade pierces you clean
through heart and lung, gasping unexpected
bones and screaming highways, bleeding
lymph nodes and stumbling plain, stupid fate.

He sways and shakes, still dreaming ideas
physical and contorting to grab hold,
but empty fingers pound the headrest
and his terrible eyes ask the impossible.
And you invert back to your bedroom desk,
again sleepless and floundering to solidify
lifelessness before you had lived.

You remember reaching through dirt
towards the footsteps above. You remember
the inescapable limbo between absence and the end.
You know you cannot promise when
he will leave or be left.
It is true this will pass and come again.

We Would be Deeply Saddened

"It is unclear what may have happened, and we are investigating further..., "We would be deeply saddened by any potential loss of innocent life."

-Capt. Bill Urban, spokesman for US Central Command

Asphalt and trees, shadows and morning,
shoulders and ribs and fingers reaching
across the table for more eggs,
smiling like a Sunday, despite the airport
and the questions and the children,
pressed against the fence, never more desperately
concerned for their parents.

You meet his eyes across breakfast and remember
he has never not known death as a distinct
possibility, born with the handle of a Jack in the box
grafted to his hand. And then the grate-snap spring
lid triggers and your mind rushes to him as his head whips
to the window to know next door is on fire, still blurred
from impact and rising to understand the screams
and the heat and the ringing in his ears like hearing
is a sense that was.

Downstairs holding neighbors' tears, you sidestep
a portion of two-year-old torso to attack the rubble,
to convince yourself there is hope in rescuing the young,
finding her dust-caked and incomplete, her mother
unprepared for this morning's sky.

Your son, above, watches blood mix with limestone
and wonders if there is indeed a righteous side,
if a bomb is exactly as precise as it means to be.

from **THE COURTESY OF THE DEAD**

The communication/

of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living—T.S.Eliot

1.

Edith Shein, her head cradled in the left hand
of an unknown sailor, sets her right leg on its toe
and arcs her body, bending it like a bow

in giving herself to a kiss as thousands pour
into Time's Square at the end of the war,
when Manhattan seemed a cozier shore.

Before Edith died, a man from Kansas City, Mo.
claimed to be her momentary beau;
he was one of ten including an ordinary Joe

from Indianapolis and a refrigerator mechanic
at Harvard—yet no one living really knows
who LIFE's camera captured in such a manic pose.

2.

It took more than twenty twisted years in the new century,
to see the 20th as definitively past,
to feel Stravinsky as distant as Mozart;

it took a tsunami and a hurricane, bombs
on a train, in a bus, more than one flood
and two buildings coming down

in the bluest sky I'd ever seen; it took a virus too.
And I thinking what they took away was merely scenery
gave nothing back but words,
the palest emanations of immortality.

THE TORCH OF ENTHUSIASM

—i.m. Raoul Middleman, 1935-2021

My friend Raoul died last night
who could talk faster than a Bay oyster
sliding down your gullet.

I often drowned in his enthusiasm
for art and philosophy,
even at the gym,
spittle shooting from his mouth,

rousing memories of his first studio
above the strip clubs on The Block
and ten thousand canvases left in storage
with nowhere else to go.

Our two brains were always at war.
He never made me a gift
though I spent a day sitting for him
and wrote a poem I never put in a book.

He knew I hated his portrait of me
painted with his usual energy—
how it made me look like an evil dwarf.

I wrote an article about him once
but he never thanked me.
Kings don't thank their subjects.

TWO DAYS LATER

Ever since the biopsy I'm peeing out my ass,
no clots that I can see, no orange water
just the faint mystery of bodily disorder
and the hope of being cancer free.

Ex-voto I am deposed to patient from doctor,
a change in position from which the angle of view
is painfully extreme, the urologist canting
back and forth his ultrasonic wand in my rectum.

Twenty-two times I hear the striking click
of a biopsy punch as loud as a mad carpet stapler.

After he's done the pictures of our intimate war
are placed in my hand, the MRI tumor targets
superimposed on an ultrasound image
of a cap-shaped prostate pierced by multiple tracks

of a digital drone. His missile has come to set me free
from a choked road to urinary flow and sexual climax.

FIVE DOLLARS TEN CENTS

I'm not too disappointed with my life
despite polio and the Nazis
at least not so much I don't envy
the fame of others
though one book of mine last year
did earn hundreds more than *Gatsby* did
(see title at top) in nineteen twenty-nine.
This was almost a century ago
when my father was a teenager on a Czech farm
and learned to ride horses in Slovakia.

So, I got a surprise in the paper today
how the Roaring Twenties supposedly ended
well before the crash
a claim some reporter based
on a filthy book-length poem from 1928
by a night-crawler Joseph Moncure March
who liked to party 'til dawn broke.
Didn't he know it's always the Roaring Twenties in New York
with brief interruptions of despair
due to war and bad music?

So, I think it's easier to sit on a bar stool in Baltimore
where an extra dime beyond a fin
gets you a burger
observing from afar.
I'm old enough to have forgotten how to drive
and afraid of contagion in a subway car.
I'm so old it hurts my legs to walk in those museums
with marble floors.
Down here I can write all day
about my complaints
how much the bosses make exiles pay for entry.

You might say we are estranged The City and I
like jilted lovers or an ex-wife
even as a poet and the poem often are
even if a certain amount of ignorance in life is necessary
to bring wonder to the page.

A KADDISH FOR CHAOS

I bow to you, superior poet, singer
of Moloch, of doom. Master painter
of emptied valleys, dried-up streams,
the woodsheds
where widows peg up
the coffins. Your servants still make them of pine
and throw in a shawl: no ratty coat, no jeans
no decoration allowed.
We come in naked and go out nude.

We have seen you in our mirrors.

Death is the name of a noun unqualified
by anything save our memory
of one who made such a glorious world—
(we know someone had to)—
the one we break over and over.

ELEUTHERA: A CARIBBEAN SONG

This poem has been writing itself for fifty years.
Why does it never let go?
From Boston to Eleuthera to New York,
From concrete and sand into a fifty-year marriage
Of a man and a woman joined by a hinge
Of happiness
And teeth made of sadness and guilt.

At the start I drag my fancy into the streets
And find them running with murky rain
That water which must pollute rather than purify,
Which no baptism has ever sanctioned,
Which has never cleansed a spirit,
But running silent, ever still,
Spills out the message of a darkling cloud,
Down through the foggy depth of a sewer tower
And showers you and I and everyone
In dismal chains, each link the weakest,
Each link the strongest,
A uniform depression....

Let us sing Clete's little song:
Yes man, the doc he sit
Yes man, the doc he sit
Yes man, he rock and sweat
Yes man, he rock and sweat
The rain, man, it fly and hit
The rain, man, it fly and hit.

We escaped alone, together, to this island,
From a land of many shouts
Pouting children throwing stones,
Parents feeding bloodied bones
To reason's rabble.
The old ones cannot think,
The young ones will not think,
But dream of drowning one another.

And the stink of that debate
Has reached beyond the Spanish Wells,
Down the coast of Eleuthera,
Past the beaches littered
With the white man's refuse
(Garbage fed the native hunger),
Beyond the forest ranches for his cattle,
The stink it crawls to reach my door
And dies.
The stink decays,
Smell on smell,
And the odor reaches beyond the spell
Of ever-falling rain....

Let us sing another song:
Today I saw some silver
Like a pillar in a hole
It grew to fill the clouds
With the old sun's failure
Then trudging past the house
It caught upon the power line
And fell to earth
No longer silver.

On an island seventy miles east of Nassau,
Or west if you prefer the upside-down view;
But people frown upon such foolish fun as mine,
And shun the backward stance,
Glances past the wrong-side shoulder
The one pressed to the wheel of life and work
Where one may learn a diverse incompetency
By standing here long enough
And dropping one's head below the knees
To catch the breeze of busy pillars....

Let us sing a little song:
My friend he heard the native talk
'Watch, my man, that woman walk
She will come with me next year
And we will sip the German beer
And marry in the sun
God bless it
And marry in the sun.

We could not reach the edge of urbanity by plane or car—
Not past the Massachusetts arm,
Swinging past the Carolinas now,
Scooping deep into the sea,
Its aromatic fingers clasping close
The island of Eleuthera.
What lies are told on every side!
The Okie cowboy, he rides, he rides,
And sees the black mosquitoes fall
To the spray of softly running words,
The driven spring of ignorance:

Let us sing a little song:
Boy is twenty-seven
And boy he'll be at ninety-nine
He's never taken a bath.
The cowboy disapproves of this
But then the doctor comes
One tenth as often as the white-man's jet
That sets upon the runway
Engines shying my vinegar heart
And the native singing to himself
Counts his gold
And paradise must die.

Can any dream be half as wet as Tarpum Bay?
Does any wetness hold a darker secret?
It rains and rains—
Drizzling like my pen, fogging like my brain
Begetting the children of its wetness
Which my wetness has not begot,
Yet hopes to spawn in proper livery on a distant day
And maintaining my costume,
Will dry to white in blackness....

Let us sing a song
Of Sturm und Drang:
Death has many fellows
Guitars and beers
Cigarettes
Drugs and drano
Long hair, short hair
And pubic hair
No hair best of all
Then we are the closest to death
And love it least
For it will not leave my friend and I
As the storm it must
Or must it?

After several hours of anxious work
At this screw-wormed desk
The storm's violent spittle cracks open
My sleepy soul.
My friend sleeps in bed
Dreaming of the nurses he will open,
Like moldy boxes of crackerjacks,
To find a plastic prize and the tired candy.
The gods are very angry
The rain is drowning the BBC
And we all know what that once meant.
It meant no crumpets for Rock Sound blacks
Who always wanted crumpets.
No, we're hearing the cracking of Britain's armpits,
You fool! Jordan has killed two score
(or was it more?) Israelis.
An unnatural demise and yet, devise
By pestilence or flood
A way to die, not of Nature's way
And sad deceit at best.

Let's sing a better song:
No bananas grow upon this isle
But Clete he buys the tree
He'll have your head you know
If you bites upon his tree
But the other natives steal him blind
And blame it on Conky-Joe.

How can I rest so far south of tenderness?
North and west my bride sits in her silent room
Planning our future,
And in my lazy egotism
I see her crying for my storm's sake,
Crying for the sun
Bewailing what was done
Before her wedding day.
As Death wears many unexpected masks
The storm must also dress itself
In costumes more subtle than
This constipated thunder struggling to emerge....

Let us sing a song of the past:
Have you come upon the night
To steal my virtue blind
And bind your strength
To weakness?
Yes, my love, I love thee.

In the town of Tarpum Bay
The post office, government throne and nurse's station fill
A single yellowed building from end to end
And between its doors the police hold sway
By the ideograms for men and women.
I do believe
The doll-sized department store has a Kotex cargo
But the Charolais cows will have none of it,
And I am on their side...

Some knowledge bleeds in
With this little song:
"So", his Cynthia said
"Andy Williams, Hank Mancini
Were on this show together!"
And all of us at her pleasure
Reached at once
An orgasm.

No doubt the morning will find me burbling
Even more unprintable nasties
Dredged up from my Slavic cunning
And theirs, clothed in the Elizabethan lisp
Of still more cunning Bahamians,
Gold-toothed brigands
Who would sell and steal,
Steal and sell,
And call it commerce.
How strange
What do we call it in Boston or Baltimore?

Let us sing his little song:
"My name is Clete"
What?
"My name is Clete"
Well what do people call you
Mr. Knowles?
You own the beach, this house
The grocery store
The construction behind
The litter in front
The unreliable taxi-service
The bikes and trikes and cars for rent
"They call me Clete, Sir."

They call me doctor now.
One evening I was just a mister,
But the professors gave me a hood of green,
And smiling at their folly,
Added honors to my degree
So I should feel still less a doctor.

Let us sing a little song:
Every other building in Tarpum Bay
The churches own;
The people pray and pray
God, God
Make this marriage business
Make it go away, away
And keep us holy
On Eleuthera.

The people had churches in Europe too,
God bless the Germans, the French and such
They obliterated every other Jew.
And the churches went away, so far, indeed,
Not even the histories can find them.
But historians grazing upon the ruins,
Will let their stomachs fill
Before they spit the knowledge out
That the people died before their God....

Let us sing a big little song
From nineteen-sixty-nine:
St. George, North Carolina, on the air.
W-blank something scrambles across
To advertise a name-brand car
Before and after headlines read,
At cost,
By the white South's high school pride,
The prize pupil of a prize.
And the restaurateur he said
"You all come back, you hear"
And the Negro cook
She sweats, you bet-
The air conditioning's
For customers only.

We passed on through that tossed-down town
Preparing ourselves for a Miami landing,
And had ourselves one filling meal,
Which sticks in me like stones this early morning,
Some five days later,
When the lightning touching ground
Has stopped up our water tanks
And squeezed my rectal sphincter shut.
The thunder and lightning give me the scare
That we are not quite where we think we are,
And there's no end to rain in Hell,
Or in the Bahamas either....

Let us sing a littlest song:
That last flash has done in the BBC
Fried it good and proper;
I look for and find
The Voice of America—
Now that's not quite right is it?
"I look for and find,"
One has hopes.

Early on I knew the form my little songs would have to take
Then late decided to be arbitrary and daring,
Artist's words for sloppy thinking;
I excuse it in myself,
For I am not British,
And have but two initials to my name—
That is the nature of modesty...

Shall I sing a little song:
Do you rhyme, dear uncle?
Do you rhyme?
Have you time to work at words
By worded rules?
Fools I say it's done by intuition
Wishing it appear
More or less unruly
But I am not an uncle yet
And being an only child....

The lamps are blinking on and off,
One on the table, one in my brain,
Both short-circuited by the rain,
That incessant beating of rain
Filling the potholes of the road
With gutless wine and tender tears.
The gentle are rarely stronger than their years
As the decent are
Those known alone by the power of God's good hand,
St. George,
Hallelujah,
Bless the land!

Let us sing a little song:
Good father, will you rhyme?
In time, my children, time
And place us in our beds?
And kiss us on the heads?
And hold our hands more softly,
To listen to the rain?
It carries poison, father...
I told them it would.

A Charolais bull stands as tall
As the downward slope of a man's chest.
The beast grows three pounds a day,
Weighs two-and-one half thousands,
Will bring to the pocket fifty more,
While three of each and every ten—
What cows or horses—
Excuse me men,
Three black children die
And free up the pasture grass.
But then, I'm telling lies again,
As every Texan knows....

Let us sing a Cowboy song:
He came from Colorado
Thin air cheated him of his humility
Now he dwells upon
The hilltop of his treasure
The ranch that claws at Rock Sound
Where the road snakes along
Like his bullwhip in the air
And like his whip
Carries all away in an ecstasy
Of violence
And bends them to his god—
Even an atheist
Must love something.

Music doesn't come easily to grace this land,
But the hand by writing
Has cleared dry chitin from my eyes,
Has discovered the vision of my unblinding.
Speak again young sewage trap—
You have seen enough
And gained enough
To torture the northern fairy;
Wisdom has no other traps for you,
It waits with the net—
And an axe...

Let us sing a little song:
For the pummeling rain will not stop
Someone somewhere is crying
For men who sought a peace
In distance
From real and angry lives;
For women will not bless
Such fleeing
From their busy hives;
For thunder without kindness;
For all of these
The water will not stop.

Over the hours, the storm oscillates in fury,
Never damps down completely;
And the weighted palms hang low,
An octave lower than my voice,
Dripping like the ink from a gold-filled pen
Picked up in a cruel silence
Masquerading as a man.
Balance, I've heard your name—
Where are you?
The lightning comes closer than before,
A miniature war roars fifty feet away
On the Caribbean shore,
Lights up endless clouds
With perilous popgun firings.
And the clouds have settled on the roof,
Scratching at our final hours.
Dear God, our deaths are ever close!
And still my friend, he sleeps,
Drunk with the poetry of youth's arrogance...

Let us sing a little song:
You will gaze upon the stars
And wonder
May I leap to reach the holy fire
Of this blessed journey?
I gaze upon the ocean
Boasting too quickly
Of future accomplishment.
For the Lord has no dominion
Over this or any other ocean
And the Lord
Will not keep a whore like me.

The Nassau crowd once made pennies and crowns
By erecting wayward lights for shoals
And many a ship, cracking like thunder,
Rode the bottom of well-lit holes.
Like storm and death and other demons,
The ancient slaver mounts the stage
Wearing a golden mask
Beaten flat by perversity,
And resembling all our neighbors...

Another little song:
Any man may write
If he will but celebrate the wind
Only the wind is free
And the agony of life
Is set by the chain
Which ties the truth
To the human heart.

In this humid hour my sputtering radio produces in static
A facsimile of a Beethoven concerto.
We have not heard from the Master this past week,
He too has been on a vacation of sorts;
Or, as Miami would have it, in exile.
The piano part is woefully inaccurate but welcome.
At any rate, my thoughts are breaking faster than the keys.
His notes live apart from all of us,
And may continue to do so—
If we but forget to burn the scores in books...

A little song arrives:
Writing this before a bowl
Of plastic grapes and apples
Far we have come
 To find the fruit
No tarantula will touch,
Bright orbs painted with the colors
Of rusted tin cans swept in
From the ocean floor
Of a clear and still proud sea.
That sea can hide a good man's dirt
Beneath the rippling hem
Of its skirt upon the beach
And the ocean will suck the storm
To ecstasy.

The calm descends so suddenly, it feels unreal.
Poor storm, he takes off his mask and dies;
The men survive the play inside my head
And the world must cease to shudder.
Under a quiet sky, my spirits are free to ride
From cloud to cloud like a flying monkey
No longer hacked in halves by my primitive sensibility
Of progress. Not all will be well unless we unite
To make of small things smaller.
For the rest we must dance a nervous dance
Upon the good earth's crust
Where sleeps the smaller portion of our divinity.
Every drama ends in comedy.
I learned this once in the calm of a numinous island
Some would call Eleuthera....

Moonlight and Mary

Bill Schillaci

Last night I woke hours before dawn and you were not there. This happens, it happens all the time. You're not there or I'm not there. There are trips to the toilet, or kitchen raids, or you'll be up long before me for a run on the tow path. I become aware your departure in semi-slumber. There's the soft whoosh of your body sliding off the bed, the shift of weight on the mattress, the very air around us moving subtly after stillness and dreams. I don't even open my eyes, and, most times, sleep quickly reclaims all of me. But last night there was something else. Through the dim digital light from the clock on your nightstand, I stared at your half of the bed, the sheet and lime green waffle blanket tossed aside, the bunched-up pillow. Was there a noise, something sharp and strange? I kept watching, waiting for my mind to pull the pieces together. But nothing happened, no obvious reason, no clarity. There was only your absence.

"Glenda," I whispered.

It's May and the night air was warm, but when I put my feet on the floor, I started shivering at once. This had nothing to do with the ambient temperature. It was the sensation that accompanies emptiness, of feeling hallowed out. I pushed against the mattress to stand, but it was an automatic movement without strength or will and I remained seated, pinned in place by the emptiness. You were not there and it was wrong.

Last week, Sunday morning, I pushed aside the glass door at the back of our house and inhaled the fragrances of spring. The rear of our backyard is overgrown with entangled mountain laurel and bayberry bushes in desperate need of pruning. Months ago I promised you that I would thin them out, but I have yet to clip a single stem. The house itself, the old roof, the older plumbing, were priorities. Now all the bushes are in bloom, and I face the unhappy prospect of snipping away so much life that has just begun. The bushes conceal most of our view of the canal at the bottom of an earthen incline fifty yards beyond the backline of our property. Built in the 1830s, the canal was a conduit for mule-drawn barges carrying Pennsylvania coal to New York. Long ago the railroads rendered the canal obsolete and now it's a seventy-mile-long, ribbon-thin state park.

You were not in the house, and I assumed you were out there on the tow path with the other runners and bikers and dog walkers, all intersecting the low sunbeams and enjoying the promise of a new day. I carried my mug over the cracked pavers of the patio—another upkeep project—and stepped onto the grass. Of course you were right; we need an opening through the bushes, an unobstructed window to the canal, one reason we came here, an enchanting link to the past, a fondness for the old world we shared. I promised myself then that I would create the view in time for the summer

so we could sit on the patio or the grass, a bottle of wine between us, and watch the trickle of humanity, people at leisure, feeling healthy and hopeful.

Peering into the bushes I saw something different, black and low on the ground. The object rippled in the breeze and I thought a contractor trash bag caught in the branches. But the movement was too deliberate, too animate, possibly one of the big turkey vultures we see overhead, landed and feeding on carrion. I love the vultures, their hideous red heads, like fleshless skulls, their black outlaw plumage, avian Hells Angels, and their calm airborne circuits, which seem to have no purpose other than the pleasure of flight and the company of other vultures. I approached softly to get a better look and stopped. What I saw through the thicket was you. You were fully wrapped in a black shawl placed over your head and you were kneeling in front of Mary. Before we bought the house, we didn't even know the two-foot-tall limestone statue was there, deep in the foliage, a standing figure with palms turned outward, only slightly eroded, her robe still bearing traces of red and blue paint. We talked about removing it, but something primal got in the way; a prohibition? a warning? We both felt it and couldn't explain it. The statue stayed where it stood.

I stared in wonder, electric chills spread across my face. You were kneeling, but it was more than that. You were crouched low, head bent, your arms crossed tight against your chest; it was as if you were trying to squeeze yourself into nothingness, as if you were trying to disappear.

I waited, but all at once it was unbearable. I was an intruder, a violator of a moment as hidden as your most private thoughts, thoughts you had every right to keep to yourself. As quietly as I could I stepped back, still watching you. Before I turned, your back straightened, your head came around and from deep in your shawl you saw me. I sought your eyes, but they were hidden in the shadow cast by the shawl. We both waited, the distance between us freighted with mystery. And then you returned to Mary, once again bending in what I could only think of as total supplication.

Last month we both took a day off in the middle of the week and drove to Philadelphia. Ever since moving north from Charlottesville, we'd planned a trip to Logan Circle, an all-day walking tour of the museums, the Franklin Institute, the Free Library. You wanted to arrange a field trip to the Academy of Natural Sciences for your biology students and you made an appointment to meet the educational coordinator. It was late in the school year to get the trip funded, particularly for a first-year teacher, but you said that since the winter break, some of your students got behind a troubling backlash against Darwinism. Your idea was to immerse them in the real science, what you called "the immaculate beauty of natural selection."

We were excited and arrived an hour before anything opened. We found a café that sold us two overpriced containers of strong coffee. You were quiet and kept gazing through the café's front window.

"We can wait in there," you said.

"The church?"

"I think it's a basilica."

“There’s a difference? It’s probably not open.”

“Let’s find out.”

“I’m comfortable here.”

“Then stay here.”

I watched as you crossed the street, your gait slow and wobbly, a trait I’ve learned is not uncommon with competitive runners when they’re not running. As you mounted the steps between the towering brownstone columns, my guess that the doors would be locked changed into a hope. But you pulled the handle, the door swung open and you were inside. What was this? Until we slowed in the city’s inbound rush hour traffic, the drive had been smooth and you were chatty, reading to me nonstop from your phone about all the current exhibitions waiting for us. Now you were somewhere else entirely. Was it me?

My coffee had cooled when I texted, *Are u ok?*

Come in, you replied.

As I approached, the structure transformed from monumental to intimidating. It was something that always bothered me about these grand houses of worship, how they seemed intent on belittling people simply seeking peace and consolation. Inside, the basilica appeared even larger, the distance between me and the arched ceiling looking greater than it could possibly be. The gilt and richness wherever I looked resembled nothing I could connect to the human experience. The two wide banks of wooden pews rolled away, narrowing with perspective as they neared the altar, not a soul in any one of them except you. You were at the far end of a row, your gaze locked on the altar, which was situated under a columned canopy with a golden dome. I walked along the back of the church, reached your row and sat beside you. You continued to stare. The silence was complete and strange in a space so immense.

I said, “What’s up?”

“I think this is what it’s supposed to look like.”

“What’s what supposed to look like?”

“Heaven.”

“I thought that was Iowa.”

A laugh, a single-syllable with a small scornful inflection sounded in your throat. You stood.

“Time to go,” you said.

A year ago, just after the holidays, Josie, your best friend at the high school where you taught in Charlottesville, was arrested after the single mother of a seventeen-year-old senior told the police that the two were having sexual relations. The mom skillfully pieced it together. There’d been too many times she’d passed her son’s door late at night hearing muffled laughter. Too many after-school study groups none of the other moms knew about. Too many sullen silences or angry outbursts when she asked him why he stopped seeing his school friends. Desperate, she raided his phone while he was taking one of his interminable after-dinner showers. The text exchanges, as long as CVS receipts, were as joyfully crude as graffiti in the stall of a

gas station rest room. The accompanying selfies were apparently intended to out-do each other, including one that responded to a challenge to take a closeup of a morning pee. Based on what was in the phone, they appeared to be having the time of their lives. The high spirits failed to mollify the mom, who screamed through the bathroom door that the son get out of the shower. Barely dressed in shorts, t-shirt and flipflops, he was ordered into the car in the sub-freezing evening, his hair still dripping wet, and driven straight to the police station. While waiting to see a detective, the mom phoned her ex, who was on the county board of supervisors. She told him she wanted him to use whatever fucking influence he had with the police to make sure Josie was yanked out of her classroom in the middle of a school day and marched in handcuffs down the school's main corridor to a squad car for all to see. The ex, who was chronically playing catchup in family court regarding child support and custody, did what he was told.

I learned some of this from the news reports but much more from you and your continued close contact with Josie, who told you everything in defiance of her promise to her attorney that she wouldn't breathe a word about anything to anyone. Josie told you the kid was wise beyond his years, and what happened between them had nothing to do with his physical appearance, six-two with a full beard, more resembling a member of SEAL Team Six than an exploited minor. As part of a plea deal, Josie declined to contest any of the charges against her and accepted full responsibility for the affair. The prosecutors factored in the consensual nature of the relationship and the relatively small seven-year difference in the ages of the parties. Accordingly, Josie was found guilty of sexual misconduct with a minor, a Class 1 misdemeanor, instead of statutory rape. In court, Josie begged the kid and his family for forgiveness. The mom relented a bit in her wrath. It all amounted to a one-year prison sentence and eligibility for parole after nine months. Josie's attorney assured her that she couldn't have hoped for a better outcome.

You started visiting the first week Josie was incarcerated. Right after your Saturday morning run, you got in the car and drove fifty miles to the state correctional facility for women. The visits were capped at thirty minutes, and in the beginning, Josie was voluble, telling you prison wasn't that bad provided you followed all the rules, written and unwritten. She taught history, but also had drawing skill and told you she'd started a children's book about a pack of neighborhood dogs who were secretly able to fly. On your last visit you were planning to ask Josie if it would be alright if you came every other week. At visitor check-in, you were informed that Josie was in the infirmary and unavailable. They refused to tell you anything more. You contacted her attorney and learned that Josie had slashed her wrists with a butter knife she'd purloined from the mess hall kitchen. After that, Josie informed you through her attorney that she didn't want you to visit again. You wrote and wrote, pleading with her to tell you what was going on. Was it something you did or said? Josie never replied. After serving the minimum sentence, she was released, her name now inscribed in the state's sexual offender registry for at least fifteen years, her teaching career over. You told me that you would have been right there for her the moment she walked through the prison gate. But by then, we were already far north, both of us with new jobs, living in a

quaintly dilapidated nineteenth century fieldstone house overlooking an historic work of human ingenuity.

“Ex-cons do that,” I said. “They just walk away from everything and everybody they knew, bad and good.”

“Maybe,” you said. “But not this time. This time it’s me.”

A few years before that, when we first met running on Lannigan Field at UVA, you lapped me three times on the track. I thought, *that’s it*, and started kicking. After that, you lapped me only once. You were stretching on the infield and invited me to join you as I walked off the burn. You lied that I had good running form. I asked if you ran for the school. “Once,” you answered and changed the subject. You said you were in your last year of a double masters, education and biology. I told you I worked in the financial aid office. You offered your number before I asked for it and we had several chats that lasted late into the night. But each time you declined my invitation to get together, once at the Southern Café and then for a walk along the Rivanna River. I buttoned it up until I was ready to crack, then said I wanted to see you. *I know*, you said, *this isn’t fair. I’m sorry*. Call over. I returned to the track a few times, then consoled myself by giving up running. A month later, you texted that you were ready for that walk if I wasn’t too mad at you.

It’s advertised as a wilderness walk, but the river path is paved and on clear, mild weekends the foot traffic is almost as dense as that on the Downtown Mall. Before you said a word, I asked you not to apologize for anything because it was great to see you again.

“It’s not an apology. It’s bad blood.”

“Between us?”

“Just me.”

We walked. I waited. You gave it to me in small portions stretched out over two hours, like a surgeon slicing out a cancer. At first it was alcoholism, three out of four grandparents. Fittingly, your mom and dad met in a bar. When times were hard that’s where they went. When times were good that’s where they went. Your father was a fire fighter who was suspended twice for showing up drunk for work. Your older sister preferred drugs and was in and out of institutions for depression and related shit. Your brother fled to the west and is rarely heard from. You were very good in school and at sports, and your parents interpreted this to mean the family curse had skipped you. You accepted the propaganda about yourself and tried to disregard the sadness or believed it was something else, pressure to excel or too much takeout food or the state of the world. Boyfriends helped but the sadness always returned and you pushed them away. Still, you loved being with boys, and were an inveterate flirt.

We walked down to the river bank. There’d been a hard rain at the river’s source in the Blue Ridge and the water was churning and deafening on its way to the James.

“So what’s the problem?” I said.

“What?”

“SO WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?”

You smiled and put your arm through mine. We watched the river for a while and then you shouted into my ear that you had to get back to your room to study.

Last night, weary but not sleepy after hammering fruitlessly at all I didn't know, I sunk back onto the bed and watched the white rectangles on the wall above the bureau, placed there by the full moon shining through the window panes. As long as there's moonlight, I thought, I'll watch and wait. Later, I heard your careful footfalls and then felt you settling behind me. The damp scent of outside air clung to you. I reached back and found your hand.

"Do you want to know where I was?" you said.

"I know, I think."

"She's a good conversationalist."

"You mean she just listens?"

You chuckled and rolled over, folding your body against my back, your arm over my stomach, locking us together.

"So Jack, do you want to go running with me tomorrow?"

The first month we were here, I ran with you three times. The third time, I vowed to keep up with you. I remembered my lungs frying, what I thought the first sign of death by smoke inhalation must feel like, and an oceanic pain that spread like metal scrapings from the fronts of my thighs to all my extremities. After that, I retired again and you ran alone. The sensations returned to me now with no loss of detail.

"Sure, sounds like fun."

You pulled me closer.

"I might stop by the lady outside and request divine intervention," I said.

"Yeah," you said. "It could hurt?"

No Literal Translation

The language of rain
Is such a liquid thing.
It runs down my face -
Sometimes hard,
Sometimes soft.
And just when I think
I might understand it,
It evaporates in the sun.

Hours and Minutes

Whether from east to west or from west to east, I always knew where the sun was in the sky
by how it felt on my shoulders. And when the sweat on my back began to turn prickly cold,
I knew night was coming, and it'd soon be too dark to work. Only enough time and light was needed to store the plow and walk to the house. For now, what else was there to do?

Heard and Unheard

The slamming door. The shattered dish. Shouts in, into, night. Grinding gears .Backfiring mufflers A wail of police sirens. Blaring horns. So many people try to be heard, but cannot be heard above the din they make.

Her Toast Untouched

Her toast sits untouched

Pills not taken

Orange juice glass on the counter

Where they remain during the day

And the next

And the one after that

Toast, pills, and glass untouched

Not mentioned

By their daughter when she visits

To help

To talk

To assess

To clean the counter

To return her mother's glass

To replace her pills in their containers

To leave her toast for the remaining birds

To take her father to visit his wife scattered by the river.

Lessons Learned

- ⌚ Those closest will leave
- ⌚ Be quick to take offense
- ⌚ Smiles are transitory
- ⌚ Friends even more so
- ⌚ Hold back screams
- ⌚ The heart always races at times like this
- ⌚ An exploding heart doesn't kill
- ⌚ Dreams of safety do not materialize.
- ⌚ There are no answers
- ⌚ You can't disappear
- ⌚ Over-sensitivity and hyper-vigilance must be permanent
- ⌚ Punching a mattress is the best stress reliever
- ⌚ Avoiding others is not recommended but oftentimes is advisable
- ⌚ Hands over the ears will not stop the voices and the pain
- ⌚ Covering your eyes does not stop you from seeing
- ⌚ Sometimes a primal scream is all you can do ...

INSIDE THE WHITE ROOM with assorted tubes, bags, and electronic panels, several machines whir and beep at regular and irregular intervals. It was thirty minutes after shift change, and she would not see a nurse for another hour.

She curled her hand, then wove her arm through the siderails of her father's hospital bed; caught herself and pulled back. She decided to press one of the buttons on the control panel. *Might as well raise his head and back a little. No point letting the blood pool or whatever the hell it does.*

She leaned back in the god-awful hospital chair that gave her a headache, and closed her eyes.

Her father had taught her to be assertive – she learned to never display her temper, and, once on the offensive, stay there. *In life, defense loses.*

Years earlier on a Saturday morning, she went with him to his law firm – the firm he founded – and discovered files missing, books gone, desks and chairs absent, divan cushions scattered on the floor, and a note scribbled across a ripped piece of cardboard. Her father froze, momentarily recovered, and asked her to wait in the hallway a moment. When she heard him tell a client he was having the furniture and rugs cleaned - she learned to hide her fear.

That morning her father paced, his right hand clenched and his left pressed against his mouth. He walked out of his office side door into the men's' restroom. After what to a child seemed forever, he emerged rigid but smiling - she learned how fleeting friends are.

The morning her father left their house with the beautiful furniture, playroom, and piano room, he told her he was in a hurry. *I've got a hearing this morning.* She found out later that was the morning when the Sheriff executed a search warrant of his offices - she learned of the façade necessary to walk outside the front door each morning.

When she witnessed her mother and father's shouts, recriminations, and accusations - she learned how to take offense early and often.

On Father's Day when she was seven, after he had just been told by her mother she planned to get a divorce, her father hugged her. She would have to leave her

school, her piano, and her cats - she learned that promises and loyalty are merely words.

When her father walked past a homeless mother and her daughter, and, later, when he neglected to give comfort to a homeless man who had sought shelter on an icy, twelve-degree, night - she learned avoidance and neglect.

When she discovered he had almost laid waste to his life one evening in an abandoned shed in southeastern Nebraska with a shotgun in his mouth - she learned that terror hits even heroes.

And two days ago, when he finally told her of his diagnosis – the same diagnosis his mother, father, and grandfathers for three generations had died from – she learned mortality.

But tonight, in this hospital room, amidst bitter, artificial odors, and the rattling sound of her father's hollow breath - she learned life is fleeting and heartache is permanent.

Visiting Again

I'll be with you tomorrow as you asleep. And later when you arise. Again at twilight.

I'll come to visit – for as long as visitation is allowed.

When it's silent and you catch my voice; when I touch your soft hair, caress your gentle spirit, admire your grace to those in need.

When you feel alone. When I'm lonely.

When you drive across town; walk from car to store and reach for my hand; when you're unmoored and wonder if our connective rope is frayed.

I'll visit you as you sit alone at our dinner table, book in hand, and pick at your supper.

When you mistakenly set a place for two. When you sit on our divan and feel a touch – a caress, a hug – it will be me.

I'll visit at night when, asleep, you scoot toward my side of the bed. When you feel a brush, the touch of skin against skin, it will be me.

I'll stay with you - holding, touching, talking - until my visitation is revoked; then I'll wait for you, until we never need to visit each other again.

One Morning Each Week

One day a week, my family did not begin our mornings with bacon and eggs or even a bowl of cereal.

I would wake to complete silence, followed a few minutes later by mumbling, feet shuffling, then stomping across floors. Palms slapped doorjambs. *Stay in bed. Stay quiet.*

A few angry yawns. Throats clearing. More shuffling. But no sounds from the kitchen.

The three of us prepared separately. Then a few muttered questions.

Avoid this part. Do not respond. Do not engage.

Eyes flashed toward wall clocks.

Do not think.

More bathroom sounds. Doors closed. Teeth brushed.

Remain silent. Just do what you need to do and be quiet.

Stools flush. Water runs. Doors open. Hangars move across dowels in the closet.

Voices:

Father, "Hurry up. Aren't you ready yet?"

Mother, "Just be patient."

Father, "We can't be late for church."

Mother, "It's only a few blocks away."

Father, shouts at me, "What the hell takes you so long?"

Pretend I don't hear. Too busy getting ready.

Voices. Words that are forbidden where we're going.

Father, "---damn it. You do this every week."

Mother, "Just wait in the ---damn car."

Repress.

The kitchen door to the garage slams against the wall, does not close. Garage door rolls open. Engine turns over. The roar of a gunned engine.

Do not feel.

Inside the house – the relative calm of an armed truce.

Do not trust.

Mother, "I'm about ready."

Me, "Me too."

Quiet.

Until the horn honks once.

Horn honks again.

Horn blares constantly, then stops.

Do not ask.

Horn honks again, twice, then again, and again.

We walk to the garage together.

There's nothing wrong here and don't you dare tell anyone about it.

Reliance

He doesn't like fireworks, doesn't care for the sound, even though his war is over now. In his chair, he fidgets with puzzles, puzzling pieces even as his stereo fails to cover the sound of pop-pop-pop. His crisp jacket hangs on skinny shoulders, even as a hunched frame shuffles shoes beneath the table as thoughts pass from one to the next. A clock chimes the hour in the other room, eight chimes later and shaky hands pull a cigarette, electronic-electronic, all electronic, from a shirt pocket and huffs steadily even as pop-pop-pop goes off closer and farther, closer, and farther. The house is silent, apart from the sound of a clock telling him to wind down, and interrupting flashes from the flashes of light and sound from his window, walls, ceiling. The phone rings, the first time today, only one person he knows would call this late and not be selling something he probably doesn't need but might buy anyway. He shuffles slowly to the phone, knowing she'll wait, be patient. Hands that haven't been steady in years, pick up the old, corded phone. *Hey, just wanted to check in and see how you're doing?* Her voice is cheerful, but pitying, this isn't a good day for him. Not a good day for many like him. *I'm just working on my puzzles, got a new one today.* He doesn't want to talk about how he feels, or that he has a doctor's appointment he has to ask her to drive him to because he won't be able to drive back. He doesn't want to say... *That's great, I made dinner for the girls and now they're trying to pick out a movie, which will take a while.* She laughs, and he chuckles too, remembering one such scene, the girls spent two hours talking about different movies, but never picked one, instead they just talked the whole time and eventually went to bed, no movie seen at all. They talk for the next hour, about the kids, about their parents, gone now, about plants- and plants and plants- they're taking care of and complaining about the heat making such care difficult in some cases. He eventually asks about the appointment, she agrees without hesitating, he knew she would. The girls tell her they've picked a movie and they're going to make popcorn. Before she can apologize, he tells her he's going to bed anyway, *have to be up early*, she accepts it, and they hang up shortly after. He shuffles back to his puzzle table and listens to the pop-pop-pop.

Bolstering Walls

Today, I break,
I break away from all the roles
I've been assigned, all the time
I've been denied and calling all
my therapy bills due. The charge
is a day, today I call forth a payment
of peace. Spare me your boyfriend
problems, your family trauma and
trouble. Spare me your angst, your
nightmares, and your feelings.

Today, I make,
I make time to turn my phone face down
and silence it's nagging presence.
Prepare my speech if asked about
my absence in conversation but
I know that no one will ask,
they only make assumptions.
I bolster my reasoning, sure now
more than ever, how much I need
this time away from constant
harassment, regardless of how I
may be feeling under onslaught.

Today, I break.
I can't handle the thousandth
panic attack, or the dumb ass
reason you had one. I can't
deal with your childish reasoning
for staying in a relationship that
drives you both insane in a bad way.
I can't deal with anxious pleas for
the same advice I've given
a dozen times before and listen
to the same dilemma you've had
longer than I've known you.

Today, I shake,
I shake off the weighty tendrils
of your neediness, of your
helplessness and carefully
cradle the remaining calm
inside my stomach. I nurture
it's presence and bring the
wisp of a flame back to life.
I focus on my studies, myself,
and my goals while shaping
my space into an island,
abandoned and inaccessible.

Today, I won't break,
as I break away from those
that would take more than
I have, that would make me
give when I've run out.
I break the bones of fingers,
as they reach for my spine
even as I turn my back to them.
My word is my bond, but my
bond is worn thin, so today
my word is a whisper.
We're closed, try again tomorrow.

Climbing New Mountains

Everest on my skin.
Nervous peaks as damp
air grasps my arms, and neck.
My eyes canvased by sunglasses,
even as my cheeks feel the thousand
brush strokes from wild hair caught easily
in the cyclone swirling between open windows.
Clouds pulled from paintings, dress the sky and I feel
content in the maelstrom, with anticipation in my belly and
exhilaration as my fingers ride the skyline. Tiptoes of fingerprints
dance on the wind and something like happiness settles down my spine.

Sestina: Got a Light?

The wall of the bar holds up my spine, as I decide whether or not to light up the lucky smoke so I can inhale something, other than the smell of sweat from another long night of wasted effort. I say fuck it and savor the first drag. The glowing tip the only light as a snuffed-out lamp on a table has grown cold with the evening air and the smell of menthol

from a smoke, pinched between cracked lips, lingers as I open a pack of menthol always careful to pack on the meat of my thumb, and whether it's lucky or not, I still flip the first cigarette before the pack goes on the table. As the mint and tobacco invades my senses, I stop wondering if I'm in hell and start to drift to a more pleasant space, imagining better days between drags, even as the weight of my own body makes me want a patch of ground to lay along.

One breath in, one breath out, pull the smoke through the mouth, in the lungs, and blocking out the buzzing from my phone as I reach for another menthol, because nothing is more important than getting through the moment that drags on, even as cars drive by throwing gravel and crushing beer cans, whether they notice or not. Stop, don't let the world in, flick the lighter, inhale and don't mind what they think about you lurking at your lonely table.

I wave away another failed attempt at a smoke ring as ashes dust the table's surface before being blown by a slow wind that brings a chill down a long neck, and springs a series of goose bumps, stinging like a swell of hail. I mentally calculate my next paycheck and the amount for a pack of menthols. The number I can afford and still pay for groceries and bills, withers in the face of reality, so I savor the end of my cigarette and hold in the last drag.

Finished, I crush the smoke against the wall, and toss it as I drag my tired body back towards the bar so I can clean off tables and refill bottles and shakers while ignoring my boss, whether he speaks or not, because he hasn't been here all night long and only shows up to collect money and complain about the menthol smell on my uniform that I never asked him to inhale.

The last napkin holder is put into place as I inhale a deep breath to hold back tears of exhaustion, and drag the last bin full of dishes back to the kitchen; my menthols sitting in my pocket like a security blanket because tables never stay empty and I'll be redoing the night before long as the bar fills and empties, fills and empties, whether

we can handle the drag of another shift of waiting tables or if another long night means another pack of menthols sustaining every inhale, whether lungs fill and empty or stop.

Itinerary of Faults

Should I list them out?

Would that help me dissect
them in my pursuit of understanding?

Does it help to know that I'm bisexual,
but afraid of men and women.

Does it help to know I still think open
mouth kissing is gross, and could seduce a man
over text but won't walk up to a single person in a bar-
even to say hey, I think you look hot.

Does it help to know my history?

To know I started young.

To know my neighbors were pedophiles
and I lost when playing doctor with their kid.

Does it help to know I've been sexually
assaulted, and then assaulted again,
when the female officer questioned my outfit
during the incident in question
before even asking if I knew him,
which I did.

Would it clear things up to know I had a non-girlfriend
in middle school who made me think she loved me
while trying to help her friend seduce me to get me pregnant,
because she knew how much he wanted to be a dad,
but apparently not how much I didn't want to be a mom.

Would you like to know that I was the girl in high school
who kept dating guys that graduated while I was in elementary?

Then later dodged marriage proposals as well as invites to threesomes
because apparently, I just have that kind of vibe.

Does it help to know I went to a redneck high school
that had more racists and homophobes than sense and kindness
and *strictly dickly* was what you said if you wanted to survive the next four years?

That's a lot to unpack, I realize that,

but these all make up one word, a word I struggle with, sexuality, because could I be
happy alone- long term, I don't know, but I do know what it's like to share a roof with an
abusive alcoholic and wonder at what it's like to feel safe.

Memoirs from a Guilty Heart

- after Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window, Johannes Vermeer, 1657–59

I wrote to you, even knowing you weren't for me, I wrote to you. I tried not to with my feelings being what they were, it was wrong. I saw the way he greeted you with anger and left you in tears. The way you tried and tried, but it never mattered, you never mattered to him. I watched the lonely leave your eyes every time you smiled at me. I asked you to meet me, so I could tell you of my heart, but my feelings bled through. I didn't know he would see it, or what he would do. Now I can only see you in my heart, while I sit beside your grave, crafting memories for a page. I remember the way your hair would cross your face, and the way you swept it away constantly. The way your lips turned up unwillingly when I made jokes at his expense. How you scolded me with your words but laughed with your eyes. You're here in my journal, where every other page has a flower, carefully pressed, in honor of your beloved garden. He tore up every root, but I gathered as many as I could, to preserve within these pages.

Murder to Save a Life

I'm petting the dog in my room, bunkered down like mom said. There isn't any fighting, but I don't know if that's good or bad. I'm careful to watch her ears, this big great dane, knowing she will hear trouble before I do. Even if she doesn't understand what it means to drink too much, or to hit, she understands something is wrong. A knock on the door, the front door, that usually means cops. I walk right out, listening, waiting for the yelling as he realizes someone called the cops again. It's not though, just a random guy. He's wearing brown jacket, brown jeans. Asking for directions from a drunk who couldn't steer his way out of a DWI or a tub when he's drinking. The guy doesn't understand the directions he's been given, and Jeff walks out with him, I follow, my pulse is in my ears. I can hear barking. I'm in the driveway, but the world is blurry, too much action, too much hurry. I watch the stranger run away. I don't follow, instead, I watch Jeff collapse. His hands are on his throat, but he can't hold the blood, can't stop its flow as the dirt driveway begins to look like it rained. I feel dog fur under my fingers, she's wrapped around me, barking furiously. I stare out, even as the ambulance comes, as they load him in and my mom refuses to ride. I watch as my mom rubs her stomach, before grabbing hold of the dog collar and ushering us both inside. I'm still walking when she stops and I look back to see her looking down at the blood. She's still got one hand on her stomach.

No Questions

I remember leaning against a kitchen counter drinking 7 Up and wanting to go home, but too afraid to walk alone in the dark. I was standing there when a drunk guy walked up and before I could even shift my cup, he was cupping me. Hands suddenly attached while a soggy grin invaded my field of vision. I was frozen in that moment. Then he unlatched with a laugh before I could wake up enough to attack or launch my drink back in his face. He walked off while I stood still, wondering what was funny about that. I unstuck from the counter and turned the opposite direction, called my boyfriend, who I had been texting, to explain this awful thing that had just happened. I could hear his accusations in the pauses, his questions that stayed unspoken, but I heard them in his tone and felt angry and betrayed that he would dare react this way. All the questions that he wouldn't say. Like *did I fight him off?* *Did I say I had a boyfriend?* *Was there any way I had signaled that I wanted to have a drunken strangers' hands touching me as I leaned against a counter wanting to go home.* But it didn't stop there, since my boyfriend was in the military and was so damn far away. His family heard his version which didn't sound the same. His brother was in my class and scoffed slut whenever he saw me and never thought to ask if there was more than just a whore who cheated on her boyfriend at a party while drinking 7 Up by herself in the kitchen.

Purification

I need a smudge stick,
to breath in sage, cedar, and rosemary,
and purify the feel of you from my skin.

I want to bathe in the coldest water, and close
my pores to your exhales full of toxic waste,
as you waste your cruelest words on me.

I hope you forget me, forget the feel of my skin
and the dreams you deemed worthless,
even as you loved me for my dreamer spirit.

Will you delete my number?
Erase me from your phone, life, and memory,
and never remember time I lost to you.

Can we pretend we never met, never loved, or lost
ourselves somewhere between cheap sheets
and *living the dream*.

If we can't, if we're stuck with the memories,
can we go to opposite corners of the world,
so I can pretend I never fucking met you.

CLASSLESS REUNION

No one yet remembers how quickly you rose—the change
that poured in your form as it climbed—how dusk stretched
just enough shade to blur your outline.

But wrapped in tradition, so tired of measuring endurance,
I'm drinking you past all this ceremony.

Who sees me beyond their glasses? I can talk
or think, fill myself completely, guess who should
remember, as needed. But why? If I
let your image linger near the cemetery
gates and become vague on some moving form,
I can keep my memory: you began that day,
and I watched you leave. I stayed to watch. So now
it's true—

I liken all I can to you—
I've even forgotten the year. And for years
I lifted the driest glass waiting
for this decision no one seems
to remember. No: evening

drops

not

recalling your name.

GABRIEL INSIDE

How many Passovers crept into me?
Sixty-one, twenty-five or forty-three?
Crawling inside so I'd barely breath?
Tempting me to see Gabriel crammed
in my lung?

He's fetal now but when
the most miraculous bough breaks
and cardiovascular ornaments fail—
when my teeth bite for air and my nerve
quakes and my soul finally disrobes—
what then?

Will I know a temple troubled
with darkness? Fingers bartering for a blossoming
light? Wailing stiff-necked
at an alter unfit for contemplation?
An unclean man laboring toward the gates?

Pardon my transgressions. Squinting, the nodding
sun blurs into halos. Looking
to touch eternity, my actions
repeatedly nursed on irony, a desert
heart crammed inside a microscopic
soul, I'm too aware. When I see,
I think.

And when I think I see angels,
I question: which are these, watching
me from their ethereal quintessence? And which
angel lays lieger so horrible
around me in unreal repetition?

How many Passovers crept over me?
Forty-two, twenty-four and thirty-three.

THE ART OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

*They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."*

*The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."*

from "The Man with the Blue Guitar",
by Wallace Stevens

I. First One Beam then Another

So desperate grows desire for a type of art,
I traveled deeper south than once
before, anchoring my blue guitar impatiently
to the frame of an impressionist shore:
where gulls dangle from unseen strings and coquinas
spill into the bowl of the land
making soup out of sand; and the heat belittled
me. The breeze upon my frosty
heart saw tradition fail, and Christ demanded
a piece of me I was not prepared
to give.

II. To Bang it from a Savage Blue

While the storm's content found form, questioning
the shore, I questioned myself as center
of the world. I sat down for an ocean sleep;
what hands unanchored me as the components
of my blood traveled to the four corners of my
biology? I reached past the moon to
the light above the gulls and touched the celluloid
of the long dead; between sleep and its impression
of sustained flight my mind held more pockets
than the night.

III. *Shall I then Stand in the Sun*

Day was green; the hurricane tore
into view: I knew I was not the dominant
substance. Chiseled against the shore like the disregarded
parameters of battered love, reaching
for a precise chaos rendered
by the waves and the drenching thunder, the storm dipped in
acrid

colors, clouding day with the bones of night.
His fingers maligned His art: these tactile
fingers, bony fingers, fat fingers, brown fingers,
white fingers, jazzy fingers—the very
blueness of the Almighty—dragging
wheels, trees, boats, trash, dirt, hearts,
breaths—cured irony. And cured damage: removed
from the weather of drunken beds; cured from
the floor of ocean sleep; cured from the artless danger

of my bottomless imagination, I found
proof beyond romance: the storm actually outgrew
itself, building a new shore—shore
consuming itself in the process—now the blue guitar
beds in the sand, strumming far off; it broke
the bark that held my music back and ate its gross
veneer; lacquer disappeared: the wood is
what I would fear. And all softened back
to the agony at heart. The day clearly beyond me.

IV. *Hoard of Destructions: the Flesh, the Bone, the Dirt, the Stone*

So, when a gale celebrates the waves, and God cuts
the invisible strings and parents brush earth from their
knees,
confessing the passing of their dreams, the winds
dance at the expense of trees or an ordinary bullet fucks
the brain with an overdose of lead
and all remember: destruction surrounds art with muscle.

V. Things as They are

Do waves design canvass by consuming
canvass? Yes. And it's for this I sing: for persistence: for desire; for a
deeper
love in the changing demands of permanence;
for knowing that death can never reclaim His footprints, can never anchor,
can only live on the grainiest frame of deepest
south, so hot His signature fades.

THE GREAT BEAR

*“The thought of suicide is a great consolation:
with the help of it, one has got through many a bad night.”*

- Frederich Nietzsche

Today you drive
for borders, leaving space to the diminishing sun.
Stirring would not wait for sleep's second solution;
you woke within concluding plans. In the labor
of waiting, time's no longer a luxury.

And the road rolls around the past. The thought
of a deep lake released this motion
but mars the view that moves you: hold when thoughts
tumble from the end. And drive: this decision
would have collapsed if easy.

* * *

Stop; look up –
see stars blink in silence as symbols of peace:
flickering sky's celluloid, some are live –
some are fossils blooming lost light: somewhere
it is always yesterday; in this view
it's here. So close your lids in wakeful dreams
and see you're always here. You can make this
decision again for years.

RESTLESSNESS

Desire without drive,
let's live as if we tried.

THE SYMBOL

Polyestered and stammering, fidgeting
with the pens in his shirt pocket, not clear why he
chose not to speak (the reasons kept him to himself),
the freshman finally raised pencil to spiral:
now the symbol was truly born: a code
he would only know.

He practiced it blindly
on shared desks (waiting and waiting);
lightly smeared with perspiration; some mornings
penciled on term papers passed to teacher
(in too tiny print), to the end of day,
blood pounding in the throat, dread of the buzzer,
dread of the waiting.

At last he'd hunt:
empty classrooms, encyclopedias,
chalked like postage in infinitesimal cells,
organized in crumbs, corners where green slate turned
creepy black and never back. One could never
go back—until they saw the symbol etched,
somehow, on detention hall desks: by winter,
school's dullest mystery.

Then finally,
delicately, repeatedly, pen cap
on the right, clearly carved to the back of his hand.

* * *

But scraping hard his nail in the frost of his parent's
car, loaded on the forbidden mystery
with the open grace of an untuned piano,
he rode proudly unseen to the original shrink,
purified in his truest understanding.

* * *

Not until the break of spring did the symbol
briefly return, petted onto his dog—the small,
crippled, half-Shepard he adored most, the dog he loved
and cared for more and more; the dog who barely
lived to see his master plotting for college and beyond.

The Bitter End

Pam Munter

Thank you all for coming today. Russ would have appreciated it. I know you wish he were here to savor your lovely words. He would have basked in them.

We were married a long time. Two decades, in fact. Now we're together, Russ, our last encounter. After we're done here, they'll haul you off to the crematorium. So, this is farewell, my friend. No one knew you and protected you like I did. This is my last chance to say my peace. I hope that's what it will bring me.

I'm not embarrassed to tell these people we met online. When friends asked, you'd tell a funny story about meeting in a mosh pit at a rock concert. I didn't know yet that lies lived at the core of your character. That first night, you said you were a senior agent with William Morris. It was months before I discovered you were only an assistant. I suppose I should have walked away but I forgave you. I understood why you needed to impress me. You felt you had to compete, even though I downplayed my partnership in a downtown law firm. When you demanded I quit and stay at home to raise babies, I did say, "No." I wasn't ready. Even after the night you hit me, I kept trying to please you. You were always at work—or the casino. At least, that's what you said. I told you then: it wasn't the cheating. It was the lying. We never did have those babies. Sex was...well, this probably isn't an appropriate place to discuss that. At least, you were home, if drunk and impotent.

When you suddenly announced we were declaring bankruptcy, you said it was all my fault. The next day, I came home from work early to find you in our bed with Jeremy, our accountant. I was stupid, though, and I stayed.

Oh, there were good times—now and again. You were a talented chef. Loved your hollandaise. You kept the cars serviced, picked up the cleaning when I asked. We had many exuberant days when we were out on the boat. Then, when I found the cocaine stashed in the cabin, I understood. I should have left then. I didn't.

And so here we are, Russ. You're lying in that box, silent at last. The lies have stopped. The chaos is over. I love the irony that you dropped dead in First Class on your mysterious flight to Rio. It was always about you, wasn't it?

Don't worry about me. I'll be soothed by that huge life insurance policy I quietly took out on you six months ago. The new house overlooking the bay will resuscitate my sagging spirits. And your boss has been more than kind in my hour of need.

So, dear Russ, I bid you farewell. And I want you to know, darling, after everything, I forgive you. Really, I do.

Thank you all so much for coming.

Failed Self-Portrait

Sometimes we can get silly with our clay,
worshiping our work without permission
of the mantle,
losing it all to the careless slope of our cheek,
curses are what the critic crafted,
our sculpture is festering for weeks and weeks.

Because A Porch Light Means Everything

One more step closer and I'll marry the flair,
for I am a victim to this simple brilliance,

audience to an endless monologue of fire,
this sort of theater is truly brilliant,

every fragment of light with its own career.

Advice

Bathe with your eyes the unwashed sun,
into the seas with your egos,
camp by the pomp of the nearest mountain,
and take its terrific blow.

War Of The Common

The empire of the lamppost recruits all its soldiers,
their mission revealed when a streetlight reacts,
something in the stones that means prompt surrender,
the wording of treaties torched in the sidewalk's cracks,
the wind has marched all night but won't remember.

Domestic Devil

Here flames are lounging like an arrangement of furniture,
his kitchen smoldering slabs of conversation,
twin beds simmering into twin terrors,
his patio misstepping into heaven,
haunts in his cellar turning over their burns,
screams in his attic getting bundled and saved,
his porch light kissing the wrong cheek of
tomorrow.

Muffins

I have eaten an entire box of muffins—they were stale, spotted with mold, and not on sale. This was a mistake, one that can't be taken back like war, like marriage, but if I sit with this weight in my gut, if I wait long enough, the frenzy will die down, and everything will go back to normal.

Bird

A bird is trapped in the house. Her wings flap against the walls, the ceiling fan, the window glass. Frantic, she zooms through the living room, office, kitchen, and dining room, and then up the stairs to the bedrooms. If only she could escape, but I never open windows, and even if I did, the screen would act as a net. Perhaps her beak could tear a hole large enough, but we'll never know for you've cornered her in a bathroom—windowless and small—and after you knock down the shower curtain, all those bottles of soap and conditioner, the loofas, and crack the mirror, you bring down the bird's body in a plastic bag.

I actually have good news for once

As the fire tired itself out and the chance to exit the party came, I kept to the far side of the yard—summer get-togethers are always outside—and I only stopped by to schmooze and grab a bite to eat. I was sure I'd stay no more than an hour, but here I was five hours in and drunk. Just as I started my 12-step master plan to break free, I announced my departure to a nearby group, gave some hugs, and circled back to the host who spent the whole time keeping the flow of beers and burgers going, someone introduced herself—she blocked my path of escape. I was trapped in a web of pleasantries. Often when caught, I've allowed myself to collapse into nods, smiles, and the volley of questions and answers, but here's the good part: I coughed, pretending to choke on some chips, and she backed off. I coughed so hard, those shards of potato chips really did get caught and then I was down on my knees gagging, my nose touching the grass, and my red face, ugly with tears and drool, was the lawn ornament on display. Everyone had to stop, circle around, and ask such ridiculous questions: *are you okay?* You really have to ask that? Finally, I recovered, without needing the dozen of Heimlichs offered, and I left without having to continue the charade of goodbyes.

The fog and the hand

It was night, it was always night,
when you reached your hand
into the mist, when you called
out my name. I didn't respond.
Caught in a giant web, I hung,
arms extended like Jesus on
his crucifix, head bowed to my chest,
as if in prayer, as if I knew the spider,
and I deserved this. The frogs croaked,
a chorus, the fireflies flirted with
their bright winks, and finally you
approached—another hand
waving away the fog, another
tangled mess of hair and branches,
another monster with a trap.

That's what it's all about

That's what it's all about. You put your whole self in. Put your whole self out. Shake your ass. Turn yourself around and around until dizzy you collapse, and while lying on the floor, he inches closer to the front door, and when he's gone, you find your feet, take a shot, and explore your walk-in closet. You slip into the red dress that always turns heads and that's what you want—heads to turn. Curl your hair, apply the red lipstick and mascara, and jump into an uber. Head downtown. It's only 6pm. And chances are all the men venturing forth for tonight's hunt are still showering and shaving. You edit your story this time—you're up for anything: baseball games, chess, beer, zoo trips during a workday, a two-hour hike, bike rides along the coast. Anything.

FOSSIL WANNA-BES

Soft concrete accepts fossil wanna-bes
impressed in goo for all to see
when concrete grows weary
of being used for posterity –
it hardens, it rejects, it resists.

Wounds tattoo its skin
like pharaoh's slave footprints
stomping straw into adobe
for pyramids enduring centuries.

Sidewalk travels beneath
feet leaving pilgrimage
of muddy impressions
that rain splatters away across
concrete, solid as a sneer.

STORY GREATNESS

She's a little girl wanting attention
by talking loud, over, into everyone
else's thoughts of "Just shut up!"
Competing, telling stories and exploits
no one cares about but laughs at politely
which feeds her to greater heights
of super hero feats and wonders.

Understanding the need for love
she stands beside her mother
working as she talks and talks.
Her mother listens, laughs
like her daughter living
through her lies or exaggerations
so everyone thinks she's more
than she appears because her daughter
talks loud into our thoughts
we dare not share as we wonder
when she'll fly around the room
with her cape flapping behind her
like her perceived greatness
when she leaves the room
to silence.

EXHAUSTING STONES

Exhausting
when he keeps tossing stones
into my waters constantly rippling,
eroding shores, weighted ballast
unbalancing with decades to oscillate
outward onto banks hopeful
no one desires to redeposit
by gleeful skips across surface
or cannonball splash echoing outward
gone except below settling
like bacteria-infested food in a gut.

Exhausting
until I freeze,
and rocks linger like children
peering into candy store window
until they burst in
grabbing, snatching, gorging,
leaving entrance shards
lapping, healing over.

Exhausting
until I pray for tsunami
to wipe "out there" silent,
silent as waters deep.

GLOVES READY

Gloves tossed on dashboard
within reach of steering wheel
remain in half grip ready
to take control if smashed glass
sprinkles their fingers
into disembodied choke hold
around thief's throat
constricted in swallowed scream
when police arrive to fallen body
blue and lifeless
like gloves lying
on dashboard sparkling
in shards of glass
like dancing bits of sunshine
on mountain lake
while fisherman gazes
into the sky hopeful
no trout tugs him awake.

DANGLING RELIEF

Men must feel like sardines
compressed inside their vehicles.
Trying to find space
they roll down the window
and hang arm out
in dangling relief
like a dog leaning
on toenail balance
to taste surroundings
on drooling taste buds
lolling pink against the car.

DISCARDED

On top stair a fat man sits,
tractor tire balanced sideways
blocking sunshine in a strobe moment.
Precarious, vulnerable to wind
or earth tremors felt only
by stairwell climbing
to obstruction above.

A tsunami descending
to where people can't run
fast enough away or to higher ground
if a shoe stub trips the man
as he rises, tumbles, plunges.

Hope is he wedges between rails.
No hope that he falls between stair steps;
bouncing tire flung downhill
to see how far it leaps, rolls, plows
a path to the bottom where it wobbles
into another discarded tire.

WITHOUT A SPOTTER

Chipmunk shinnies up tall grass
until weight bends stalk slowly
to ground where chipmunk
nips three-inch seed pod
and carries it to rock lookout.
Chipmunk stands upright
and eats seeds like kernels
from a corncob.

In 5th grade I grabbed the rope
tethered to the gym's ceiling
and pulled myself upward.
I didn't know how to use my legs
and feet so I hauled away
with arm strength only.
Part way up I stopped.
My legs dangled in rag doll
uselessness, hemp rope slivers
stickered my palms and fingers.
I looked down and saw
Mrs. Kelley staring at me,
her arms spread out as if to catch me
if I fell, if I let go, plunged.

Would she catch me if the bough broke?
I almost tried it, but I had no confidence
in her abilities to catch. I pulled away
and reached the top and then bottom.
Mrs. Kelley wiped her forehead.

I envy chipmunk's swagger
without a spotter.

REMAINS

Lone sneaker balances
on highway's yellow center line.
Gymnast on balance beam
disappears by swipe of a truck
speeding through 2 a.m. dark
until eyes meet bright headlights.

Everyone else thinks shoe
was thrown out a car window
by drunk passengers.

Or a pretend spelunker
confronted by rickety plank
spanning cave expanse
tries to remove his shoes
for better feel and toe grip.
Successful with left shoe,
but right shoe careens
into dark with the rest
of the explorer,

and only shoe remains.

SHADOW TRAIN

Shadow train strobes sunshine,
shadow, sunshine, shadow
in square freight car shapes
that slice across my skinny,
morning shadow pretending
victim tied on tracks.

Save me! Save me!
Sever, restore each
shadow, sunshine.

Until shadow train
dissolves into sunshine;
I follow myself
into sunrise, hop on
noon stones, tow
myself into nightfall

where at a distant crossing
the train whistles.

GO WEST

Atop the ridge cedar trees
like ancestors line the horizon
traveling in wagon trains west
along trail dusty with curses,
dreams, new beginning
from Connecticut, Iowa to Oregon.

Solid like Russian immigrants
photographed in black and white.
Eyes stony with past travels
through forests, rivers, rocks
to sail from England to the U.S. --
fleeing from, fleeing toward
Philadelphia, Wyoming,
Colorado to Oregon.

Two families join at the hub
with spokes dashing outward
toward and from
like wagon wheel.

Lazy, Happy

I woke up Saturday joyful at my body's triumph
over virus, breathing again without pain and enjoying
winter and the cold that keeps us sane and sober.
But by Sunday my mortality had returned.

If I pass away now, how to assess my days.
Is balancing income and expenditure reports enough?
Our marriage and our piece of land. Dependent
on economy. For food delivery and machine repair.

In my youth, I imagined crossing mountains
to the sea, living off the land. Enduring weather patiently.
It's impossible except three days or three weeks,
with a load of supermarket food on your back.

So I accept home gratefully. And a niche in society.
We could explore these hollows and hills on foot
but my wife is weak and I am lazy. We use the library
to travel inner space. We found this place.

Next spring, a garden. Dig depleted soil behind
garage and fertilize it from our compost pile.
Learn the names and ways of cultivars, their relations
to wild plants and the edge. Finally know the fern and sedge.

Lazy one, life is short. You have never fought, to yourself
you remain unknown. You go the way of an unknown
soldier. Unable to assess the purpose of the battle.
Nameless, hungry, same as the neighbor's cow.

Be happy, slap happy. Within your generation, surrounded
by history. Seeking mastery through practice.
Rewarded with the sunrise, sunset. Yet to have delivered
on the promise expected by the parents of the baby.

When Peg Laughs Like Liz

When Peg laughs like Liz
deep woman-hearted laugh
eating beef jerky on Mesa Verde

the good hearts and smarts of women
come back to me, not guessing
any better than they at the time what love

meant, leaving them behind in sandstone time
going to my own cement, sandstone
or good mountain grave

having seen the sharp-shinned and sparrow
hawk flying and at rest, not at peace,
seeking prey from a ponderosa snag.

I left my woman behind to float
alone down the long canyon for feathers
and signs, she's making camp

the moon half full, the sun half high
sky full of planets birds and stars
I look up from the rocks

elements
housekeeping, thinking
love that's learned to love

from earlier loves
laughs remembered, heard
in the laugh of the woman who is my wife.

Year Million

Standing at back of cafeteria during youth basketball awards ceremony

This is my community.

“What you do may not seem important but it is very important that you do it.”

The men and women bringing the boys and girls a step to wisdom.

Win or lose play your best and treat your opponent with respect.

Maybe the school principal can explain the ultimate mystery?

The women cannot be this chaste! The men so committed to non-violence!

What is the board president alone in her bedroom.

Coach Strong and his blowsy frowsy wife?

They put much emotion and gratification aside to get things done. Done for their
sons and done for their daughters.

Visit the web site! Buy a raffle ticket! Belong to the loved ones!

I follow distantly. I watch warily. I have not been asked to lead or lift a load.

Sitting in a chair in a corner of a room at the top of a house near the end of a street
on the edge of a city at the mouth of a river,

Estuary of ocean, ocean of atmosphere, pierced by a meteor bringing ore and
organisms, incinerating elements and rototilling ecosystems,

Everything changes but consciousness.

The kids of course are perfect as animals in habitats.

In light of these basketball certificates, team spirits,

Time, our moment, is indeed “the mercy of eternity.”

What's your name?

We were a family.

How'd it break up and come apart?

So that now we're turned against each other.

Each standing in the other's light.

How did we lose the good that was given us?

Let it slip away?

Scatter it careless?

What's keeping us from reaching out?

Touching the glory?

— from the script of *The Thin Red Line*

CONTRIBUTORS

Robert D Vivian's latest book, co-edited with Joel Peckham, is *Wild Gods: The Ecstatic In Contemporary Poetry & Prose*.

Jeff Varljen is a father and public school teacher from Richmond, Virginia. He writes about family, doubt, and being unimportant. His work has appeared in *Wilderness House Literary Review*.

John L. Stanizzi is the author of the collections *Ecstasy Among Ghosts*, *Sleepwalking*, *Dance Against the Wall*, *After the Bell*, *Hallelujah Time!*, *High Tide - Ebb Tide*, *Four Bits*, *Chants*, *Sundowning*, *POND*, and *The Tree That Lights The Way Home*. Besides *Ginosko*, John's work has been widely published including in the journals *Rattle*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Cortland Review*, *American Life in Poetry*, *Thrush*, *Praxis*, *Passages North*, *Spoon River Quarterly*, *Rust & Moth*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Tar River Review*, *Poetlore*, *Hawk & Handsaw*, *Plainsong*, *Potato Soup Journal*, and many others.

His work has been translated into Italian and appears widely in Italy, including in *El Ghibli*, *The Journal of Italian Translations Bonafini*, *Poetarium*, and many others. His translator is the Italian poet, Angela D'Ambra.

His nonfiction has been published in *Literature and Belief*, *Stone Coast Review*, *Ovunque Siamo*, *Adelaide*, *Scarlet Leaf*, *Evening Street*, *Praxis*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *The Red Lemon*, *After the Pause*, and many others. *Potato Soup Journal* named his story "Pants" The Best of 2020, and it was subsequently published in *Potato Soup's* anthology celebrating the best work of 2020.

John is the Flash Fiction Editor of *Abstract Magazine TV*, and he has read at venues all over New England, including the Mystic Arts Café, the Sunken Garden Poetry Festival, Hartford Stage, The Guilford Poetry Guild, The Riverwood Poets, and many others. For many years, John coordinated the Fresh Voices Poetry Competition for Young Poets at Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut. He was also a "teaching artist" for the national poetry recitation contest, Poetry Out Loud; he spent a decade with Poetry Out Loud.

A former Wesleyan University Etherington Scholar, John has just been awarded an Artist Fellowship in Creative Non-Fiction - 2021 - from the Connecticut Office of the Arts and Culture for work on his new memoir, *Bless Me, Father, For I Have Sinned*. He is a former New England Poet of the Year.

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received a California Arts Council Grant for a rural poetry series; co-published a regional arts anthology; co-owned an alternative literature service; produced poetry readings. Mooney's poems are published in: *Glassworks Magazine*, *Soul-Lit*, *The Avalon Literary Review*, *Galway Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *California Quarterly*, *The Ricochet Review*, *Adelaide International magazine*, *Roundtable Literary Journal*, and several others, including anthologies like *Calyx: Women and Aging*; *Cold Lake Anthology*; *Smoke & Myrrors* (UK), among others. More poems are at: www.sharonlopezmooney.com

George Bishop is a poet living in Florida. He attended Rutgers University and has worked featured in such publications as *Main Street Rag*, *The Meadow*, *Cold Mountain Review* & *New Plains Review*. His chapbook *Following Myself Home* won the third annual Peter Menke Prize in Poetry at YellowJacket Press. He has published several chapbooks as well as a full length poetry collection.

Meg Tuite is author of a novel-in-stories, *Domestic Apparition* (San Francisco Bay Press), a short story collection, *Bound By Blue*, (Sententia Books) *Meet My Haze* (Big Table Publishing), *White Van* (Unlikely Books), won the Twin Antlers Collaborative Poetry award from (Artistically Declined Press) for her poetry collection, *Bare Bulbs Swinging*, as well as five chapbooks of short fiction, flash, poetic prose, and multi-genre. She teaches workshops and online classes through Bending Genres and is an associate editor at *Narrative Magazine*. Her work has been published in over 600 literary magazines and over fifteen anthologies including: *Choose Wisely: 35 Women Up To No Good*. She has been nominated over 15 times for the Pushcart Prize, won first and second place in *Prick of the Spindle* contest, five-time finalist at *Glimmer Train*, finalist of the Gertrude Stein award and 3rd prize in the Bristol Short Story Contest. She is also the editor of eight anthologies. She is included in the *Best Small Fictions of 2021*. She is also has dual citizenship in Ireland and the US. Her blog: <http://megtuite.com>

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Alan Catlin has published dozens of chapbooks and full-length books. Among the most recent are *Asylum Garden: after Van Gogh* and *Memoires Too* (Dos Madres).

Jerome Berglund graduated from the University of Southern California's Cinema-Television Production program and spent a picaresque decade in the entertainment industry before returning to the midwest where he was born and raised. Since then he has worked as everything from dishwasher to paralegal, night watchman to assembler of heart valves. Berglund has exhibited many haiku and senryu online and in print, most recently in Tofu Ink Arts, Vermillion, Hey I'm Alive Magazine, and Fauxmoir. He is furthermore an established, award-winning fine art photographer, whose black and

white pictures have been shown in galleries across New York, Minneapolis, and Santa Monica. You can read Jerome's earlier published works collected in *Bindle Bum* and *Paint Chips*, available through Amazon.

Z.Z. Boone's fiction has appeared in *Ginosko*, *New Ohio Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *PANK*, *Pithead Chapel*, and other terrific places. He is the author of *Off Somewhere*, a 2015 Indie Award nominee for Best Short Story Collection.

Dane Hamann works as an editor and indexer for a textbook publisher in the southwest suburbs of Chicago. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from Northwestern University and currently reads for *TriQuarterly* after serving as its poetry editor for over five years. His chapbook *Q&A* was published by Sutra Press and his micro-chapbooks have been included in multiple Ghost City Press Summer Series. His debut poetry collection, *A Thistle Stuck in the Throat of the Sun*, was recently published by Kelsay Books.

Sharon Olson is a retired librarian originally from California who currently lives in Annapolis, Maryland. Her book of poems, *The Long Night of Flying*, was published by Sixteen Rivers Press in 2006, and her second book *Will There Be Music?* (Cherry Grove Collections) appeared in 2019. Her poems have appeared in many journals including *Off the Coast*, *String Poet*, *Arroyo Literary Review*, *The Curator*, *Adanna*, *Heron Tree*, *New Verse News*, *Cider Press Review*, and *Rat's Ass Review*. Her blog is at <https://slopoet.blogspot.com>.

Ian C Smith's work has been published in *Antipodes*, *BBC Radio 4 Sounds*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Griffith Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Southword*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, & *Two Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

Jamie Brown's fiction has been published in a number of publications, including the *Bay to Ocean Anthology 2021*, *Ginosko*, *Bay to Ocean Anthology 2020*, *fresh.ink*, *The Broadkill Review*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*, *The Delmarva Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Cup of Joe*, *Coffee House Flash Fiction Anthology*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, *The Washington Review of the Arts*, and *Wordwrights!*, garnering three Puscart nominations, and his plays have had varying levels of production in the DC "off-Ken-Cen" theatre district, one of which, "Death Comes Twice," when reprised by the Milton Theatre (Delaware) at a one-act play festival, swept the awards, taking Best Play, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Costuming. His poetry has been published in over forty publications and he has been an Associate Editor and a Contributing Editor of several Lit mags (he started *The Broadkill Review* as well), was poetry critic for a major metropolitan daily newspaper (*The Washington Times*), and a member of the Poetry Committee of the Folger Shakespeare Library. He

has been awarded both a Best Book of Verse and a Best Chapbook of Verse by the Delaware Press Association for *Sakura: A Cycle of Haiku*, and for *The Delaware Bay: Poems* respectively. His latest chapbook, *A Passing Acquaintance with Grief*, is available from the Broadkill River Press (broadkillriverpress.com).

Brown received his MFA from American University in 1988 while both working a full-time job as Public Affairs Officer for the Better Business Bureau (BBB) of Metropolitan Washington, D.C., and simultaneously as the primary home-making parent raising two children. After earning his 48 hour graduate degree, he taught for over a dozen years at George Washington University and, concurrently, for eight years at Georgetown University's School of Summer and Continuing Education. He also taught the first creative writing workshop ever offered at the Smithsonian Institution. After he and his wife retired to Delaware he taught at Delaware Technical and Community College and at Wesley College.

Ronda Pizsk Broatch is the author of *Lake of Fallen Constellations*, (MoonPath Press). Ronda's current manuscript was a finalist with the Charles B. Wheeler Prize and Four Way Books Levis Prize, and she is the recipient of an Artist Trust GAP Grant. Ronda's journal publications include *Fugue*, *Blackbird*, *2River*, *Sycamore Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Palette Poetry*, and *Public Radio KUOW's All Things Considered*.

Lorraine Caputo is a documentary poet, translator and travel writer. Her works appear in over 300 journals on six continents; and 19 collections of poetry – including *On Galápagos Shores* (dancing girl press, 2019) and *Escape to the Sea* (Origami Poems Project, 2021). She also authors travel narratives, articles and guidebooks. Her writing has been honored by the Parliamentary Poet Laureate of Canada (2011) and nominated for the Best of the Net. Caputo has done literary readings from Alaska to the Patagonia. She journeys through Latin America, listening to the voices of the pueblos and Earth. Follow her travels at: www.facebook.com/lorrainecaputo.wanderer or <https://latinamericawanderer.wordpress.com>.

Lori M. Myers is an award-winning writer, Pushcart Prize nominee, and Broadway World Award nominee of fiction, creative nonfiction, and plays. Her work has appeared in print anthologies, online, and audio in publications such as *American Writers Review*, *Art in the Time of Covid-19*, *The Dark Sire*, *Night Terrors vol. 17*, *Transcendent*, *Off Season*, *Bad Neighborhood*, *Dissections Journal* and others. Her plays have been produced across the US, Canada, and abroad. Lori teaches writing, literature, and playwriting at several colleges in New York and loves sharing her love of the written word with her students. She is the Drama/Nonfiction Editor for the online arts literary journal *Masque & Spectacle*.

Matthew James Friday is a British born writer and teacher. He has been published in numerous international journals, including, recently: *Dawntreader* (UK), *The Dillydoun Review* (USA), *VerbalArt* (India), and *Lunch Ticket* (USA). The micro-chapbooks *All the*

Ways to Love, The Residents, Waters of Oregon and The Words Unsaid were published by the Origami Poems Project (USA). I am a 2021 Pushcart Prize nominated poet.

Amy L. Fair (she/her), born and raised in West Virginia, makes her home in rural Oregon, where she lives on the native land of the Cow Creek band of the Umpqua tribe. She teaches at a small community college and plans to grow old without any grace whatsoever.

John Tustin's poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2009. fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry contains links to his published poetry online.

Cy Hill is an eleven-year Navy veteran. He also spent fifteen years in manholes and climbing telephone poles. He is currently majoring in Biology.

Réka Nyitrai is a spell, a sparrow, a lioness's tongue — a bird nest in a pool of dusk. She is the recipient of a Touchstone Distinguished Books Award for 2020 for her debut haiku volume "While Dreaming Your Dreams" (Valencia Spain: Mono Ya Mono Books, 2020).

David Brehmer was born and raised in Wanamingo, MN. He now lives in Richmond, California with his wife, son, dog, and drums. In 2012, he co-self-published *This Has Happened: Words and Images After the Crash*. His next collection, Life, Death, Love, and Babies, will be released by Finishing Line Press in 2023. His poems have appeared in small rooms throughout the East Bay, the pages of THE MACGUFFIN, and on beatnikcowboy.com. He writes to prove he loves life, despite his words and thoughts. He would like to think it will get better. footbridgepublishing.com

MICHAEL SALCMAN: poet, physician and art historian, was chairman of neurosurgery at the University of Maryland and president of the Contemporary Museum. Poems appear in *Arts & Letters*, *The Café Review*, *Hopkins Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *New Letters*, and *Poet Lore*. Books include The Clock Made of Confetti, The Enemy of Good is Better, Poetry in Medicine, his popular anthology of classic and contemporary poems on doctors, patients, illness & healing, A Prague Spring, Before & After, winner of the 2015 Sinclair Poetry Prize, and *Shades & Graces*, inaugural winner of The Daniel Hoffman Legacy Book Prize (Spuyten Duyvil, 2020). Necessary Speech: New & Selected Poems is forthcoming from Spuyten Duyvil (2022).

Bill Schillaci was born in New York City and attended New York University. He earned his living as an engineering writer and freelance environmental journalist. His short stories have appeared in print and online journals. He lives in Ridgewood NJ with his wife.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet

Thomas Elson's writing has been published in numerous venues, including *Ellipsis*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Cabinet of Heed*, *Flash Frontier*, *Short Édition*, *Sandy River Review*, *Bull*, *Litro*, *Journal of Expressive Writing*, *Dead Mule School*, *Selkie*, *New Ulster*, *Lampeter*, and *Adelaide*. He divides his time between Northern California and Western Kansas.

Amanda Hynds was born in North Carolina in July of 1993. She recently completed her senior year at Flagler College, receiving her bachelors in English. At this time, she has work published in *Down in the Dirt* magazine.

Daniel A. Scurek I'm a Chicago-area poet/playwright/actor with poetry published in several magazines in the US: Ancient Paths, Poetry Motel, Tomorrow Magazine, Hammers, Words on Paper and others; and England: Psychopoetica and Krax. As a playwright, I've had plays staged at Chicago Dramatists, the annual ATHE Festival, and the Love Creek One-Act Play Festival.

Pam Munter Speaking at her husband's funeral brings up a bit of unfinished business. Pam Munter has authored several books including When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart and The Teen Agers of Monogram, Almost Famous, and As Alone As I Want To Be. She's a former clinical psychologist, performer and film historian. Her essays, book reviews and short stories have appeared in more than 200 publications. Her play, "Life Without" was nominated for Outstanding Original Writing by the Desert Theatre League and she has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Pam has an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts, her sixth college degree. Her latest book, Fading Fame: Women of a Certain Age in Hollywood, was published in 2021. Pam is a member of the Authors Guild and active on Facebook and Twitter and a frequent guest on podcasts. Her work can be found at www.pammunter.com.

Jason Viscontil first discovered my love for poetry after losing my mother at a young age and needing a way to express myself. Decades later, it remains my passion.

Cat Dixon is the author of Eva and Too Heavy to Carry (Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2016, 2014) and the chapbook, Table for Two (Poet's Haven, 2019). Recent work published in *Sledgehammer Lit* and *Whale Road Review*. She is a poetry editor at *The Good Life Review*.

Diane Webster's goal is to remain open to poetry ideas in everyday life, nature or an overheard phrase and to write. Diane enjoys the challenge of transforming images into

words to fit her poems. Her work has appeared in *Home Planet News Online*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Talking River Review* and other literary magazines.

Robert Ronnow's most recent poetry collections are *New & Selected Poems: 1975-2005* (Barnwood Press, 2007) and *Communicating the Bird* (Broken Publications, 2012). Visit his web site at www.ronnowpoetry.com.

